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# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 1: An Alluring Difference

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There was a light on in the kitchen window as Harry Potter and his Headmaster approached the back door of the Burrow after their successful recruiting trip.

“Somebody is still up at this hour?” the teen wondered.

“Arthur has been working long hours at his new post,” Dumbledore noted. “Almost everyone at the Ministry has, now that Voldemort’s return has been confirmed.”

“New post?”

“Ah...perhaps that is his story to tell,” the Headmaster replied sagely, as he stepped up to the thick wooden door and knocked. In order to gain entry, Dumbledore was required to answer a challenge through the door crack. Harry’s price of admission into the Burrow’s kitchen was a bone-crushing hug against Molly Weasley’s bosom.

Once released, Harry spotted two younger witches sitting at the kitchen table with mugs in their hands. The one with her back to him had mousy brown hair. The other, who was facing Harry, was so breathtakingly beautiful that he couldn’t help but stare.

Now, a charitable person might attribute the teenager’s bad manners to the witch’s tall, willowy frame, or to her long blonde hair that appeared to emanate a faint, silvery glow. A less charitable person might instead place the blame on the thin, nearly translucent dressing gown, or to the amount of cleavage revealed by that gown’s loosely knotted sash.

Molly Weasley fell firmly into the latter camp, and proved it by growling out a spell that transfigured the witch’s gown into a thick terrycloth robe that closed tightly at the neck.

“Hey!”

“Yes, well...”

“I’ll not have you dressing like a scarlet woman in front of my boys,” Molly spat.

“But...I was covered, and you said that ‘Arry would not be making his arrival until ze morning?”

Dumbledore took a step forward and held his hands out as if to separate the two witches.

“I must accept the blame for this,” he stated. “We were lucky that Slughorn proved far more agreeable and the effort far less time-consuming than I had anticipated...Harry’s doing of course.

Ah, hello, Nymphadora!”

“Hello, Headmaster,” the third witch replied, turning towards the arrivals. “Wotcher, Harry.”

The-Boy-Who-Lived could hardly believe that this was the same witch he’d first met during his previous escape from Privet Drive...not just because she wasn’t sporting her usual mop of bubble-gum-pink hair, but because she hadn’t immediately challenged the use of her first name, or teased him for his age-appropriate indiscreet manners.

“Hiya, Tonks...how are you?”

“Just peachy, thanks,” she replied, pushing back from the table. Tonks then pulled her cloak around her shoulders and nodded. “Well, I’d better be off...thanks for the tea and sympathy, Molly and...Harry, you remember Fleur Delacour, don’t you?”

“Erm...yeah, of course.”

“Eet ‘as been too long, ‘Arry,” the part-Veela declared warmly, as she too rose from the table. It took only a few light steps for her to cross the room, place her hands on Harry’s shoulders, and lean forward to kiss each of his cheeks.

“Ah...yes. Eez good,” he stammered, feeling the places where her lips had touched burn.

Molly muttered in the background.

Fleur tilted her head towards the older witch’s words, then smiled and greeted Albus Dumbledore in mostly the same manner (her lips finding far more air than cheek). The Headmaster accepted the attention with good-humor, and begged forgiveness that he would not be able to stay.

“Tonks, Dear, are you sure that you have to go?” asked Molly. “Bill should be arriving home with my husband before too much longer.”

The metamorph’s eyes met Fleur’s, and they shared a small smile before she insisted on saying her goodbyes, and headed out the back door towards the designated outbound apparition point. Dumbledore was close behind, leaving Harry alone with Molly and Fleur.

“Are you hungry, Dear?” the Weasley matriarch asked him. “Have a seat at the table...I’ve got some onion soup on the simmer.”

Harry’s eyes darted towards the stove and smiled.

“That sounds wonderful, Mrs. Weasley...thanks.”

With his attention focused on the delicious aroma, Harry missed Fleur’s frown behind his back.

“Come sit next to me, ‘Arry...I ‘ave been longing to see you,” she said.

The Boy-Who-Lived turned, surprised by the request, and by the way that the part-Veela was almost caressing the section of wooden bench closest to her.

“Really?” he asked, sitting a respectful distance from the witch. She gave him a mock pout, then grabbed his arm and slid her bum over until they were sitting thigh-against-thigh.

“Oh, yes...I ‘ad no opportunity to zank you for saving me zat night in ze maze.”

“Oh, well...you would have done the same...” Harry replied nervously, his brain focused on the leg contact.

Fleur shook her head and squeezed his arm. “Or to zay my thanks again for saving my seester. You remember Gabrielle, no? She never stops talking about her ‘Arry Potter. She can’t wait to see you as well.”

“Is she here too, then?”

“No, no...you are so silly!” Fleur smiled, as she squeezed his arm. “I mean next summer when Bill and I wish to...ah, but you do not know, no?”

“I don’t know know what?”

The melodic laugh that escaped from the blonde-haired witch was carried on a mint-scented exhale that brushed against Harry’s face like a warm wind.

“Bill and I are intended to be married!” Fleur declared.

“Oh, erm...congratulations,” said Harry blankly.

“Zank you, ‘Arry,” the part-Veela replied, pulling him into another embrace.

When Harry looked over Fleur’s shoulder he noticed that Molly had a stern look on her face. She was staring down at the pot of onion soup and stirring with far more force and speed than was necessary.

“Bill eez very busy these days,” noted Fleur, “working very ‘ard at ze bank, and sometimes ‘elping with ‘is father’s work as well. I only work part-time at Gringott’s for my Eenglish, and Bill and I have been staying here...to help with the watching, but also to save money for ze down payment on a ‘ouse once we are wed.”

Molly let out an audible sniff. Fleur, having already heard something similar on many other occasions, paid her no mind.

“I was so pleased to ‘ear zat you would be staying ‘ere as well...zere isn’t much to do ‘ere unless you like cooking or throwing ze garden gnomes! And I know zat ‘Ermione ‘as been so anxious to ‘ave your arrival...”

Harry's eyes lit up at the news. "Hermione? Is she here?"

Molly let another inarticulate sound escape her mouth. "She arrived a few days ago," she stated.

Confirmation of this news came to Harry when he felt something else brush against his leg... something warm and furry. He ducked his head underneath the table and smiled.

"Crookshanks! How are you doing, old boy?"

The part-kneazle looked up at Harry, then glanced at his thigh-against-thigh point of contact with Fleur. When he reached down and offered Crookshanks a spot on his lap, the familiar shook his head, then darted out from the other side of the table.

"Where is he off to?" Harry wondered, as the part-Kneazle scampered towards the opened doorway that led upstairs.

"'Ermione's familiar has been playing ze lookout for her," Fleur answered.

"Ah, I see," said Harry. He stood up and braced himself for the hug that would follow a shout of surprise, then the pounding on stairs as his best friend barreled her way down to see him. It wasn't until later that he realized that Hermione's silent arrival was intentional, so as not to wake up certain others.

The bushy-haired witch smiled when she poked her head into the kitchen, then practically leaped into her best friend's arms.

"Harry, I would have..." she mumbled into his shoulder. "But they said that you wouldn't..."

"Ssssh...s'okay, Hermione," the Boy-Who-Lived whispered into her ear. "I really wasn't supposed to arrive until tomorrow."

Fleur stood and slipped onto the bench on the opposite side of the table. Harry acknowledged this with a mouthed "Thanks" as he guided Hermione down onto the spot that had just been vacated. The Muggleborn then pulled her head back from Harry, and carefully scrutinized his face. He knew what she was thinking, and really didn't want to talk about how he'd been coping over the loss of his godfather. so he took the initiative.

"Mrs. Weasley is making soup for me," Harry told Hermione. "So how about I tell you all about our new Potions Professor in between sips?"

"It's late, Harry," Molly noted, as she levitated a bowl of hot onion soup onto the table.

"Wouldn't you rather wait until morning, so that you won't have to repeat the story for Ginny and Ron's benefit?"

"Oh, I don't mind," Harry said with a smile. His eyes sought out Hermione's, and then Fleur's, but they were both too focused on the soup bowl to return his attention. He frowned a bit in confusion, and then added, "Unless Fleur would rather fill me in on the details about her

engagement to Bill?”

Molly pursed her lips. “They aren’t actually engaged yet, you know.”

“Only because my Bill wishes to do ze ‘onorable thing and ask for ze permission first,” Fleur countered.

“Whatever...now off to bed, you two!” Mrs. Weasley ordered, waving both Hermione and Fleur away from the table with her fingers. “Harry will be following right after he eats his soup.”

Not wishing to get involved in this disagreement, Harry instead focused on filling his stomach. He looked down at the table and frowned, certain that there had been a spoon there next to the bowl. As he ducked his head to look to see if it had fallen to the floor, Fleur reached across the table and lightly grasped Hermione’s hand.

“Molly, while I am ‘appy zat you will be my future mozzer-in-law... I am an adult, and ‘Ermione only a few months from ze same...”

“Yes, but this is my house and...”

“And we are not your daughters,” Fleur gently countered. “And I am not yet your daughter-in-law, and ‘Ermione is not even zat.”

“You can say *zat* again!” Hermione muttered, just loud enough for Harry to hear as he rose from the bench.

“What can I get you, Harry?” Molly asked.

“Oh, no worries...I was just going to get a spoon from the drawer...”

“There was one on the table...oh, never mind. Sit down...I’ll get you another one.”

The Weasley Matriarch was just about to pull out the silverware drawer when she saw movement in the corner of her eye.

“Oh! They’re coming!” she exclaimed, pointing towards the clock that was propped up on the kitchen counter-top. Both Bill and Arthur’s hands had swung from “Mortal Peril” to “Traveling.”

And sure enough, a few moments later there was a knock on the back door. Forgetting all about missing cutlery, Mrs. Weasley hurried to it, pressed her face against the wood, and called out her husband’s name. Fleur stood and made her way towards the door as well, anticipating the arrival of her intended. Molly and Arthur then started down a humorous exchange of challenge questions and answers that involved flight mechanics and embarrassing nicknames. Mr. Weasley and Bill were let into the house and, once they broke away from their respective welcome hugs, dropped down onto the bench opposite Harry and Hermione.

“Harry! We weren’t expecting you until morning!” Arthur said, reaching a hand across the table as

his wife set down two more bowls of soup.

“Thanks, Molly,” he said warmly. “Been a rough night...good thing our son the curse-breaker was right there by my side.”

“Ah, it was nothing,” Bill said with a wave. He kept that hand extended out as Harry gave it a firm shake.

“I hear that congratulations are in order, Bill.”

“Thanks, Harry,” the curse-breaker replied with a grin. When Fleur leaned over his shoulder and draped her arms around his neck he patted her arm and added, “I still can’t believe that she said yes.”

“These three were just heading up to bed,” Molly blustered, trying to get her way through some passive aggressiveness. “Harry, Dear, you’ll have Fred and George’s room all to yourself.”

“Why? where are they?”

“They’ve been sleeping in the flat over their joke shop,” said Molly. “Go on then, Harry,,their room is now just off the first floor landing.”

“First floor?” Harry confusedly asked.

“Oh,” said Arthur. “Hasn't Harry been given the grand tour of the new upstairs?”

“He’s only just arrived,” Molly said defensively. She turned to Harry and added, “We’ve done a little bit of remodeling since your last stay here, Dear.”

“A *little* bit of remodelling?” Bill snorted. “Found where my old bedroom walked off to, then?”

“William!” Molly chided. “Harry, Dear, you can get a tour in the morning. Go on up to bed, now...just one flight of stairs and to your left...your trunk and owl are already set up.”

“Er...thanks,” Harry replied, looking across the table towards the family curse-breaker.

“Did your bedroom really get up and walk away?”

Bill smiled. “Dunno. I was out of the country when it made its escape.”

“Why aren’t you sleeping in Fred and George’s old room, then?” Harry asked. “I really don’t need a room to myself...I’d be happy to share with Ron.”

Bill snorted. “Sorry, old man...but I’m already bunking with my little brother.”

“Really?” asked Harry. “What about Percy’s old room...is he back, then?”

Molly choked back some tears and turned away from the table.

“I’m afraid Percy is still...on his own,” said Arthur. “Hermione is using his room at the moment.”

“But...so Fleur...?”

“I am sharing with my future zister-in-law,” the French witch answered. “And getting to know ‘er very, very well.”

“Ah, I see,” Harry said. he stood, but instead of moving towards the stairs walked towards the silverware drawer. Molly blocked his way.

“Oh, so sorry, Harry...with all of the excitement. you sit down, and I’ll warm that soup up for you, and get you a new spoon.”

Bill spotted Hermione and Fleur’s attention to Harry’s bowl and arched an eyebrow. “I’ll take care of the soup, Mum,” he stated, drawing his wand.

The warming spell was slightly overpowered, causing the broth to boil and spill over the edge of the table where Harry’s lap would have been had he still been seated.

“Bill!”

“Oops, sorry about that...end of a long day and all that,” the curse-breaker said apologetically.

Molly shook her head and vanished the boiling contents of Harry’s soup bowl from both bowl and bench.

“I’ve got plenty more, Harry dear,” she noted, patting his shoulder.

As the teenage wizard sat back down next to Hermione, he spotted her staring at Fleur and Bill, holding a wordless conversation with head nods and eye movement.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“No...not at all, Harry,” Hermione replied.

“Are you sure, ‘Ermione?” Fleur asked.

The Muggleborn witch glanced nervously at Harry and bit her lower lip. She made a decision, then nodded her head slightly to Fleur and whispered, “We have to be sure.”

“Sure about...?” asked Harry.

Hermione cut off his question by reaching down and squeezing high up on his thigh.



“Brace yourself, Harry,” she whispered.

“What?” he asked. While turned towards his best friend, Harry didn’t notice as Fleur closed her eyes and relaxed her shoulders. Instead, he noticed Hermione’s eyes dilate as she clamped her knees together and squeezed down harder on his leg.

“Hermione?”

“Y-y-yes, Harry?” the Muggleborn stammered, before biting down on her lower lip in an attempt to stifle a moan.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Hermione was now taking shallow breaths, with her eyes shut and a grip on Harry’s thigh that was moving northward.

“I’m fine,” the Muggleborn purred.

Harry was far more nervous than fine as his best friend’s nipples visibly hardened underneath her gown, and her fingers ran up the inside of his thigh. He reached down and covered Hermione’s hand just before it could cup his bits.

“What’s going on?” he hissed, shifting his attention from Hermione towards Bill. The red-haired wizard placed his hand out with palm facing Harry, and mouthed the words “*Hold on!*”

The-Boy-Who-Lived cocked his head, and was about to ask Bill for an explanation when a loud moan caused him to completely lose his train of thought. He turned, and caught his breath when he realized that it was Mrs. Weasley that had moaned, rather than the witch that was now squirming by his side.

“Arthur...time for bed!” she ordered, placing her hands on the table and thrusting her ample bosom towards her husband’s face.

The Weasley patriarch gasped, more than a bit embarrassed by the obvious signs of his wife’s sexual arousal. But not so embarrassed as to look a gift shag in the mouth.

“Erm...right then,” he stammered, as he rose from the table. “You four don’t stay up too late, right? Goodnight!”

Harry watched with his mouth agape as Arthur scrambled up the stairs, keeping one step ahead of his wife and her groping hands.

Just as soon as Mr. Weasley was out of sight Hermione bolted away from the kitchen table and dashed through the entrance to the adjacent front sitting room...one hand groping her own breast as the other furtively untied the sash of her robe.

“What the hell?” Harry demanded.

“Sorry, it was the only way,” said Bill.

“But Hermione...what’s wrong with her?”

When the black-haired teen rose to check on his best friend Bill reached over and grabbed Harry’s arm.

“Sit down!” he ordered. “Hermione doesn’t need your help right now.”

“But...”

“Please, ‘Arry...listen to Bill,” Fleur added, as she stood and canceled Molly’s transfiguration spell. The shift from thick terrycloth back to thin silk caused her restored dressing gown to fall completely open in the front, revealing a black lace demi-cup bra and high-cut knickers underneath.

The attention Harry paid to the part-Veela’s state of undress was short-lived...her perky pink nipples half-exposed by her half-cups were breathtaking, but not quite a match for the incredibly sexy moans coming from his best friend in the other room.

“*Ohhh...fuck...!*” Hermione hissed loudly.

Fleur followed Harry’s eyes and blocked the threshold in between the kitchen the sitting room. As she casually retied her dressing gown she said, “Relax, ‘Arry...’Ermione has ze situation well in ‘and.”

Harry doubted this assertion when he heard another loud moan coming from the other room.

“What are you two on about? What have you done to her?”

“Fleur released a variation of her allure that affects women, rather than men,” Bill replied. “It’s a defense mechanism, used when a Veela doesn’t want to be the centre of men’s attentions.”

“Eet waz ze only way to get you away from Molly and ‘er soup,” added Fleur. The part-Veela then looked back towards the sitting room, pulled her wand, and thought to cast a silencing spell.

“What about Hermione?”

“She’ll be fine, once she...releases the effects of the allure,” Bill replied. “She’s gone through this once before, Harry...and she did agree on the need.”

“Once she releases the effects? You mean that she’s in the other room right now, rubbing one...?”

“Yes she is...and if she isn’t too embarrassed over the fact she can explain why later,” said Bill. He then pulled a small vial from his pocket and set it down on the table. “Right now, I need you to focus...and drink this potion.”

“What for?”

“It’s an antidote for Amortentia,” Bill asserted. “That’s a type of love potion.”

“What would I need that for?”

“Because we’re certain that Mum brewed up a batch last week, and we can’t be sure that she didn’t already slip some into your soup.”

Harry scowled. “You think your Mum wants me to fall in love...with her?”

“No!” Bill nearly shouted. “With Ginny, you berk. now will you just drink it?”

“This is ridiculous,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. “You expect me to believe that Fleur did something that caused your Mum and Hermione to...get so that they have to...oh, Merlin, so that means that right now your Mum and Dad are...?”

“Yes, Harry, they are,” Bill said with a sigh. “They probably didn’t think to silence the room again, either.” Harry then heard confirmation of this statement when the sound of rhythmic banging drifted down the stairs.

“Oh, that’s just...” Harry moaned. He shook his head and added, “Well, so long as they are busy upstairs, maybe you two could back up and start this story from the beginning?”

Bill sighed, and nodded his head. “Fleur and I have been here for a week and a half. We’re staying here for the summer because...well because of you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, but...well off-point for now. The point is that when we arrived here and announced that we intended to get engaged, Mum went through the roof. She’s convinced that Fleur is using her allure to trap me, and would rather I settle down with the nice English witch that she’s picked out for me.”

“What? Who?”

“Ze metamorph...Tonks,” Fleur claimed. “Although she eez not part of Molly’s schemes, as ‘er ‘eart belongs to another.”

“Either way, within a couple of days of our arrival, Mum had her cauldrons on the boil,” Bill said. “She claimed that she was just making medicinal potions, but...well easy enough to tell from the owl-mailed ingredients.”

“But if she wanted to use the love potion on you...then why would I need to worry?”

“We might be completely off-base here,” Bill admitted. “But you might be a target of opportunity...so long as she’s got the potion brewed, and is still dreaming of her one big happy Weasley family...”

“Her what?”

“Molly weeshes Bill to wed Tonks, and to match ‘Ermione with Ronald, and to pair up you wiz Ginny,” Fleur declared.

“Why would she...that’s just so hard to believe,” Harry decided.

“I know, I don’t want to believe it myself,” Bill admitted. “But with Mum almost bragging about the fact that potions were used to get Dad in the right mind...”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” said Bill. “Dad laughs about it now, saying ‘all’s well that ends well’...claims that the potion can’t create what isn’t there just under the surface to begin with, but...”

Harry shook his head as he eyed the vial.

“Not to doubt what you’re telling me,” he said, “but if this is all true, why are you helping me?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do?” asked Bill.

“True, but...to go against your own family...”

“I think that I’m actually helping the family by helping you, Harry.”

“And ‘elping ‘im start ‘is own family,” Fleur added with a grin. She turned towards the sitting room after catching movement in the corner of her eye. “Ah, I knew it would be quick with you ‘ere, ‘Arry...eef you will excuse me?”

The teenage wizard shook his head again as Fleur walked into the sitting room. Then he thought of what may have just happened in the sitting room, and couldn’t help but lean forward and twist his head for a look.

“Eyes here, Harry” Bill hissed, covering Harry’s arm again. “She’s going to be embarrassed enough as it is, don’t you think?”

The black-haired wizard thought for a moment, then sighed and leaned as far back as he could without falling off the bench.

“So what did Fleur mean about you helping yourself?” he asked.

Bill started to glance back towards his girlfriend, but caught himself in time.

“Best that she be here to explain,” he decided. He then looked down at the vial and asked, “Would it help if I took a vow stating that the vial contains a love potion neutralizer, and that everything else that I’ve told you tonight is true, to the best of my knowledge?”

Harry stared down at the vial and shook his head.

“That won’t be necessary,” he decided. “I suppose that you’ve already dosed yourself?”

“Yeah,” Bill replied. “Hermione did as well, once she arrived and we warned her off.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Harry...really,” Hermione declared from the entrance to the kitchen.

The Boy-Who-Lived looked up towards his best friend. Her hair was in place and her dressing gown tied modestly across her chest. Any sign that she had been sexually aroused...and acted in response...were gone, so long as you considered her flushed cheeks to be due more to embarrassment than excitement.

“Hey...are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she muttered, as she cast her eyes downward and walked around the table to take her seat next to Harry.

“Well...erm...thanks,” Harry stammered. “for willing to...you know...”

“No worries,” Hermione said quietly. “Just make it worthwhile and drink that bloody neutralizing potion before Molly finishes up and comes looking for us.”

Given the situation, Harry did not care to hear the words “Molly” and “comes” in the same sentence. But he took this advice to heart and brought the vial that Bill had placed on the table to his lips.

Hermione didn’t care for the way that those lips were smiling as he downed the neutralizer.

“Something funny, Mister?” she challenged. “I would have thought that you’d react more maturely about this...not like you’re Ron...”

Harry’s eyes widened at this chastisement. He waited until he’d finished off the vial’s contents before responding, however.

“Sorry, Hermione...I was laughing over the fact that you just swore, not that you just...”

“Well, never mind then,” she replied, finding it hard to look Harry in the eye.

He decided that it would be best for his eyes (and thoughts) to focus elsewhere as well, so he turned to Bill and Fleur and asked, “So what about you two starting a family, then?”

It was Bill’s turn to experience reddened cheeks. He turned to his girlfriend, who nodded and placed her hand over his in support.

“Bill and I...we wish to be married, but we can not do zis without your ‘elp, ‘Arry.”

“My help?” asked Harry.

“Oui,” the part-Veela replied. “Because of last year...when you saved both ze life of my seester and myself...”

“What?” asked Harry. “What does...not that I think that I actually saved your lives...although I was happy to help...you would have done the same...no need to....”

“But zere eez a need,” Fleur declared. “I can feel it in my ‘eart every time zat I zink about fully giving my ‘eart to William.”

“You...you feel something about me in your heart?” Harry asked incredulously. “Not that I’m not flattered, Fleur, but...”

Hermione decided that she could no longer hold her tongue and entered the conversation.

“Harry, it’s not that Fleur has feelings for you...she just feels that she can’t act on her feelings towards Bill with the life debt or debts that she thinks are hanging over her head.”

“Not zink, ‘Ermione...i know,” Fleur insisted.

The raven-haired teenager furrowed his eyebrows. “Even if there was a life debt here, which I kind of doubt...why would that get in the way of anything? I could just forgive the debt, or have it paid off with a promise not to betray me, or something?”

“Eet doesn’t work zat way with ze Veela,” Fleur replied. “We are ze creatures sexual...if ze life debt eez created eet must be repaid with body and soul...”

“Body and...you mean that you have to give me your body...but I thought that this was about you two?”

“Eet eez, ‘Arry.”

“You aren’t suggesting that you need to give me your virginity, or something like that, to satisfy this debt you think exists?”

The serious expression on Fleur’s face lightened considerably with this question.

“Eet would be too late for zat, zanks to my William, ‘ere,” she replied coyly.

Harry’s attention turned towards Bill, who had his eyes firmly focused on the table in front of him. He tried his best to ignore the thoughts associated with Fleur’s last comment, and asked, “So in plain terms, Bill...how can I help you two? Do I need to ask Fleur for a kiss, or something?”

The older wizard shook his head. "When she said heart and soul, Harry...we're talking more than just a kiss."

"So how...?"

Bill let out a deep sigh as he looked straight into Harry's eyes.

"By granting me a boon, milord!" he stated firmly.

There was silence in the room as the four dwelt on that statement. Not that noise couldn't still be heard, mind you, given what was carrying down the stairs...

"Plain terms, Bill?" Harry finally asked.

"Fleur is certain that her debt to you has to be repaid sexually," the older wizard explained. "But that doesn't mean that there has to be a direct repayment...you could give Fleur to one of your liege-men as a boon."

"Give Fleur to somebody else?" asked Harry. "Like she was my property or something?"

Hermione shook her head and squeezed Harry's hand.

"No, Harry, it's not like that...okay, well maybe it is, but..."

"Not helping, Hermione..."

"You wouldn't be giving Fleur to just anybody...you can give her to Bill as a boon from his liege lord, and then they can become engaged for real," his best friend countered.

"I can?" Harry asked. "And if I did, they could?"

"Oui, milord," Fleur said with a smile.

"And what is all this milord business?" asked Harry. "I'm not a Lord." He then turned towards Hermione and weakly added, "Right?"

His bushy-haired friend smiled and shook her head. "Not that I can tell, Harry...at least not yet."

"You mean that I..."

"As Heir Apparent you can become Lord Potter on your birthday...maybe Lord Black as well, depending on what Sirius set out in his will."

"But I'll only be sixteen? And Dumbledore didn't say anything about me becoming Lord Potter or Lord Black?"

"I'm not surprised," Bill said. "More than once I've heard him and Mum talking about you

needing to enjoy your childhood for as long as possible. but the fact is, as the Potter Heir Apparent you have the right to claim your lordship at sixteen and be recognized an adult a year early.”

“Yeah, well that first bit I can believe,” Harry said cynically. “So let me see if I’ve got this right. When I turn sixteen next month, I can become Lord Potter, and then you can swear fealty to me, and then you can ask for a boon, and I can transfer Fleur’s life debt from me to you so that you two can get married like you should be able to in the first place?”

Bill thought for a moment, then nodded. “That’s it, more or less.”

“And that would make me square with the Delacour family?”

Fleur giggled. “Wiz me at least. my seester will insist zat she still must be sitting on your hook.”

Harry closed his eyes and groaned, while Hermione squeezed his hand and said that there would be plenty of time to worry about Gabrielle sitting on Harry’s hook down the road.

“So what would it mean if you become my liege-man, Bill?” Harry asked, his eyes still shut.

“It would mean that I would become your man...you would have my loyalty above all others.”

Fleur cleared her throat, causing Harry to open his eyes and Bill to turn his head and blush.

“Erm, except for my wife, if you don’t mind, milord.”

This qualifier earned Bill a kiss on the cheek. He then turned back to Harry and said, “Not counting my wife, Harry...but counting my Mum...or Dumbledore...or even Gringott’s if it ever came down to it.”

Harry mulled this over for a moment. or at least tried to...it was hard to mull giving the distracting noises coming from upstairs.

He nodded towards the empty vial.

“So that’s why you gave me this antidote...in case your Mum spiked my soup?”

Bill shrugged. “I would have done it anyway, but...yes. While I can’t actually swear fealty until you assume your lordship, I think that I can prove my worth to you between now and your birthday.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me, Bill,” Harry said dismissively, as he reached out his hand. The red-haired wizard smiled, and grabbed further up Harry’s arm, as a kinsman might shake hands.

And then the moment of camaraderie was ruined by Molly’s coarsely-worded encouragement for her husband to ride her like a hippogriff.



Bill, Harry and Hermione all winced. Fleur chuckled.

“Why don’t you sleep on this?” Bill asked. “We should be able to find some more time to talk over the next few weeks.”

“Without going to the same extremes, hopefully,” added Hermione.

Harry nodded in agreement as he looked across the table. “You two are really going to stay here over the summer?”

Bill looked towards Fleur and shrugged. “When we joined the Order last month, our first orders from Dumbledore were to spend the summer here at the Burrow. Two extra wands, in-house protection during your stay and all that. Can’t say that the sleeping arrangements are ideal...”

“Or ze ‘overing of zee Queen Bee,” Fleur added.

“Zat too,” Bill teased, adding, “But we’ll muddle through somehow.”

A cry of passion caught all of their attentions. Bill looked towards the stairs, shook his head, then snorted.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, milord...I’d like to do a bit of muddling with my girlfriend while there’s still a chance.”

Hermione snorted. “Muddling? is that what you kids call it these days?”

“You might zink about a bit of muddling yourself,” Fleur said playfully, as she rose and pulled Bill towards the back door.

“Goodnight, you two,” Bill said rather sheepishly. “Don’t do anything that we wouldn’t do.”

Hermione chuckled. “Don’t think that I don’t know just how much latitude that gives us.”

“Latitude?” asked Fleur with a wink. “Eez zat what you kids call it zees days?”

“Goodnight, Fleur...Good night, Bill,” Hermione said with a wave and a sing-song tone of voice.

Once the older witch and wizard slipped outside, Harry and Hermione turned towards each other... each searching for a safer topic of conversation than the elephant in the room (i.e. what she had done in the other room).

“So...not that I’m not happy to see you,” said Harry. “But weren’t you planning on spending more than a week or two with your parents?”

Hermione nodded. “That was the plan, until Madame Pomfrey made a house call last week.”

“Poppy?” Harry asked. “You mean...you haven’t fully healed yet?”

“Mostly,” she replied. “Turns out that I almost used up my magical core fighting that curse...it’s coming back, Harry, no worries. I’ll be right as rain for the start of term...but she suggested that I help the process along by doing small amounts of magic each day.”

“Spell casting?”

“Yes. Not supposed to do anything complicated right away...First Year spells for the first couple of weeks, then work my way up,” Hermione explained. “I could have just as easily done this at home, if it weren’t for those Underage Magic laws.”

Harry frowned. “Can’t you get a medical excuse, or something?”

Hermione sighed. “I could try, but the Ministry would need to approve it, and with me being Muggleborn...”

“It might get approved the day after you return to Hogwarts,” Harry agreed. “So what makes being here different?”

This question earned Harry an eye-roll. “It turns out that the Ministry’s sensors can’t tell who casts a spell within a magical household. They monitor locations, not wands.”

Harry frowned. “That makes sense, given the warnings I got for Dobby doing magic at my Aunt and Uncle’s...or when I did accidental magic and blew up my Aunt Marge...but that means that last year, at Grimauld Place...”

“Exactly,” Hermione replied. “We could have used magic to clean out all of those rooms, even though Molly claimed that we weren’t allowed.”

“Figures,” Harry spat. “So you can do magic here, and the Ministry won’t know?”

“You can too,” Hermione nodded. “Just don’t let Molly see you do it.”

“Does she know that you are using magic?”

Hermione nodded. “The Headmaster and the Matron worked together to convince Mrs. Weasley. She didn’t want to at first, but...she eventually agreed, so long as I promised to keep it a secret from Ron and Ginny.”

“But not from me?” Harry asked.

His best friend shrugged. “Maybe she forgot?”

A loud shout from up the stairs caught their attention.

“Or maybe she was distracted by Fleur?” Harry asked playfully.

Hermione blushed, and looked down at the table, causing Harry to curse his stupidity.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to be a git about it,” he said.

She looked up and gave him a thin-lipped smile. “It’s okay, Harry...just so long as you know why I did it, and don’t make a big deal about it.”

“Erm, okay, I can do that.”

Hermione looked for the truth of that promise in his eyes. “Are you certain?” she asked. “because I wouldn’t want what happened to change things between us.”

“Do you just want to pretend that it didn’t happen?” Harry asked. “I guess that I could try, but honestly, that would be rather hard for me...”

“No, I couldn’t hold you to that kind of promise,” she admitted ruefully.

A funny thought came to Harry’s mind, causing him to snort.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Tell me!”

“Alright,” Harry sheepishly replied. “I was just thinking that there was a way to put us back on an even footing.”

“What? How?”

“Simple,” Harry grinned. “You stay here while I go into the sitting room and...you know...”

Hermione blushed the deepest shade of red yet that evening.

“Harry!” she hissed. “Don’t you dare!”

“Why not?” he asked glibly. “You know I’d do whatever it took to make things right between us.”

“Yes, but...still, you just can’t...”

Harry snorted. “Of course I can...not like I haven’t done it before...wouldn’t take any time at all, given what’s gone on tonight.”

Hermione winced and cradled her face in her hands. “I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

“Not unless you let me square things up.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m Harry, Sirius is my...”

The cheeky, playful attitude faltered at the reminder of his late godfather.

“Oh, Harry...” Hermione said, pulling him into a hug.

And in that quiet moment, hormones won out over grief and Harry realized that his chest was pressed against hers. And then they both realized that the silence was a truer silence than they had heard over the past fifteen minutes.

Hermione broke away from the embrace and scowled. “She’ll be checking on us soon,” the teen whispered.

Harry grinned. “Guess you’ll have to just imagine what I’ll be doing tonight in my bed.”

He waggled his eyebrows as he glanced towards the sitting room entrance.

“Harry!”

“What?” he asked with a grin. “Maybe I’ll just be dreaming about Molly’s delicious onion soup?”

“But the soup’s on the boil over there,” Hermione noted, pointing over his shoulder.

“It is, isn’t it?” Harry grinned.

“Well you’ll need this, then,” Hermione said dismissively, as she handed him the spoon that had gone missing.

“Ah...you nicked it so that I couldn’t...clever,” said Harry. “But where have you been hiding it all this time?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Wouldn’t he like to know what, Hermione,” Molly asked from the stairwell.

The two teens turned towards Mrs. Weasley. She had, unfortunately, a certain look about her that was related to what she’d just accomplished with her now sleeping husband.

“Know how we did on our OWL’s, of course,” Hermione quickly stated.

“Where are Fleur and Bill?” Molly asked.

“He said something about checking the ward line,” Hermione lied. “And since nobody is supposed to be out there alone...”

“Well of course she would volunteer,” Molly snapped. She scowled, and looked down at her clock. Not seeing any immediate cause for even more concern, she looked back towards the two

teens.

“Thought that you two were going to bed?” she asked.

“Oh, we were...hope you don't mind, but the soup was so good, I was just about to help myself to a second serving,” Harry lied.

Molly smiled. “Of course, dear, but still...”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, Mrs. Weasley...we'll be off to bed now.”

The matronly witch nodded in approval, and escorted the teenagers up the stairs. This kept Harry and Hermione from gaining any kind of resolution to many of the things that had been said and done that night...but not all.

“Sweet dreams, Harry,” said Hermione, as she pulled him into a closely monitored hug.

“Of course...I promised, right?” he asked.

Hermione tilted her head back, then shook it as she broke free.

Harry winked at her as he wished her to have sweet dreams as well, then turned and wished Molly a good night. She kissed his cheek and shooed him into Fred and George's old room.

Hedwig was waiting for his arrival on her perch, set beside an opened window. She greeted Harry with an owlish sort of scowl, expressing her frustration over the late hour, and the fact that he hadn't sought her out sooner. He apologized, she nibbled on his finger for his penance, then flew out into the night in search of a good meal.

This left Harry alone with his thoughts as he opened his trunk, changed into his pajamas, and crawled into bed. He considered what Bill and Fleur might be up to outside, then dwelled on what Hermione had allegedly done in the sitting room (*And where, exactly? On the sofa? One of the chairs? Lying on her back on the floor with her legs in the air? How would he be able to spend time with her in that room without thinking about it?*).

The consideration of these questions forced Harry to realize that he could never again think of his best friend as anything but a sexy and very attractive young woman. The scenes that he imagined alongside these questions...these smutty imaginings...they goaded him into slipping his hand down the front of his pajama bottoms, and making good on his promise as he relieved the hormone-driven pressures.

He had been right about it not taking any time at all.

As he cleaned up, Harry wondered if Hermione had been in her bed while he wanked, focusing on what he was doing and the promise he'd made that he would do it.

Down the hall, inside Percy's old room, Hermione lay in bed with a smile on her lips. While she

was quite certain *what* Harry was doing in his bed, she did allow herself to wonder *whom* he was thinking of while he was doing it.

But would she have the courage to ask Harry that question in the morning? That unanswered question made her dreams that night far more unsettled than sweet.

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# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 2: Different Hermione Plans

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

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Hermione's alarm clock woke her early the next morning by playfully swishing his tail across her nose.

"Geroff, Crookshanks," the Muggleborn witch mumbled. She swatted the tickling tail away from her face and pulled a pillow over her head as a guard against further attack.

"Meow!"

"Ten more minutes, Crooks?"

"Meowwww!"

"Oh, alright," Hermione muttered, sitting up in her bed. "Happy, now?"

Her familiar shook his head, then leapt off the bed towards the door.

"Meow?"

Hermione rubbed her eyes as Crookshanks began to prowl back and forth in front of the door with his tail up in the air.

"Do you really need to go out, or are you just getting fussy about using the box?"

The part-Kneazle's eyes darted towards the charmed litter box. He hissed at it, then shook his head and started to pace again.

"Then why do you...ah, is that it?" Hermione asked. She was now awake enough to match her familiar's aggressive tomcat behavior with the emotions she was sensing over their link. She was also aware enough to remember that emotions carried both ways over the connection, and blushed at the possibility that her somewhat pervy dreams that night may have affected Crookshanks's libido.

"Feeling the need to wander?"

"Hisssss....."



“Now, don’t you start blaming me... and just you remember who it was that convinced my parents not to have you neutered!”

“...me-ow .”

“That’s better,” Hermione noted with satisfaction. She pulled her wand out and cast a *Tempus* (one of the Matron-approved low-powered charms).

“Right, then...early enough to do my treatment regimen before Ron or Ginny wake up.”

“Meow?”

“Sorry, Crookshanks...it can’t be helped. I can’t cast tripping jinxes on things that can’t walk, and there’s nobody else that I can practice on.”

“Meow?”

“Okay, I promise to ask Harry today about volunteering to be your replacement...and once I’m done you’ll be free to do your tom-cattling.”

Crookshanks looked up at his human and let out the feline equivalent of a sigh. He didn’t care to be a living target for her spells, but he had gained enough intelligence from the familiar bond to recognize the need. And after receiving some of Hermione’s thoughts and emotions across that same bond the previous night he really, really needed to follow the scents that would lead him to a certain barn on the other side of the Weasley’s orchard.

He purred, bowed his head, and slowly walked towards the ersatz spell firing range on the far side of the room.

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Ten minutes later, sweat was dripping off of Hermione’s bushy-brown hair. She pushed herself to cast one last jinx, then used the hem of her sleeveless nightgown to mop her brow.

“Right, then...that’s enough,” she declared in between large breaths. The spell casting had been exhausting, and she still had to cast a half-dozen other spells that worked on inanimate objects.

Crookshanks hissed his agreement and sauntered towards the closed bedroom door.

Hermione would have liked to have adjusted his attitude with a cheering charm, but that was a spell taught to Third-Years. So the best she could do was squat down and rub Crookshanks’s back.

“Now you behave yourself out there,” she said.

“Meow?”

“You know what I mean,” Hermione teased as she picked up her familiar and pulled him into a

hug.

“Don’t act like a pompous git when you get there,” she whispered into his ear. “Don’t be preening and prancing about...even if you are the smartest, hottest, most handsome tom around. Treat your girl right...”

“Meow!”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Girls, then. Honestly, Crooks...how many do you have in that barnyard harem of yours?”

The part-Kneazle purred proudly.

“Just promise me that you’ll make sure that their needs are met too?...Don’t be a Ron, be a Harry!”

“Meow?”

“Stop it!” Hermione hissed, giving Crookshanks a squeeze in protest. “You know I haven’t...and certainly not with Ron!”

“Meow.....?”

Hermione snorted. “Just how much of my dreams did you see last night?”

“Rrrrrrrw!”

“Right. Well, you’ll probably be the first to know if that ever *did* happen...maybe second, if Hedwig’s bond is stronger than yours...”

“Hiss !”

“Oh, Crooks...enough,” she decided, placing her familiar back down onto the floor. Hermione reached for the door knob and, after one last caution, allowed him to escape out into the hallway.

As her familiar began tracking his harem’s scents, Hermione listened for signs that others were up and about. Not hearing any, she let her eyes drift up towards the door to the Twins’ old bedroom...the one that Harry was now using at the end of the hallway. She smiled when a naughty thought crossed her mind about Harry following her scent...without Fleur’s help it would have been easy enough for him to track her to the sitting room. But with work to be done, she pushed that idea to the side, quietly closed her own bedroom door, and returned to her magical therapy session.

Hermione’s mind drifted back to First Year as she progressed through the balance of the approved spell list. She thought about the people, places and events associated with each spell as it was cast. An *Alohamora* returned her to the Third-floor gauntlet that they’d run to protect the stone. Her matchstick-turned needle brought back memories of her very first Transfiguration class, and

all of the emotion that came with it (she'd nearly asked a Prefect how to cast a drying charm that day, just in case she wet her pants from all of her anxieties and excitement). And then there was *Wingardium Leviosa* ...

The feather fell back down onto Percy's old desk almost as quickly as it had risen. Hermione recast the spell four times, but failed to achieve a better result. There was just too much history associated with that spell for her to maintain any kind of focus. It was the spell that provoked Ron's cutting remarks about her being a nightmare...remarks that seemed to confirm her worst fears about remaining scorned and friendless. But it was also was the spell that saved her when it separated the troll's club from his hand later that day...and sparked a friendship and sense of belonging that had endured to *this* day.

At least with respect to Harry's friendship. Ron had acted like a git towards her too many times over the years, and his typically self-centered oafish attitudes had been in full appearance in the days since her arrival. His rude behavior had been bad enough for even his mother to admit to it, but her excuses were wearing thin, and did nothing to explain how Ron treated her before he was attacked by cognivores. She'd do her best to put up with it, at least for Harry's sake...she wouldn't want to force him into having to choose between friendships. And so long as she needed to hide her medicinal magic use under the mantle of a full wizarding household...well, she'd just have to be all the more tolerant, and diligent when it came to maintaining her regiment of love potion neutralizers.

This wasn't to say that Harry and her healing weren't the only up-sides to her staying at the Burrow for the balance of the hols. Bill and Fleur had been great, not just with their warning and supply of antidote, but with their friendliness. Hermione would have never have imagined that she could build a friendship with the part-Veela, but that was what was quickly happening. Of course, Fleur had her own motivations working...it was good to have a friend or ally nearby when you are thrust into a difficult situation in a foreign country, and forced to deal with a potion-brewing matron and her catty teenage daughter. Hermione had also considered the possibility that Fleur was being nice to her only because she was Harry's best friend, and Fleur needed Harry's help. But there'd be time enough over the summer to test motivations, and in the meantime she enjoyed the French witch's company and support.

The need for Bill and Fleur to ask Harry for a boon came to Hermione's mind as she twisted the white practice feather in between her fingers, and thought more about that first Hogwarts Halloween. Fleur's belief that she owed a Harry a life-debt couldn't be any stronger than Hermione's belief that a life-debt was created when Harry rescued her from the troll. And once Hermione began to compare circumstances, she couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to repay that debt by offering her best friend her heart and soul... and body. It was a thought that both terrified and excited her sexually. To have Veela heritage as an excuse for doing all sorts of naughty things to Harry...or at least to offer doing them, because Harry was too noble to call in that sort of debt that way...

Hermione, however, had to face the fact that she wasn't part-Veela. And as much as she might secretly fantasize about a progressively physical relationship with her best friend, she wasn't ready to go all the way...and Harry already had enough on his plate to worry about without keeping

a girlfriend happy. But most anything short of going all of the way...done with a best friend willing to share certain benefits without strings attached? That was a goal worth striving for, in *Carpe diem* fashion. It was also, however, a goal that needed to be worked towards.

Hermione chuckled as she dropped her wand and the feather onto the desktop, amazed at what had happened the night before. She figured that with Fleur's tactical use of her allure that she could place a tick next to the first step in her plan...to get Harry to start thinking of her as a girl. Groping him under the table and masturbating while he was in the next room might have been overkill, but there didn't appear to be any harm caused. Harry's cheeky behavior right before bed was actually encouraging.

What happened after Harry's arrival also did much to advance her second step in the plan. It wasn't enough for him to know that she was an attractive young woman; he had to recognize and accept that she was a sexually mature young woman, one whose needs and urges might not be any less than his own hormonally-driven needs.

The Muggleborn witch had taken a bit of a risk and asked her mother for some advice on how best to complete this task. Mrs. Granger had been not only helpful, but creative in her approach to the problem. Neither Hermione nor her mum thought it would be wise for her to change Harry's way of thinking about her by acting too drastically out of character. If their close friendship was going to be the grounding for any added physical dimension, then she needed to mostly stay true to the person that Harry had befriended. Special dispensations could be granted for situations that couldn't be helped (like her response to Fleur's allure). But in all other situations, slit skirts, sudden use of makeup, or over-the-top flirting wouldn't do. So what would?

Hermione smiled to herself as she looked over her shoulder towards the bedroom door. She again listened for any signs that anyone else was up in the house. Hearing none, she reached down and pulled the hem of her nightgown up and over her head. As the summer-weight garment dropped to the floor she hooked her thumbs inside the elastic of her knickers and pushed them down towards her ankles. Stepping out of the leg holes, the now-naked witch walked over to her nightstand and picked up a jar of magical salve. Hermione unscrewed the top and dug into its contents with her fingers. Once an appropriate amount of salve was removed, she walked in front of a full-length mirror that had been placed there for her benefit (it was the only change made to a bedroom that stood ready for Percy's much hoped-for return just as he had left it).

A scar that stretched from left collarbone down to right hip stared back at Hermione when she looked into the mirror. The swelling was gone, but not the dark purple hue. Madame Pomfrey had warned Hermione that the scar would not disappear completely, but hoped that daily application of the salve would at least lessen the discoloration. Fleur had suggested that a good base tan would also minimize the contrast, causing Hermione to giggle at the thought of helping the French witch turn the Burrow's small pond into a clothing optional beach. What a scandal that would cause! Although it would also allow her to add several ticks to her step-by-step plans if Harry joined them...

Hermione centered her thoughts back to the more modest next step to her plan as she spread the salve down the length of her scar. Harry needed to realize that she was a sexual being without her

acting like a tart. This would be accomplished by adding sex-related words, phrases and issues to her everyday conversations with Harry. Not in a salacious manner, but matter-of-factly; she was a smart, mature young woman who treated Harry like the smart, mature young man he was (for the most part). Facts were facts, anatomical parts and biological processes were normal, natural and a part of every one's lives. There was no reason why two best friends couldn't use appropriate terms and talk frankly about sexual issues just because they were different genders. Right?

As she stood before the mirror, Hermione congratulated herself on the successful incorporation of the word "masturbation" into the last night's conversation with Harry. While an obvious situation had been provided to use the term in an appropriate context, it was still an accomplishment that she'd been able to talk about what she had done with only moderate amounts of blushing, stammering, and embarrassment. And that had only been possible through lots of practice.

To that end, Hermione remained in front of the mirror after she'd finished applying the salve, and using a voice that was quiet, but also firm and confident, began to point out body parts and associated processes. Hermione then imagined that she was looking at Harry's naked body, and called out some correlative bits, and the ways that those bits might be stimulated.

Once she ran through the list a few times, and was satisfied with her unabashed delivery and unwavering voice, she took the next step, and incorporated this vocabulary within set phrases and complete sentences. The first time through, she voiced statements that would be right at home within a dry academic setting (for example, "*The female orgasm is most readily achieved through direct clitoral stimulation.*"). But once that was done, Hermione began to practice situation-specific sentences that she could imagine using with Harry.

*"Honestly, Harry...what you call 'moistened knickers' is a common physiological response when females are subjected to external sexual stimuli..."*

*"Don't worry, Harry...Premature ejaculation is quite common among adolescent males. I've done some research, and would be happy to walk you through a few exercises..."*

*"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Harry...studies show that the average teenage male experiences an erection every fourteen minutes, on average..."*

*"Oh Harry...there's obviously no correlation between big shoe sizes and above-average penis lengths...just look at how small your feet are, for example..."*

Hermione couldn't help herself and let out a very un-Hermione-like giggle after that last one. But then she heard someone out in the hallway, and made a dash for her covers.

She couldn't wait until she was cleared to begin casting silencing charms again.

Once she was reasonably certain that she hadn't been heard (for that would have surely led to somebody barging into the room), she slipped off the covers and reached for bathrobe and shower kit. So long as that was only one Weasley that she heard, there was still a chance for a shower before the morning queue formed.

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One hour later, Harry Potter was jarred awake by what sounded like canon fire. He bolted upright, and tried to simultaneously retrieve the wand that he had placed underneath his pillow and the glasses that he had placed on the nightstand.

Someone threw open the curtains, filling the bedroom with painfully bright light.

“What the hell?” he shouted towards the closest blurry figure.

That figure closed the distance to Harry’s bed and slapped him on the top of his head.

“Why didn’t you wake us, you berk!”

“Ron, don’t hit him! And, Harry, language!”

The black-haired wizard snorted as he finally was able to shove his glasses onto his face. The wide grin that came into focus on his assailant’s face seemed to match poorly with the level of just-delivered violence. Then again, there always was something just a bit off with Ron Weasley.

“Doin’ okay there, mate?” asked the red-haired teen.

Harry rolled his eyes as he rubbed his scalp and leaned back against the headboard.

“Never better...you?”

“Can’t complain too much,” Ron replied, as he pulled a wooden crate towards the edge of the bed and sat down. Hermione walked over from the window and chose to sit on the edge of the mattress, close enough to reach out and greet Harry with a light squeeze on his leg.

“Have a nice lie-in, then?” she asked playfully.

“Erm... yeah, I did, thanks, just like I promised you last night,” Harry replied cautiously.

There might have been more warmth in this response had Hermione’s grab not reminded him of the previous night, and caused him to worry whether his blankets were bunched up high enough (and in the right places) to conceal his erection.

Hermione released a barely-voiced gasp and she involuntarily looked down at Harry’s duvet. The she caught herself, looked back up towards his face, and smiled.

“Well, then,” she said coyly. “I guess we’re all square.”

Harry responded with a slightly embarrassed smile

“What’s all this about?” asked Ron turning towards Hermione. “Were you up last night when Harry arrived?”

“Not when he arrived, but... Crookshanks woke me,” she explained.

“And you didn’t wake me up as well? Why not?” Ron demanded.

“Because you were asleep and snoring loud enough to raise the dead!” Hermione claimed.

“Doesn’t matter... you should have...”

“Ron, it really was late when we arrived last night,” Harry interjected. “And your Mum ordered us to bed just seconds after Hermione came down them.”

“Hmmmph!” Ron snorted dismissively. It wasn’t hard for him to imagine his mother doing that but he still didn’t like being left out...and he didn’t like the thought of his friends going “to bed” (regardless of whether there were separate beds involved). But what he really, really didn’t like was the way that Hermione was sitting on Harry’s bed, with her hand still resting on his leg.

While Ron was staring at Hermione’s hand, her eyes were locked on Harry’s. Agreement was reached with the slightest of head nods over his selective presentation of the facts (while Molly had indeed ordered Hermione back to bed seconds after she came down, Ron didn’t need to know that those orders were ignored).

“I still don’t...” growled the red-haired wizard. He looked up and asked, “There isn’t anything going on here that I should know about, is there?”

“No, of course not,” Harry snapped defensively.

“Why would you think that?” Hermione asked sharply.

That question was seconded by a sweet-sounding voice drifting in from the doorway.

“I zink zat zere eez nothing ‘ere for your worries, Ronald... don’t you?”

The red-haired wizard’s eyes went wide. A goofy-looking smile formed on his face as a slight bulge formed in his trousers. He faced the doorway, and gazed lustfully at the French witch that had just entered the bedroom.

“There is nothing here for my worries,” agreed Ron, using a robotic tone of voice.

Fleur nodded at the teenager and smiled.

“’Arry and ‘Ermione are just good friends,” she declared.

Ron nodded in agreement. “Harry and Hermione are just good friends.”

The part-Veela placed a hand on Ron’s shoulder and smiled sweetly.

“Zeeze are not ze droids zat you are looking for.”

Ron smiled dreamily. “These are not the droids that I am looking for.”

“Very good, Ronald,” Fleur replied huskily. “Now, you are feeling zertain needs, no?”

“Oh, yes!” he hissed.

“Zen perhaps you should find a private place to take care of ze needs?”

The red-haired teen sucked in a deep breath, looked around the room, then bolted for the door. Fleur released him with a wry smile, an expression that she shared with the other witch in the room.

The only wizard left in the room was more shocked than bemused, but that was to be expected.

“Did you just...zap Ron with your allure?” Harry asked.

Fleur shrugged her shoulders.

“Almost no need,” she claimed. “Ronald... he acts like ze dogs of Pavlov.”

“Whose dogs?” asked Harry.

Hermione snorted. “Pavlov's, a Muggle scientist,” she explained. “Fleur means that she’s got Ron trained well enough to nearly ejaculate just at the sound of her voice.”

Harry’s head swiveled and he gave his best friend a sharp gaze. Filing away for future discussion her choice of words, he turned back to Fleur to ask more pressing questions.

“Muggle references and Jedi mind tricks?”

Fleur smiled impishly. “I am full of ze surprises, no?”

“But you didn’t even need to look into his eyes this time,” Hermione noted.

The French witch chuckled as she crossed the room and sat down on Ron’s crate. She reached out, grabbed Hermione’s knee, and purred. “You are zo perceptive, ‘Ermione! Eet was....how you say...ze area effect spell.”

Hermione furrowed her eyebrows, then shook her head as she reached out and pulled down Harry’s covers. Waving almost dismissively towards his crotch, she asked, “But how could it be a male-impacting area effect if it didn’t affect Harry?”

Focusing more on what Hermione had just exposed than what she had just asked, Harry cried “Hey!” and hastily pulled the covers back...but not before Fleur had the opportunity to make a wide-eyed observation.

“‘Ermione why do you say zere was no effect on ‘arry? Eet certainly looks like ‘e had ze reaction



magnifique!”

“What?” asked the Muggleborn witch. She looked towards Harry’s midsection, then snorted after a few moments of thought.

“You mean Harry’s erection?” she asked Fleur. Waving a hand dismissively, she declared, “That’s nothing.”

“Hey!” her best friend cried indignantly.

“Nothing?” asked Fleur. “Perhaps only in comparison to ze bits of a dragon?”

Harry’s eyes darted towards the French witch. He didn’t know whether to thank her for her support or chastise her for making the underlying observation.

Hermione chuckled. “No, no, there’s clear evidence that Harry’s penis is above average in length. What I meant to say is that there is nothing unusual about Harry having an erection right now. He’s always got one first thing in the morning.”

“Hey!” Harry cried, even more indignantly.

Fleur giggled. “And you know ze facts ‘ow, ‘Ermione?”

The bushy-haired witch rolled her eyes. “From having to barge into Harry’s dormitory so many times to drag his sorry arse out of bed so that he isn’t late for class.”

“Hermione!”

She turned towards her upset friend and patted his leg.

“Yes, Harry, language. Would you rather I say buttocks?”

“No!”

“Then are you are disputing the fact that I have to roust you out of bed when you oversleep?”

“No, I’m disputing your need to look at my bits when you do!”

“Ah,” she replied knowingly. Then she sighed, and added, “There is nothing to be ashamed of, you know. Your erection is a perfectly normal physiological response to the pressure placed on the male prostate gland by a full bladder.”

“I don’t care!”

“Oh, honestly, Harry. It’s no different from you staring at my hardened nipples whenever we enter a cold room. Or, for that matter, when I get zapped by Fleur’s magical pheromones, like last night.”

“But...”

“Relax, Harry, I’m not upset by your staring. You can’t help the fact that you’re a teenage boy with teenage levels of testosterone. It doesn’t mean that you find me sexually attractive; it’s an involuntary evolutionary response, after all...wouldn’t matter if it’s my nipples, or Fleur’s, or Molly’s that catch your eye.”

“Hey!”

“Hay is for horses, Harry,” Hermione quipped.

“Well, talk about certain people’s nipples is for-bidden!”

“But it proves my point?”

“It also makes me want to hurl!” Harry hissed. He then thoughtfully added, “The idea of me staring at Molly’s, I mean. Nothing upsetting about yours...because, Hermione, you have a very attractive pair of...”

“Perhaps zis admiration of each other’s bits eez better for another time?” Fleur teased.

Harry looked at the French witch and blushed.

“Excuse me,” he asked, pulling enough of his covers down to swing his legs over the side of the bed. “Now that the thought of Molly’s pair has caused some serious shrinkage, I’m going to go to the loo while I can.”

As made his way past Fleur she looked down at his pajama bottoms and made a comment in French that he didn’t understand. Hermione did, though, based on the chuckling that he heard behind his back as he opened the door and walked into the hallway. He might have stopped and asked for a translation, but he really did have a full bladder. He could see light spilling out into the hall from the door to the new bathroom, and didn’t want to risk the chance that someone would beat him to it.

After finishing his pressing business, Harry washed up and walked back out into the hall. Ron’s bedroom door was shut, but not soundly enough to keep certain noises from escaping into the hallway. The-Boy-Who-Lived snorted, and quickly made his way back to his room. When he opened the door he stopped short of entering...bedazzled by what he walked in on. Fleur and Hermione were sitting very close to one another on his bed, conversing in French. While the words were incomprehensible to Harry, their meaning seemed clear enough from the seductive way that they sounded, and the way that they were voiced. And then there was body language...as Fleur said something to Hermione, she reached forward and exposed some cleavage as she grabbed the Muggleborn’s thigh for emphasis.

“Wow!” he muttered, as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

The two witches stopped their conversation and turned towards him with shared smiles.

“Something wrong, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“No, it’s just...when you walk into your bedroom and find two pretty witches sitting on your bed...if Ron were with me he’d probably run right back to his room and lock the door again.”

“Oh, ‘Arry...you know just ‘ow to flatter a girl,” Fleur teased, as he walked towards them and took a seat on the unoccupied crate. “But why do you not ‘ave ze same reaction?”

Harry smiled. “Ah, but Fleur...I am already in my bedroom, and just closed the door.”

“Do you need some private time, zen?” Fleur teased.

The teen-aged wizard closed his eyes for a moment and smiled as he shook his head.

“Thanks for the offer, but it sounds like Molly and Ginny are putting together a breakfast tray. Wouldn’t care to have them walk in on me...and that probably goes for Ron as well. You must have really zapped him, Fleur...he’s still at it!”

Hermione looked towards the door and snorted.

“Ron should have only needed a minute or two,” she noted. “He must be trying for two ejaculations.”

“Hermione!” Harry protested.

“What?” she asked. “There’s empirical evidence.”

“I don’t care, it’s still not right to talk about it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Harry, I thought that after last night...you didn’t have any problems acting like an adult while we discussed my physiological response to the release of Fleur’s allure.”

“Time and place,” Harry countered. “I mean, shouldn’t we be more worried about what Ron is going to do or say when he returns?”

“Why should it matter?” Hermione asked. “Was Ron right to worry that you and I are becoming more than just good friends?”

“Perhaps friends wiz benefits?” the other witch asked.

“Fleur!” Harry and Hermione chided in tandem.

“Oh, sorry eef I spoke too soon,” the part-Veela coyly replied demurly. “But do not worry, ‘Arry...when Ron returns ‘e will not remember what ‘appened before. Ze affect makes ‘im... like ‘e eez shagged senseless, as you say?”

Hermione nodded. “Just like Molly isn’t going to think that anything strange happened last

night.”

Harry frowned. “But what about you?” he asked. “How do you remember about last night?”

His best friend snorted. “There are certain things that are very hard to forget.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry agreed. “But you know what I mean.”

Hermione nodded. “It helps a lot if you know that there is going to be a release beforehand, and have enough time to brace for the attack. Bill also lent me a book on Occlumency that I’ve read through a few times, and practiced some of the meditation exercises. Come to think of it, that’s probably what kept you from being affected just now.”

Harry shook his head, and recalled the pre-match festivities at the World Cup final. Fleur nodded her head, thinking that it was interesting that on both occasions, Hermione had been by Harry’s side. Fearing the implications might be too much too soon, Hermione leaned her head forward, and said that Harry’s resistance probably had more to do with his ability to shake off the *Imperius* curse.

Further exploration of this topic was cut off when the door swung open and a young red-haired witch walked in unannounced, carrying a full tray of breakfast items.

“Rise and shine, sleepy...head,” Ginny called out. The smile on her face dropped when she noticed who was in Harry’s bedroom, and where. Molly walked in right behind Ginny, and seemed almost as upset. Her concerns, however, were more focused on who wasn’t in Harry’s bedroom, rather than who was. She immediately turned and shouted out into the hallway.

“Ronald?”

“He just stepped out for a little while, Mrs. Weasley” Hermione said quickly.

Molly paid no attention to the excuse and strode out into the hall.

Harry couldn’t help a snort from escaping his nose as Molly went hunting for the son who should have been informally chaperoning Harry, Hermione, and Fleur. He could just imagine the scene if she walked in on Ron before he was done with his allure-addled business.

It wouldn’t be very pretty. Funny as hell... but still not very pretty.

Molly’s scolding carried easily into the bedroom. That her concerns were more about his location, rather than what he had been doing at that location, indicated that he had at least managed to avoid reliving that kind of embarrassment. The red-haired wizard was clear-eyed as he entered Harry’s bedroom and muttered a greeting (his mum’s tirade effectively clearing the lusty cobwebs from his head). Molly was on his heels, and now that Ron was accounted for turned her attentions to her unwanted French house guest.

“You should have been at your station already,” she stated sharply.

Fleur looked at a wall clock and frowned.

“Eet takes only a few minutes to walk out zere, and zere is steel ten minutes to go.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Molly said dismissively. “So long as you are doing anything... productive...you might as well head outside. Mundungus has been out there all night, you know.”

“Dung?” Harry snorted. “Well that makes me feel a whole lot safer.”

“Harry!” Hermione hissed.

“What?” he challenged. “Last year? Privet Drive? Dementors?”

“Still...”

Molly glared at the raven-haired wizard. She started to chastise him, but was distracted when her sight lines were blocked by a head of blonde hair.

“Well...enjoy your breakfast, ‘Arry,” Fleur told Harry, after swooping down and planting kisses on each of his cheeks. “ I will be ‘ere for ze evening dinner. And eef you wish to visit me before zen...”

“He will do nothing of the sort!” Molly declared.

The French witch ignored the retort as she leaned towards Hermione and kissed her cheeks as well. Ron moaned out loud when he spotted a hint of Fleur’s cleavage. The part-Veela turned towards the red-haired wizard and smiled. She walked up to him and planted nothing-but-air kisses on his face. Ron reacted as if she had shoved her tongue down his throat, and might have had an embarrassing sticky release had it not been for his solitary efforts just a few minutes previous.

The breakfast tray still held in Ginny’s hand served as an effective barrier, and there was no way in hell that Fleur was about to physically say her good-byes to Ginny’s mum. She thought it polite enough to nod as she gracefully floated out of the room.

Molly reacted by making a noise that sounded like a cross between a loud fart and the sound that Crookshanks made when he expelled fur balls from his throat.

“Mum hates her,” Ginny told Harry.

“I do not!” Molly protested. “I just think that there hasn’t been enough time for Bill to make a decision like that.”

“You mean about their engagement?” Harry asked innocently.

“They’re not officially engaged, Harry.”

“They’ve also been working together at Gringott’s for a whole year,” Ron mumbled, his eyes fixed firmly on the door that Fleur had closed behind her exit.

“Well that’s not enough time!”

“How long were you and Mr. Weasley engaged?” Harry asked.

“They weren’t, Harry,” Ginny said slyly. “Mum and Dad eloped.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Molly said indignantly. “Your father and I knew each other for several years before that.”

“Yeah, the seven years you both lived in Gryffindor Tower?” Ginny noted.

“No sense in waiting when two people realize that they are perfect for each other,” Molly snapped.

Harry’s eyebrows inched involuntarily towards his scar. Hermione stifled an incredulous snort. Ginny rolled her eyes, while her brother’s eyes were still fixed on the door.

The youngest Weasley’s reaction caught Harry off-guard. He wondered whether this a sign of rebellion...a signal that, when coupled with her sly comment about her parent’s elopement, indicated that Ginny wished to stand independently of her over-bearing mother and her mother’s ways. But then she called Fleur a “cow” and “Phlegm” in between Molly’s rants about the part-Veela not being the right one for her Bill, and decided that Ginny was just acting catty on an equal-opportunity basis.

There was no chance to challenge the witch’s comments so long as her mum was dominating the conversation. Molly went on and on about Fleur until she ran out of breath, saving just enough air to chide Harry about eating his eggs while they were still warm. She then turned and left the room, calling for Ginny to bring Harry’s breakfast dishes back down to the kitchen once he was finished.

Harry’s eyes gravitated towards Hermione’s just as soon as Molly’s back was turned, and they both broke out into giggles.

“What’s so funny?” Ginny demanded, as she finally gave Harry a chance to eat some breakfast by setting the tray onto his lap.

“Oh, nothing,” Harry replied quickly. “Just wondering how long it’s going to take for Ron to regain his wits.”

“What?” asked Ron.

“What makes you think that he ever had any to begin with?” Ginny asked.

Harry snorted, and once again noted the young witch’s general level of bitchiness.

“Can’t help it!” Ron protested. “They way that she floats around the room...”

“And you haven’t gotten used to it over the last couple of days?” Harry asked.

“Well sure...but then she goes and surprise kisses you...can’t be helped.”

“Of course it can,” Hermione countered. She waved towards her best friend and added, “He’s only been here a few hours, and Harry’s isn’t drooling over Fleur like an idiot, is he?”

Ron frowned, and furrowed his eyebrows as he gave Harry a calculating inspection. He somehow, miraculously, managed not to ask the black-haired wizard whether or not he was a poofter. Not that it mattered...his thoughts were clearly understood by everyone else in the room.

Ginny smiled, and coyly said, “Well maybe Harry’s heart belongs to another, and that love shields him from Fleur’s attacks?”

Ron snorted dismissively. Harry found enough to like within these comments to smile, and say, “Maybe so, Ginny...maybe so.”

This made Ginny smile brilliantly...until Harry turned and gave Hermione a rakish wink.

“If Mum has anything to say about it, you won’t have to worry about Fleur for much longer,” said Ginny.

“Why?” Harry asked. “From what I heard last night, Bill and Fleur are staying here for the rest of hols to help with security.”

“Bah!” spat Ginny. “I still don’t know why we are staying here in the first place. I mean...last year we all stayed at Headquarters because the Burrow supposedly wasn’t safe enough...what’s different this year?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe now that the place is cleaned up they don’t need a captive work force to stay there?”

“It is a good question,” said Hermione.

The black-haired wizard nodded. “To which I actually have a good answer...because I asked it myself last night when Dumbledore picked me up.”

Hermione waited for a beat, and then asked, “.....And?”

“And the answer is that he didn’t know until last night whether it was safe for anyone to stay at Grimmauld Place,” Harry replied. “When Sirius died...I was told only last night that he left the house to me, but the Headmaster was afraid that it could only go to a pureblood like Bellatrix. Or that Draco might have a stronger claim to becoming the Head of House Black. And if either of them had access, then...”

“Then it’d be Death Eaters battling the doxies, rather than us,” Ginny said.

“Exactly.”

“But you said ‘until last night’,” Hermione noted.

“Yes, I did,” Harry replied. “Dumbledore came up with a simple test to solve the question.”

“Gringott’s inheritance test?” asked Ginny.

“Hope not...heard that’s rather bloody,” said Ron.

Harry shook his head. “It was a simple test that didn’t involve blood...not that I wasn’t thinking about spilling some blood when Kreacher responded to my call...”

“What?” asked Ginny.

“Kreacher is bound to whoever owns Headquarters,” Harry replied quietly. “The Headmaster asked me to summon Kreacher, and if he appeared to then issue him an order. Well he did pop to me, and he shut his mouth when I told him to.”

“So that means you are Lord Black, now?” Ron asked in a raised voice.

Harry shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. Probably at most the heir...heir apparent, right Hermione?”

“That’s right.”

“Not that I’ll expect you to call me milord if I’m wrong. Sirius never had us doing that...”

The corners of Hermione’s eyes were wet as she picked the tray off of Harry’s lap, set it aside, and pulled him into a hug.

“Oh, Harry,” she whispered. “That was an awful thing for Dumbledore to ask you to do!”

“Thanks,” he replied, as his face found warmth in her brown bushy hair.

“That means that it *would* be safe for us to stay at Headquarters,” Ginny concluded.

“Why would we want to do that?” Ron asked. “Can’t play Quidditch there, can you?”

“Because then we could send Phlegm away,” Ginny reasoned.

Ron thought for a moment. His cheeks flushed and his eyes dilated as he repeated his question.

“Why would we want to do that?”

“Bah! You’re disgusting!” Ginny replied, knowing full well what the small bump in her brother’s



trousers meant.

Harry was too glum to call Ginny out on her name calling. “Don’t expect that I’ll be able to play even if we stay here,” he noted.

“Why not?” Ron challenged. “Thought your ban was lifted at the end of term?”

“That’s what the Headmaster told me,” Harry countered. “But he apparently got ahead of himself.”

“What do you mean?”

“The ban was issued by Umbridge, but enforced by the Ministry,” Harry explained. “And the Ministry works at its own moronic pace.”

“Oy!”

“Except for your father, of course.”

“Why would Dumbledore tell you it was lifted before it was lifted?” asked Ron.

“Maybe he was too used to being Headmaster, Chief Warlock and Head of the ICW all at the same time?” Hermione asked.

“But it is going to be lifted before September...right?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. “Hope so. But in the mean time, I still can’t legally fly.”

“Legal...smeeegal!” Ron said disdainfully. “No harm in you playing two-v-two pick-up games, right?”

“Have to ask your mum,” said Harry. “Maybe it’s best not to do anything out of turn now that your dad’s got a promotion?”

“That shouldn’t matter!” Ron spat. “Why, I’m going to go talk to mum right now and straighten this out...”

Harry reached out and stopped his friend by grabbing hold of his arm.

“Hold on, Ron,” he asked. “Plenty of time for that later...and we’ve got more important things to talk about right now.”

“What? You’re daft, mate! What could be more important than practicing for the upcoming season?”

Harry and Hermione sighed in tandem. He looked towards Ginny, who didn’t look to be leaving anytime soon...which was a problem. Harry wanted to reveal the Prophecy to Ron and

Hermione...but not to Ginny. At least not yet.

The black-haired teenager purposely set his tea cup down on the platter.

“Thanks for bringing me breakfast, Ginny...guess I’m not as hungry right now as your mum figured I’d be.”

The younger witch waved away Harry’s concerns.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter...what do you need to tell us, Harry?”

“Well...”

Not seeing a way to encourage Ginny to leave the room without raising her suspicions, Harry began a full accounting of his introduction to Horace Slughorn. This included the relaying of Dumbledore’s comments about the potion master’s habit of cultivating politically and socially advantageous relationships with certain students.

“No doubt he’ll be polishing you up,” Hermione told Harry.

“I don’t quite like the sound of that, thank you very much.”

“He would polish Fleur in a heartbeat,” Ron reasoned, getting that dreamy look in his eyes again. He glanced towards the opened window and added, “I know I would.”

“Arrrgh!” Ginny hissed. “Will you stop mooning over Phlegm!”

“Stop it, Ginny,” Harry asked. “I don’t like hearing you call Fleur names.”

“So she’s got you under her spell too?” asked Ginny.

“I don’t like it one bit either,” Hermione said sharply.

The younger witch rolled her eyes. “You too, Hermione? Maybe you’d like to polish off the cow at the same time?”

“Enough!” Harry said sternly.

Ginny looked at the firm expressions on Harry and Hermione’s faces. Then she turned and saw the goofy grin on her brother’s face.

“Daft! The lot of you!” she hissed as she turned her back on the other three and walked towards the window.

“I can just see her out there,” Ginny spat. “With her robes unbuttoned and her skirt hiked up high, shamelessly working on that oh so perfect tan...”

“You can really see her?” Ron asked, with a mixture of hope and lust in his voice.

“Of course not,” his sister replied dismissively. “Bill’s got the ward line set so far out, you’d need a hawkeye spell to see her...or maybe...”

Ginny was distracted by a shiny object sitting in an opened box on the far side of the window.

“Or maybe a telescope!” she declared, walking over and pulling out a cylindrical brass object.

Ron was too loopy to warn his sister about the risks involved when touching anything in their brothers’ old room. Harry and Hermione hadn’t been pranked enough by the Twins to learn that lesson the hard way, and Ginny’s bat-bogey hex was too good for her to have learned that way either. So, filled of certainty that Fleur really was dressed as she imagined, Ginny held the telescope up to her eye and began to search for demonstrable proof.

*Bang!*

“Ginny!” shouted Hermione and Harry.

The witch who had disappeared within a puff of black smoke emerged from that smoke with the prank telescope in her left hand, and a magnificent shiner over her right eye.

“Squeezed...poked...*cough*!” she rasped, looking down at the small boxing glove that swung from a coil attached to the eyepiece.

“No worries, Mum can fix that right up for you,” said Ron, who was just coherent enough to realize the risks involved if he found humor in the situation.

Harry and Hermione nodded in agreement, and asked Ginny if she was okay. Neither thought the prank to be very funny, and knew that they could have just as easily been its victims.

Ginny pulled a small mirror from a pocket and held it up to her face. She shrieked, and barreled out of the room and down the stairs.

“Mum can fix that,” Ron said with confidence. “She’s really good with healing potions, and fixing minor injuries and stuff.”

Harry nodded, thinking more about Molly’s brewing skills than her healing talents. He felt sorry for Ginny, even as he realized that her bad fortune had given him the opportunity he needed.

“Well, so long as Ginny’s in good hands,” he began, “There’s something else you two need to know about last night.”

“What’s that?” asked Ron.

“Dumbledore says that he’s going to be giving me private lessons this year.”

“What for?” asked Ron.

“Probably has something to with the prophecy....”

**oo000000oo**

Hermione and Ron both gave Harry, and the secrets that Harry revealed to them, the complete focus that they deserved. Questions were asked with hushed whispers, and when answers were available they were whispered in reply. Hermione was horrified and despondent and fearful all at the same time, and spent most of that time of full disclosure crying into Harry’s shoulder. Ron didn’t cry, but he didn’t joke about the situation either, which was a major step for him. And if either of the other two realized that Ron’s focus was aided by having Harry’s breakfast leftovers within reach, they held their tongue.

When the hushed conversation swung back around to Dumbledore’s private lessons, Ron did try to lighten the mood with a comment about Harry knowing at least one class that he’d be taking that Fall. This triggered Harry’s memory of another thing that the Headmaster had told him the night previous...that their OWL results would be arriving that day.

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Hermione, without much enthusiasm in her voice.

Her two friends stared at her as if she’d grown another head.

“What?” she said defensively. “Were you expecting me to fly off the handle at the news? To start shrieking, or rushing to the window to see if I could spot owls heading towards us, or run downstairs to badger Molly, and demand to know if our private test results were for some reason delivered to her instead of to us?”

Harry and Ron looked at each other, then turned their heads towards their bushy-haired friend at the same rate of speed and replied in tandem.

“Yes.”

Hermione sighed. “Well that’s disappointing. Have I been that bad?”

Ron rubbed the back of his neck.

“Well, Hermione...you have spent an awful lot of time staring towards the Eastern sky since you’ve been here, haven’t you?”

“Define awful.”

“Hermione, it’s part of what makes you...you,” Harry declared. “And we love you for it.”

“Oh, stop,” the Muggleborn witch insisted. “I’m mature enough to admit to my anxieties over the past month, but now? After you just told us that, Harry? Makes my petty anxieties rather...petty.”

Ron arched an eyebrow. “Quick, somebody check her for an *Imperius* .”

“Hey!” Hermione protested.

“Is for horses?” Harry teased.

“Hmmmft!”

“Too bad you can’t maintain that mature attitude,” said Ron.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

“I mean that you have to freak out,” the red-haired wizard replied. “It would be out of character for you not to, unless there was something even more important for you to worry about.”

“But there is!”

“And I would just as soon keep that more important thing between us,” Harry whispered loudly. “Ron’s right. His Mum and Ginny are sure to notice if you don’t act like they’d expect you to, and will want to know why.”

Hermione frowned. “So you two are telling me that in order to keep your secret a secret, I have to wear my anxieties on my sleeve?”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“Any suggestions on how I accomplish that task?”

“Hmm...,” thought Ron, rubbing his chin. “You could always fly off the handle at the news, start shrieking, and run downstairs to badger Mum and ask if she’s received our test results?”

“Prat!”

Harry chuckled. “No worries, Hermione...we’ll know that you’re just putting on an act.”

“And you better know that I’ll be thinking about you the whole time!” Hermione hissed.

“Thanks. I will.”

Hermione nodded, then took a quick step towards Harry and pulled him into a deep hug. Then she took two steps back from the boys, took a deep breath, and shouted more towards the door than towards them.

“Today? Our OWL results are coming today? And only now you think to tell us? Harry! OH NO! What if they’ve already arrived?”

The Muggleborn witch then threw open the door and ran down the stairs, screaming the whole

way.

“Mrs. Weasley...Harry says that they’re coming today! TODAY! Have any owls arrived yet?”

Harry chuckled and shook his head.

“She’s a good actress.”

“Not much of a stretch, though, is it?” Ron said with a smile.

Harry snorted.

“Right, so...you probably ought to stay in character as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been all serious and thoughtful the last few minutes,” said Harry. “Very out of character.”

“Oy!”

“Don’t try to deny it.”

Ron rolled his eyes.

“So I imagine you’ve got some ideas on how I should act?”

Harry smiled, then stretched that smile into a glassy-eyed goofy grin.

“Oh, Fleur you’re so...amazing!” he mock-mumbled.

“Sod off.”

“Have you acted any differently since she arrived?”

Ron sighed.

“Okay, fine...I’ll try.”

“Can’t be too much of a stretch for you.”

“Shut it, Potter,” Ron hissed. He took a step towards the door, then paused and turned back.

“Harry?”

“Yes, Ron?”

“You won’t mind if I *don’t* think about you the whole time I’m downstairs acting like a horny

teenager...will you?"

"I'd just as soon that you didn't," Harry replied quickly.

"Good," said Ron. He paused, then added, "Not that there's anything wrong with..."

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Go act like a horny love-struck buffoon."

"Right."

Harry let out a small sigh as he followed his friend down the stairs. He thought about all of the different ways that he could prove to Ron that he wasn't a homosexual, which brought him back full circle to the play acting that he himself might need to be doing downstairs.

So was there a way that he could secretly let Hermione know that he might be thinking about her at the same time that she was going to be play acting and thinking about him?

He smiled...and wondered if he dared suggest that they read their OWL results in the sitting room.

*canoncansodoff*  
*FanficAuthors.net*



# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 3: Panda pants

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters, no money being made, etc., etc.

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The fourth owl that swooped into the Burrow's kitchen window that morning didn't garner nearly as much attention as the first three...not that she cared. Hedwig landed on her human's shoulder and nudged the side of his head with her own.

"Good morning to you too, girl," Harry replied quietly. "How was the hunting?"

"BARK!" Hedwig replied, with a response that was far more characteristic of snowy owls than the pedestrian "hoot" used by other owls.

"Ssshh!" Harry hissed, nodding back over his shoulder towards Ron, his mum, and the Burrow's active floo connection.

"bark."

"No worries," Harry whispered. "Too bad about the hunt...thought you might have more success out here in the country."

"bark...bark!"

Harry snorted. "Well at least you didn't go hungry. Leave any room for some bacon?"

Hedwig's silent glare was the perfect answer for a ridiculous question.

"Right," Harry said with a quiet chuckle. "So...I think that I managed to hide a rasher or two from Ron. There's a breakfast tray still on my bed...check under the plate."

"bark!"

"Oh, and if you're up for it girl?"

Hedwig glared at her human, and nibbled on his ear.

"Fine...just trying to be polite!" Harry whispered, as his familiar launched off his shoulder and flew out the opened kitchen window.

Hermione stared at her best friend and shook her head in disbelief. She thought that her familiar bond with Crookshanks was strong, but the way Harry and Hedwig communicated was amazing.

"What did you just ask her to do?" she whispered across the table.

Harry smiled. "She'll take your letter after you've written it."

"What letter?"

"The letter that you are going to send to your parents letting them know about your test scores."

"Oh, yeah...I guess," Hermione said. "Doesn't have to be right now though. I mean...if you want to..."

Harry scrunched his nose and shook his head.

"Plenty of time for worries and plans," he whispered. "Besides, if you take after your mum and dad, they might be just as anxious and nervous as you were."

"Stop!" Hermione gently chided. "So what's up with Hedwig?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said that she didn't have much success hunting...but she didn't go hungry?"

Harry snorted. "Three mice and a small hare...no, she ate well last night."

"But what was she hunting for, then?"

The teenage wizard grinned. "The right guy to nest with."

It was Hermione's turn to snort.

"Really?" Harry asked slyly. "So how is your hunt going, then?"

"What?" Hermione hissed.

"Your reaction...you were thinking something like '*Aren't we all*' , right?"

Hermione's eyebrows arched towards her hairline. The fact that he understood her non-verbals as well as his familiar's was...disconcerting.

Harry's smile grew wider as he nodded towards the stairs.

"Go...grab some parchment and... if you don't mind, lend me a pen and paper as well?"

Hermione tilted her head.

"Headmaster didn't want Hedwig delivering letters from my Aunt and Uncle's," Harry explained. "I haven't sent Susan Bones my condolences yet."

The Muggleborn's eyes darted towards the stack of *Daily Prophets* that they had been sharing.

"Sure thing, Harry" she replied sadly, imagining his name written out in a ledger next to a column labeled "*The Right Guy* ."

Hermione placed a check mark next to her caring, thoughtful friend's "*Right Guy*" tally as she rose from the table and headed towards the stairs.

"Where she going?" Ron asked.

The-Boy-Who-Lived swung his legs around the bench so that he could face the red-haired teen. For the last hour Molly had forced Ron to stand by the kitchen fireplace as she made one floo call after another, bragging to friends and acquaintances about his OWL results. Every once in a while she would blindly reach out and literally drag him into the conversation.

"She's going to write to her parents," Harry replied, carefully keeping his gaze centered on Ron's face.

The last thing he wanted to do was let his attention drift towards Mrs. Weasley while she floo called from her hands and knees. It wasn't the first time that he'd seen Molly in this position, but it was the first time he had seen her bum in the air since she encouraged her husband to *ride her like a hippogriff* .

"Oh, right," Ron acknowledged.

Molly pulled her son's head into the flames before he had the chance to expand on these comments.

Harry chuckled to himself as he swung back towards the table. The pile of newspapers caught his eye again, and he sighed. The sheer number of Death Eater attacks and related disappearances over the previous two weeks was overwhelming. And while he was happy to see that Fudge had finally been sacked as Minister, that event was overshadowed by Amelia Bones' death. Harry had thought her to be the ideal replacement to Fudge, based both on his conversations with her niece, and how she had treated him during his trial.

The-Boy-Who-Lived began mentally composing the first few lines of his condolence letter while he waited for Hermione's return. He hoped that he wouldn't need to reuse these lines in other letters sent to grieving friends, but was realistic enough to fear that the sympathies might become boilerplate language.

**oo00O00oo**

"Just a few more calls," Molly assured them, glancing over her shoulder towards Harry and Hermione.

He tried not to think about the view as he looked past Mrs. Weasley's bum and nodded.

"No worries," Hermione declared from the other side of the table.

Molly thanked them for their patience and grabbed one more pinch of floo powder. Before calling out her next address she glanced down at the clock that she had set on the floor. The clock face stared back unchanged...nine hands, all hovering over "Mortal Peril." She sighed, and literally dove into her next conversation.

"She said that an hour and a half ago," Ron whined to his friends.

"Well, it could have been worse, you know," Hermione stated.

"How?" demanded Ron.

"You might have spent less time sleeping in History of Magic, and allowed your mum to brag about eight OWLs instead of seven!"

"Yeah, yeah...don't hold your breath waiting for me to apologize for coming up short on that one," Ron said.

Hermione let out a short breath of exasperation and glanced towards Harry.

"No apologies here, either," he declared with an almost satisfied grin on his face.

"Bah! At least you had a good excuse, Harry," she muttered.

The Muggleborn caught movement out of the corner of her eye.

"What's up?" she asked Ron.

"I'm starving!" hissed the red-haired teen, as he gravitated towards the ice box.

"Ronald! Come back here!" Molly barked. "Emily Codswallower is waiting to congratulate you!"

The teenager froze, sighed, then retraced his steps.

"Yes, Mum. Coming, Mum."

Molly accepted her son's compliance with a curt nod, then turned towards Harry.

"Why don't you ask Ginny to make you something for lunch?" she asked, just before she dove back into the flames with her son in tow.

Harry turned towards Hermione, who was a little miffed at Molly's focus.

"You think that Ginny will make me some lunch too?" she asked.

"Don't think that Ginny will be anywhere other than her room, so long as she has that black eye," Harry said.

"Do you blame her? I know that I wouldn't want to be seen looking like a panda."

Harry chuckled, "Oh, I don't know, Hermione. You were a cute little kitty cat...bet you'd be just as cuddly as a panda."

The Muggleborn stared at her friend, trying to decide whether to be angry or pleased by this comment. She decided to avoid deciding, and stood back from the table.

"Come on, we need a break."

"Fancy an escape to the sitting room?" Harry teased.

"Hush!" Hermione hissed, pushing on his arm until he nearly lost his balance. She then pulled him back away from the table, and dragged him into the small scullery on the far side of the kitchen.

"Might as well earn our keep," said Hermione, using her full voice now that they were in the pantry and well away from the floo. "Mrs. Weasley will be upset once she realizes that the washing hasn't been done for the day."

Harry shrugged his agreement as he ducked under hanging bunches of dried herbs and walked past shelves of tinned fruits and vegetables. He'd seen Molly's daily routine enough times to know what needed to be done.

"Unless you'd rather talk about....?" Hermione asked.

Her best friend shook his head as he reached for the large two-handled wicker basket that sat empty on top of Molly's charmed washing machine.

"Like I said before...time enough to talk when Ron's with us," he reasoned. "And it would do me good to keep my hands busy...on chores, that is."

Hermione snorted. "Thinking of another way to keep your hands busy, Mister?"

"Maybe," Harry grinned. "Only saying that there are times – *cough* -sitting room-*cough* - when we just can't help where our hands go."

"You are a real prat sometimes," Hermione chided.

"Ah, but that's why you love me...right?" Harry teased.

Hermione shook her head slightly and sighed.

"I suppose...heaven help me," she admitted. "Now let's get going, before Ron or Molly realizes that the two of us are tucked away in the closest thing the Burrow has to a broom closet."

"You make that sound like that's a bad thing."

"Out!" Hermione growled, pushing Harry back towards the kitchen with both hands.

The smile on her face made it clear that she wasn't really upset. The smile on Harry's face made it clear that he was enjoying the banter, which Hermione thought was a really good thing, considering circumstances.

Harry and Hermione's exit from the pantry was met by a calculating gaze...Ron's face had cleared the flames again, and he had been searching for his two friends. Harry held up the large wicker basket, causing the red-haired wizard's shoulders to relax.

"Oh, right...good," Ron decided. "Mum can start straight away on lunch, then."

"You're so predictable," Hermione sighed.

Her red-haired friend smiled. "That's why you love me, right?"

"No."

Ron paused. "So there's other reasons, then?" he asked half-hopeful, as his friends walked past him towards the stairwell.

Hermione was polite enough to wait until she was halfway up the stairs before softly muttering, "None that come to mind."

Harry stopped and looked back over his shoulder at his best friend.

"We'll start at the top floor and make our way down," she stated plainly. "That's the most efficient way."

"Erm...right," Harry agreed, deciding not to offer up the teasing that sat on the tip of his tongue.

**oo00O00oo**

It took far less effort to climb to the head of the Burrow's stairs now that someone had shaved a few layers off of the top. Hermione used the gathering of dirty laundry to give Harry a tour of the remodeled home.

The insides of the Burrow used to be just as strange and quirky as it looked from the outsides...a six-bedroom home with the bedrooms spread out over five different floors. Some levels had one bedroom, others had two. There didn't appear to be any bedrooms on the third level (Harry still didn't know what it was used for, even after all the time he'd spent at the Burrow). Nobody ever complained about the layout, or thought it strange or unnatural...like many things in the Wizarding World, the Burrow thumbed its architectural nose at logic and efficient design.

But Molly's acceptance of her home as "just the way it is" faltered after Voldemort's return at the end of Harry's Fourth Year. The Burrow's only Floo connection was in the kitchen, at ground level...too far away from a fifth floor bedroom if there was a Death Eater attack that necessitated a quick escape. Molly wanted her children to be as close to her as the family clock that she clutched continuously to her bosom... and that meant bedrooms much closer to the Master

Bedroom.

It had taken the better part of a year to design, finance and complete the remodeling job. The work has started the summer previous...just after the Weasley family had moved into Grimmauld Place. The coincidence was striking for Harry. Not that he begrudged their long-term guest residence...that had been Sirius's decision, not his, and Hermione had been quick to point out safety advantages that went beyond Molly's occasionally irrational fears. For example, wards and security charms were much more effective and much less expensive to apply to a structure whose footprint was more symmetrical than eccentric.

Harry and Hermione started their self-assigned chore on the second floor (which would have been called the third floor by her cousins over in the States).

"This is the Master," Hermione noted, as they walked into Arthur and Molly's bedroom.

Harry had a look around the room. There were separate twin beds, but it was the same way in his Aunt and Uncle's bedroom, so it didn't strike him as odd, or particularly Victorian. Then he glanced up at the ceiling.

"Nice and quiet," he noted. "Do they still have an attic?"

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, they do...but no, they don't have a ghoul anymore."

"Probably didn't have much of a chance once he was clanking over Molly's bed, instead of Ron's."

"No, I don't imagine that he did," Hermione agreed, as she emptied the bedroom's clothes hamper into the basket. She glanced towards the bed and thought for a moment.

"Sheets were changed yesterday, so we don't need to strip the beds."

"Just as well," Harry grinned. "Wouldn't fancy having to handle Ron's linens after this morning."

Hermione crinkled her nose.

"Moving on, then..." she segued. "There's a new bath over this way, and Ginny's room is now on the other side."

Harry followed her into a small, but serviceable full bath, complete with a claw-footed tub. Hermione added a set of dirty towels to Harry's basket, then knocked on a closed door that was opposite to the one they'd used to gain entry.

"Ginny?" she called out.

"Go away!" a voice cried.

"Ginny, I'm just doing laundry."

"Don't care!"

"Ginny...you know how your mum gets when the dirty clothes don't...."

"Fine...Hold on, Phlegm's got a ton!"

"Ginny?" Hermione admonished.

There wasn't a response to this reproach...after a few moments silence the door swung open. The youngest Weasley appeared carrying a still-painful shiner and an armful of clothes. She took two steps into the bath, and was half-way through spitting "There...happy now?" when she spotted Harry standing behind Hermione with the basket.

"Eep!" the red-haired witch shrieked. She dropped the clothes, spun around, and darted back into her room.

"You didn't tell me that Harry was with you!" Ginny shrieked from behind the slammed door.

Hermione sighed as she squatted down to pick up what Ginny had dropped.

"What's wrong, Gin?" Harry called out. "I was there when it happened...not like I haven't seen something like...that...before?"

The way that the end of this sentence lost volume and faltered caused Hermione to look up at Harry. He was looking down...not at her face, but at the pair of black silk knickers that she'd just picked up off of the floor.

She smiled, and put one of her well-practiced sentences to good use.

"Oh, honestly, Harry...it's just a bit of dirty laundry. Don't tell me you've never seen a pair of knickers before?"

Harry gulped, thinking that "dirty" could easily describe the whiff of sheer silk in more ways than one. And in a flash he remembered that he *had* seen something exactly like those knickers...the night before, when Fleur was still wearing them. And he found himself wondering why they looked sexier, and more arousing, now that Hermione had them in her hand.

He panicked, not wanting to give her the chance to talk about how natural it would be if he got a stiffie. So he lowered the laundry basket so that it covered the front of his trousers, and reached for the brain-bleach.

"Never seen a pair like that when I've done laundry at my Aunt and Uncle's," he snarked.

Hermione's eyes went wide.

"Would you have wanted to?"



"Not really."

Hermione shivered her shoulders. "Gee thanks, Harry," she snapped, tossing Fleur's undies into the basket. "That image just made me throw up a little bit in my mouth."

"I learned to get over that reaction."

"Oh, Harry...I'm so sorry."

He shrugged. "All part of the package tour when you're a house elf on Privet Drive."

Having gathered up all of the rest of Ginny and Fleur's clothes off the floor (and it was easy for Harry to tell what belonged to whom), Hermione dumped them into the basket, then offered him a consoling one-armed side-by-side hug.

"Done with this floor, then?" he asked.

She nodded, then led him back into the Master Bedroom.

And the witch who had been eavesdropping with one ear pressed against the door frowned...not knowing whether she should be discouraged or relieved that Harry had made no mention of her plain-Jane unmentionables.

When Harry and Hermione reached the first floor they found themselves on more familiar territory. Percy's room on one end, the Twins' on the other, and a bath and Ron's room in between.

With Harry walking behind her, Hermione allowed a small smile to form on her lips as she walked into her bedroom. She hadn't planned on doing the laundry with Harry that day...if she had, then her skimpiest, sexiest, undies would have been waiting for retrieval. The navy blue polyester knickers and bra set was a pretty good alternative, though...and certainly better than the pairs of "mollypants" that she only wore on certain days of the month.

The Muggleborn had second thoughts about her dirty laundry when she suddenly remembered just how she had dirtied some of it. Hermione had broken into a heavy sweat during her morning spell workout...sweat that had left her knickers wet in all the wrong places (so long as she didn't want Harry to mistakenly believe that she'd soaked them during a heavy rub).

Did she dare allow him to jump to those conclusions? She waffled.

"Hope that my hamper isn't too disgusting," Hermione said, as she pulled her nightgown out of the bin. "I sweated like a pig when I did my workout this morning."

"No worries," Harry replied brightly, as he secretly tried to logic out the pattern of sweat stains on the nightgown. "You worked up that sweat casting spells then?"

Hermione decided to explore the outer limits of her plan as she casually tossed her damp knickers onto the top of the growing pile in Harry's basket.

"Are you thinking of some other way that I could have gotten these knickers this wet?"

Eyes widened when Harry risked a quick look down at the pile. He pulled the basket tight against his body to double check that it was concealing the right parts, then let out a deep breath.

Trying hard not to act his age, Harry tried to play it cool.

"Hmmm...I guess you could have gone for a swim?"

Hermione grinned. "Yes, that is one alternative," she replied. Then she reached for her brassiere and added it to the pile. "But how would you then explain the fact that my bra isn't wet?"

Harry arched an eyebrow. "You went topless?" he cheekily guessed.

His friend shrugged nonchalantly. "Wouldn't have been the first time...except this is the Burrow, not France."

A breath caught in Harry's throat. It was getting very hard to act more like a friend than a teenage boy.

"Now that is a vacation story that you've never shared with me before."

"Oh...would you like to hear it, then?" Hermione asked coyly, as she reached for the rest of her clothing.

"Might be a good distraction while we empty out Ron's hamper," Harry joked.

Hermione laughed.

"You got me there," she admitted. "Although, there is always a chance we'll be able to take the good with the bad."

"What chance is that?" Harry asked with disbelief.

Hermione smiled. "I want to see if Bill has gotten brave enough to wear the silk shorts that Fleur has had him wearing now that he's back at the Burrow."

Harry thought for a moment, then let out a low-pitched whistle.

"That would be rather ballsy with his mum doing the laundry," he stated.

"Language, Harry!" Hermione chided. "The correct term is testicles."

"Erm....Right. Sorry."

Hermione nodded, then led Harry out of the room. Her face betrayed a hint of self-satisfaction. His face betrayed more than a hint of confusion.

They made short work of collecting first the bathroom towels, then the contents of Ron's hamper. It turned out that Bill was still working his nerve, and the less said about his younger brother's dirty clothing, the better. Harry actually spent far more time examining Ron's room than his undies...marveling at how it was exactly the same as when it'd been on the top floor of the Burrow. Hermione picked up on this interest, and told him that from what she read, magical remodeling actually allowed for the cut and paste of entire rooms as if the house was a stack of building blocks.

Harry didn't think to worry about his own clothes hamper until Hermione took a look into it and chuckled.

"Harry...did you go regimental yesterday?" she asked conversationally, as she dumped the hamper into the basket in one go.

"No!" he hissed.

"Then where are *your* ...?"

"Disappointed?" Harry teased.

"Well, it's only fair. You got to see mine," she mock-pouted.

"You'll have to peek under my robes, then," Harry replied.

"You're still wearing the same pair?"

Harry shrugged. "I only have one half-way decent pair...everything else is my cousin's hand-me-downs, and...well...there are some stains that don't come out no matter what you do..."

"Ugh...thank you for sharing that image with me."

"You're welcome."

Hermione shook her head.

"So when do you change your shorts, then?"

"I don't...just use cleaning charms every morning."

"Cleaning charms?" Hermione asked, her voice rising in pitch. "How could you...they're so...how do you handle the chafing?"

The teenage wizard shrugged. "Guess it wasn't an issue for me after a while."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said sadly. "Your poor skin...it must be so rough and dry!"

Harry grinned. "Are you volunteering to rub some lotion on me?"

Hermione's first thought was to call Harry a berk/git/prat. Her second thought was that Harry was being amazingly relaxed...almost cheeky. Just what she had hoped to accomplish!

Deciding it a shame to waste the opportunity, Hermione purred like a kitten, and said, "I've got a bottle of moisturizer in my trunk."

"You'd...you'd really..."

"What's the matter, Harry?" his friend asked. "It would only be for medicinal purposes...right?"

"Erm...right."

"Of course," Hermione continued, "We'd have to consider a permanent cure for the problem."

"We would?" Harry asked. "Got something in mind?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, actually...I saw some green silk boxers in one of the mail-order catalogs that Fleur lent me."

Harry snorted. "Boxer shorts in a mail-order catalog? So is that where she shops for Bill, then?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Hermione replied matter-of-factly.

"So...why were you borrowing it?"

The bushy-haired witch's eyes flashed with mirth. "Well somebody has a birthday coming up... doesn't he?"

Harry snorted. "Yeah...I bet green would look good on Neville."

Hermione gave him a gentle nudge that set him a bit off-balance.

"Prat!"

"I'd say you love me anyway, but we've already established that point...haven't we?"

Hermione sighed. Harry pressed his advantage.

"So you think boxers over briefs, huh?"

"Yes."

"Is that a personal preference, or....?"

"Harry, if you don't want my help, then..."

"No, no...I do!" Harry replied.

"Good."

"Just so long as you let me return the favor," Harry joked.

Hermione chuckled, then pressed her advantage.

"Sounds good to me."

"Really?"

"Sure...it's just good friends helping good friends, right?"

"Absolutely."

"We'll just have to find a private time to look through the catalogs together," Hermione decided.

"There's more than one?"

"Of course, Harry," Hermione chided. "One to shop for Bill and you, the other for Fleur and me."

"So Fleur has a birthday coming up as well?"

"Harry!"

"Okay, fine. So...what's this about private time, then? We're doing this as friends, right?"

"Of course, Harry," his friend said with a smile. "But that doesn't mean that Molly...or Ron... wouldn't blow their top if they spotted us having a look through."

"Really?" Harry asked. "So just how racy are these mail-order catalogs, then?"

Hermione paused, thinking how best to answer. She pointed to the basket in Harry's hands, and smiled.

"Fleur says she orders most of her lingerie from them."

Harry immediately thought about the outfit that Fleur had flashed the night before...the outfit now sitting in his basket. And then he imagined Hermione wearing an outfit like that. And then he pressed the clothes basket even closer against his crotch.

"Private time it is, then," he stammered.

**oo00O00oo**

Harry was very happy to see Molly back on her two feet when Hermione and he made their way back to the kitchen. Ron obviously shared that attitude as he sat at the table and watched his mum pull food from the ice box.

"Oh, there you two are," said Molly. "I'll take that basket, Harry...you don't need to be doing the wash."

"That's alright, Mrs. Weasley," Harry replied. "It won't take but a minute for us to load the washer," Harry replied.

"No, you're a guest, Harry...I insist."

"Mum...but what about lunch?" Ron whined.

Molly sighed.

"Well, where is Ginny, anyway? She should have been doing one or the other."

"Dunno," said Ron. "I was with you all morning, remember?"

"We saw her up in her bedroom, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione.

Molly scowled. "Why would she be there at this time of the day?"

"She still has that black eye," Harry noted.

"What? I can't believe that," Molly snapped. "Used the strongest bruise removing spell in the book...it should have cleared up by now." Then she walked over to the base of the stairs and shrieked, "Ginny? Come down here!"

It took two rounds of shouting to coax the teen-aged witch out of her room and down to the kitchen. Her black-eye didn't look any better.

Molly huffed, and slammed the kitchen knife that she'd been using to prepare lunch down on the counter.

"Well, we'll have to get Fred and George to come here and straighten this out right away," she declared.

"Can't it wait until after lunch?" Ron whined.

"No! Now!" Ginny shouted.

Ron scowled. "Don't see why it couldn't just wait until we see them when we go to Diagon Alley for our school shopping," he muttered.

Molly stopped in her tracks, swiveled, and cuffed Ron on the head.

"Ouch!" he shouted. "What was that for?"

"For being so selfish and insensitive," Molly declared. "Why the very idea! Forcing your poor

sister to live with that black eye...it could be weeks before the supply lists come out!"

"It was just a suggestion," Ron said defensively.

"And a horrid one at that!" Molly yelled. "What kind of mean-spirited person would even think of allowing such a thing to occur?"

Ron hung his head, and went with the rote reply of, "Yes, Mum. Sorry, Mum."

Deciding that the point had been made well enough, Molly nodded and reached for a pinch of floo powder.

Harry dropped his gaze to the pile of laundry in his hands as she got down on hands and knees and shouted, "Wheezes!" He kept his eyes diverted while she stuck her head into the green flames, and only looked up once it was clear that she was once again back on her feet.

"Why the nerve of those two!" Molly said in a very loud voice. "Charming some cardboard cutout of themselves to say that they can't come to the floo right now, and to give them my name and floo address...I'll give them something, alright!"

Ron caught his breath as he watched his mum open up her "special" cabinet and reach for the stack of "special" red envelopes.

"Oh, boy...they're in for it now!" he muttered.

Harry felt Hermione nudge his shoulder and turned towards her.

"Why don't we do that laundry now?" she asked softly. "Sounds good to me," Harry replied.

He carried the basket into the pantry as she held open the door. She closed the door behind her.

"No need to hear that howler being made at full volume," she stated.

"Agreed," said Harry.

"I've never understood why the howler's magic can't simply amplify the voice of the sender," Hermione said.

"Where's the fun in that?" Harry snarked. "Wouldn't give Molly a chance to express her concerns in full voice."

"Good point," Hermione agreed, as she began to toss dirty clothes into the basin of Molly's charmed washing machine.

The device was a curious blend of magic and Victorian-era Muggle technology. The washer basin sat upright on four short legs, and was roughly the size of a 55-gallon barrel. Two rollers sat one on top of the other on one side of the basin; they were there to press the water out of the cleaned

clothes after they were washed. Soon after Hermione dropped the first bit of dirty laundry into the basin, the cleaning water magically appeared and began to slowly fill the washer. The water level rose to just a few inches from the rim, reaching that point just as Hermione dropped in Molly's bloomers, which had been sitting at the bottom of the basket.

The wizard who was holding the laundry basket was (thankfully) thinking too much about the knickers that preceded Molly's bloomers to notice.

"Harry?"

He looked up.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"The basket is empty."

"Erm, right," he said sheepishly, as he placed the basket down on the floor (where it would catch the clothes after they'd been squeezed through the rollers).

When Harry straightened his back and turned towards his best friend he noticed a wry smile on her face.

"What?" he asked.

"Your's too, Harry," she said impishly.

"What?"

"Your shorts, Harry...toss them into the basin."

"But I'm still wearing them?"

"So you've told me," Hermione replied brightly. Then she turned her back to him and added, "There, I promise not to peek."

"But then I'll...what about while they are still in the wash?"

Hermione giggled. "I thought all wizards liked the chance to air out their privates?"

"But...you'll know that I'm..."

"Yes, Harry, I'll know you're going regimental," Hermione said plainly. "Not that I could see the proof of that, given the length of your robes."

"But...you'll know!" Harry hissed.

Hermione sighed. "Harry, it's not healthy to wear your shorts day after day, using only cleaning



charms."

"But..."

"So how do you clean them when you are at your Aunt and Uncle's?" Hermione asked. "Don't you worry about getting underage magic use warnings?"

"I don't."

"You don't worry?"

"No, I do worry...which is why I don't. Use magic that is," Harry explained. "I sneak them in when I'm doing their laundry."

"Ah...and do you resort to wearing your cousin's then?"

"No, I don't."

"Don't wear your cousin's shorts, or don't wear any shorts, Harry?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"So what's the difference between going without underwear there and airing your privates out here?"

"Trousers."

"Ah, I see," Hermione replied. She smiled sympathetically and intentionally ignored the simple solution (that Harry just pull on a pair of trousers from his trunk).

"Would it make you more comfortable if I tossed mine in as well?"

"You already did."

"I meant the ones that I'm wearing right now."

"Oh...you'd do that?"

Hermione shrugged. "If that's what it takes...good friends helping good friends, going through things together...right?"

Harry thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"I would actually be a lot *more* uncomfortable if you went regimental with me."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "My robes aren't any shorter than yours?"

"Because I'd know that you weren't wearing knickers!" Harry said with exasperation. "And without

my shorts, there'd be nothing to hold back my...reaction....to the fact that I'd know."

Hermione's eyes sparkled. She was delighted by this admission...delighted both in its contents, and in the fact that Harry actually voiced them to her.

"Well, I wouldn't want you to feel uncomfortable about displaying your...reaction," she said brightly. Hermione then turned her back and said, "So it's a solo mission, then."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd know."

"Yes, Harry, I've already agreed on that point. But why would that matter?"

"Because...because it would," he admitted.

Hermione nodded, and placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. In the ebb and flow of her game plan, it was time to ebb.

"Fair enough," she said, dropping a cup of charmed detergent into the basin and closing the lid. "So long as you promise to change your shorts each day after we order from that catalog?"

Harry eyed her skeptically as the basin's legs came to life and agitated the mixture of wet dirty clothes and detergent by running in circles first one way, then the other..

"I get final say on what we order, right?" he asked.

Hermione giggled. "Sure, Harry...I can always order the man-thong birthday present separately."

He winced. "You are joking, right?"

"Maybe..."

Harry shook his head. "Don't know how anyone could be comfortable having a string stuck up in between their cheeks."

Hermione shrugged and playfully repeated something that he had said earlier. "Guess it wasn't an issue for me after a while."

A large breath caught in Harry's throat. Hermione smiled sweetly, and opened the door before he could voice a response.

The-Boy-Who-Lived waited a few seconds before following Hermione out into the kitchen. This allowed him to adjust the way that his shorts constrained his reaction to Hermione's implied admission. Not that anyone would have noticed, given all of the focus placed on the Weasley twin

who had lost the coin flip and responded to his mother's howler.

"I can't believe you would be so careless, Fred!" Molly shouted. "Merlin knows what else you've left upstairs...if you don't march up there right now and clean your room, then I'll clean it for you!"

"Mum...what about my eye?" Ginny whined.

"Oh, yes," Molly said. "Fred? First fix your sister's eye, and then clean your room."

"Yes, Mum," her son muttered. He pulled a tub of ointment out of his pocket and offered it to Ginny.

"Here...dab some of this on, and the bruise should be gone within the hour."

Molly reached over and snatched the salve out of her son's hand. She unscrewed the top, and gave the thick yellow paste a wary look.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded.

"George and I made it," Fred replied. "With all of the product testing we've been doing, needed a decent bruise remover."

Ginny snorted loudly. "If you think that I'm going to be one of your guinea pigs..."

"No, we've done all the testing on it...it's perfectly safe!" her brother protested.

The red-haired witch frowned as she took the tub from her mother, held it under her nose, and gave it a good sniff. After a few quiet moments of thought, she set the tub down onto the kitchen table.

Then, without any kind of warning, she spun on her heel and violently punched the fleshy part of Fred's arm with a clenched fist.

"Owww!" he howled, turning away from Ginny and protectively covering his arm. "What did you do that for?"

"So that you can prove this stuff is safe," she said sweetly. "Now give us a look...might need another whack to get the right color."

"You're barmy!" Fred shouted. He then turned to the Weasley matriarch and whined, "Mum?"

Molly dismissed her son's protests with a wave of her hand.

"I don't want to hear it," she replied, walking up to Fred and pushing up the sleeve of his robe. "That can't have hurt any worse than getting punched in the eye, and if you hadn't left your dangerous pranks lying about, then..."

Molly shifted her focus from completing her sentences to the fist-sized bruise that was forming on Fred's arm.

"Well," she said, "the bruise isn't quite as purple as her black eye, but I think it will do."

"Are you sure?" Ginny asked, pulling her fist back and measuring out a second blow.

"Yes!" Fred protested, moving to place his mum in between him and his sister.

Hermione shook her head and sighed. "Ginny, you're more worried about nasty side effects than whether it will work, right?"

"No! There's no way that I'm going to walk around looking like this..."

Harry nodded. "I don't blame you, Ginny, but Hermione's right."

"Oh, you would think so, wouldn't you?" the younger witch whined.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Harry.

"Enough," Molly snapped. Using her free hand, she grabbed the tub of salve and held it in front of her son. "Well, get on with it, then," she ordered.

The red-haired wizard looked first at his mother, then at his angry sister's fist. He let out a deep breath as he dipped his fingers into the tub.

"Why couldn't you just trust me when I said that it was safe?" he muttered.

"Years of experience?" Ron volunteered.

Fred noticed that Hermione and Harry were both nodding their heads in agreement. He shrugged as he spread a dollop of ointment onto his bruised arm.

"It's a fair cop," he admitted.

The swelling and discoloration in Fred's arm began to lessen almost as soon as the ointment was absorbed into the skin. Ginny wasn't convinced by either the apparent efficacy of the product, or the apparent lack of immediate side effects, and insisted that they wait out a full hour before she treated her black eye. Fred complained, saying that there were a million different things to do back in their shop, but Molly agreed, noting that an hour should be more than enough time for him to clean his room.

Ginny retreated to her bedroom to wait out the hour, while Molly tried to get back into her daily routine after all of the day's excitement. This left Harry, Ron and Hermione to follow Fred up to his old bedroom.

"So how are you doing, Harry?" the older teen asked.

"Can't complain."

Hermione gave Harry an incredulous look, to which he shrugged in reply.

"What?" he asked. "I could have all of...that...over my head and still be stuck at my Aunt and Uncles."

"True enough," Ron agreed. "So what's all this stuff you left behind?" he then asked his brother.

Fred shrugged. "Prototypes, mostly. Here, catch."

Ron did the sensible thing and ducked out of the path of the cloth pouch that his brother had tossed his way.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake...it's just an expandable bag," Fred whined.

"Sure about that?" asked Ron.

Fred rolled his eyes as he picked the pouch up off of the floor.

"Geez...had it in my pocket...then pulled it out of my pocket," he muttered. Fred held the bag open under Ron's nose and asked, "Satisfied? Or do you want to crawl in and take a look for yourself?"

Ron snorted and shook his head as he grabbed hold of the open bag. "No, thanks."

"Is that like a magical tent, then?" Harry asked. "More room on the inside than there should be?"

Fred nodded as he grabbed one of the half-empty crates and dragged it in front of his brother.

"Century bag," he noted. "Holds up to one-hundred gallons of stuff, but never gets heavier than a few pounds."

"Dead useful," observed Harry. "Hey Hermione...how many books are there in a gallon?"

The Muggleborn witch sighed. "Well it would obviously depend on how big each book was."

"I suppose," Harry reasoned. "Still...has to be an improvement over the book bag that you haul from class to class."

Hermione snorted. "As if I'd trust any of my books not to go missing in one of those."

Fred chuckled. "And the love and trust just keeps on flowing around here, doesn't it?" He reached into the crate and retrieved a sheet-covered rectangular object.

"Oh...look! Forgot all about this experiment."

"What's that?" Ron asked.

Fred pulled the sheet away, and allowed the charmed mirror that had been underneath to answer for itself.

"What do I look like, you moron?"

Ron scowled. "A charmed mirror?"

"No...you think?" the mirror snarked. "Tell me...when they were passing out brains was your place in line behind the orangutans?"

"Be nice!" Fred chided.

"Says the ingrate who threw a sheet over my head and binned me...and how long ago was that? Can't be that long, since you haven't gotten that much uglier..."

"Right...buh bye, then," said Fred, as he covered the mirror back up.

"And it wonders why we left him here," he sighed.

"So what was that?" Harry asked. "Did you two change the mirror charms to make it insult people?"

"What?" Fred asked. "Oh...no. It was like that when we bought it."

"Why would you want a mirror that insulted you whenever you looked at it?" Hermione asked.

"Because it was cheap, and all we could afford at the time," Fred replied.

"What were you trying to do, then?" asked Harry.

"Modify our canary creams, so that they turn you into a mirror instead of a bird."

"Huh? What for?"

Fred looked at his brother and sighed. "Maybe not behind the orangutans, but not that far ahead..."

"Hey!" Ron protested.

"It's a prank idea," Fred explained, setting the shrouded mirror on the floor. "Let's say that you ate one of these creams, and turned into a wall mirror. Then you get Harry, here, to swap you out for one of the mirrors in a girls' lavatory?"

"Uh...then what?"

"Then you would get to make the snarky comments, Ron...instead of the mirror," Harry concluded.

"That's a terrible idea!" Hermione chided. "What if somebody replaced one of the changing room

mirrors at Madame Malkin's? Or swapped out a mirror that faced one of the girls' dormitory showers?"

Fred offered up some mock indignation. "Hermione! We would never think of something that perverted and devious!"

"Right," she replied sarcastically.

A smile formed on Ron's face. "Oh...now I get it. Brilliant idea, Fred."

Hermione snorted, and shook her head. "You're such a...so Ron, what if Fred had stuffed one of these mirror candies down your throat, then snuck you into Umbridge's bathroom? Or what if your mum ate one, and replaced the mirror in *your* bedroom. Fancy the thought of what she might watch you do there?"

Ron's face grew pale. "Erm, yeah...not so brilliant, then."

Fred chuckled as he pulled his wand and vanished the mirror, rather than drop it into the expanding pouch. "Well, not to worry...we never were able to get the transfiguration part right."

"You were using transfiguration spells?" Hermione asked. She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then shook her head. "I would have thought that illusion-based magic would be more appropriate."

"Huh...never thought of it from that angle," Fred replied. "Wonder if it would work that way?"

Hermione caught her breath, chagrined that she might have inadvertently helped the Twins with this kind of nasty prank. Her concerns were magnified when Harry offered his opinion.

"I'm pretty sure that it can, Fred...if it's anything like the spell I saw last night that made somebody look like an armchair."

"Really?" asked Fred. "And who was this somebody?"

"Horace Slughorn," said Harry. "He's going to be teaching potions this year."

The red-haired twin smiled as he pulled a small notebook and Muggle pen from a pocket and wrote himself a note.

"An armchair, you said? Thanks for the tip, Harry!"

"Fred!" Hermione scolded. "You are not going to invent that sort of thing!"

The prankster smiled. "Okay, Hermione...no mirrors. I reckon that a toilet is more like an armchair anyway."

"A...a toilet?" the Muggleborn witch hissed. "That's even worse!"

"Erm...Fred?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Why would anyone want to disguise themselves as a real toilet? I mean...I get the perv potential, but what if somebody sits down on you and...you know...?"

"What and why indeed?" Fred replied with a grin. "I was thinking of the prank potential...casting it on your enemies instead of your friends. Couple it with a *Petrificus Totalis* spell so that the victim is forced to just sit there, and..."

"I don't know what would be worse," Hermione muttered. "Getting...used...or being the user."

"No need for the user to know," Fred countered. "Unless...maybe we could build in a triggered *Finite* that cancelled the spell a few seconds after somebody dropped their drawers and took a seat...that'd be a rude surprise, wouldn't it?"

Hermione let out a huge sigh. "If only you two used your powers for good, rather than evil..."

"Now, now," Fred gently chided, pointing towards the pouch in Ron's hand. "I'll have you know that the Ministry just ordered a hundred of these bags from us."

"Really?" asked Harry. "What are they planning on using them for?"

"Something about cleaning up attacks on Muggles," Fred explained. "They can quickly sanitize a site without destroying magical evidence by dumping all of it into one of these bags."

"They should be spending more time trying to prevent Death Eater attacks, rather than worry about more effective clean-ups," Hermione spat.

"No argument here," Fred replied.

Ron's brother began transferring rubber chickens from crate to bag. Hermione immediately noticed the difference between these rubber chickens and the ones used in the Twins' prank wands...the heads were more streamlined and bulbous, and their necks both longer and thicker.

Fred spotted this interest, and waggled his eyebrows as he held the chicken's head close to his lips and crowed, "*Cock-a-diddle-do!*"

The rubber toy's long limp neck immediately stiffened up, and became rigid.

"Isn't it supposed to be doodle-do?" asked Ron.

"Not for these chickens," Fred grinned. He winked at Hermione as he tossed the toy towards her. She caught it by its neck, with her fingers gripped just below the head.

Fred mock-whispered, "The activation phrase is '*Vibrato*'."



Hermione glanced at the rubber toy and blushed.

Harry grinned. "Are you choking the chicken, Hermione?"

"Certainly not!" she replied hastily. Fred and Harry shared a good laugh as she quickly tossed the elongated object over her shoulder.

"I don't know what you're laughing about!" she said primly (but with a deepening blush that suggested otherwise).

"Me either," added a clueless Ron.

This caused the other two wizards to laugh even more.

Harry wasn't laughing so hard, though, to miss the fact that Hermione hadn't actually given the charmed chicken back to Fred. He marked its location as it rolled underneath the bed, and wondered if it might be retrieved by somebody later on in the day.

Hermione changed the topic of conversation before he could imagine how she might use the chicken.

"So, Fred...you've gotten a supply contract from the Ministry of Magic?" Hermione asked. "Why would they trust the effectiveness of anything sold by the same company that makes things like those chickens?"

"Ah, but they didn't award the contract to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," Fred said with a grin. He stood up straight and with a deep announcer's voice added, "*When safety matters, trust only the best...Griffon's Nest!*"

"What's that?" Ron asked.

"Griffon's Nest Security Ltd," Fred said, proudly adding, "*Grins* for short."

"Some kind of shell company?" Hermione asked.

Fred laughed. "Nope, we still sell sea shells out of our joke shop catalog."

"Huh? I don't get it," said Ron.

"It's like this, little brother," said Fred. "Harry had it right...nobody was going to take seriously anything sold from our original mail order catalog. But it turns out that some of the things we originally developed as gags can also be useful in other situations. So, George and I created a separate company with its own mail order catalog.

"And you call this serious company *Grins*?" Hermione asked skeptically.

"Just between friends and coworkers," Fred admitted. "It's worked out brilliantly, though. That

contract with the Ministry? It was for a lot more than just these bags...you wouldn't believe how many witches or wizards out there can't do a decent shield charm." He smiled, and added, "Of course, they didn't have Harry here teaching them, but still..."

Ron arched an eyebrow. "You're selling your shield hats then?"

Fred nodded and began ticking off his fingers. "Shield hats, shield cloaks, shield gloves...half-dozen different kinds of shield shorts..."

"Why would you need six different kinds of shorts?" asked Ron.

"Boxers or briefs, little brother," Fred replied. "Then there are the more feminine options. We sell charmed bloomers, normal knickers, French-cuts and shield thongs...for the more daring witches."

Fred then wagged his eyebrows at Hermione, and with a conspirator's whisper noted, "They cost extra, though...harder to shield the entire bum when there's so little fabric to work with in the back."

"Fred!" Hermione protested.

"Shield thongs?" Harry laughed. "Sounds like you might be better off selling those out of a lingerie catalog."

"You've got it half right, partner," Fred said with a wink. "Got those for sale in the back pages of our WonderWitch catalog."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "That's another new company, I suppose?"

Fred smiled, and placed the side of his finger against his nose.

"Spot on," he said proudly.

"I was just joking," Hermione admitted.

"No, really...we've got a third company dedicated to catering to that type of customer. Surprised you haven't seen our advertisements in *Teen Witch Weekly*."

Ron snorted. "Oh, come on, Fred...What would Hermione be doing reading a girls' magazine?"

Fred and Harry each made strategic side steps away from Ron as Hermione glared at him.

"What?" Ron asked.

Hermione seethed, as Fred walked over to an unopened crate and kicked the lid open.

"Ah, thought this was the one," he said, reaching into the box and pulling out a pair of skimpy

black briefs.

"Hey, Ron, these might come in handy if you plan to keep on saying dumb things like that."

"What?"

"Forget it, Fred," Hermione sighed. "I know that I'm planning to."

"Planning to do what?" Ron asked.

"Forgetting the idea of you wearing that style of shorts," she replied darkly.

"Hey!" Ron protested.

Harry tried to facilitate his own forgetting by changing the subject.

"So selling products through three companies and three different catalogs?" he asked Fred. "Must be keeping you two busy."

"Too busy, to be honest," the twin replied. "Between that Ministry contract and filling orders made for our existing product line...haven't had enough time to spend on new product development, much less get the brick and mortar shop ready for opening."

Hermione nodded. "But if the mail-order business is going so well...why even open the retail shop?"

Fred said, "Yeah, we considered that...but where's the fun in only selling out of catalogs?"

"It'd be safer," Harry noted. "Wouldn't be giving the Death Eaters another fixed target."

Fred shrugged. "Yeah, but if we didn't open up a retail shop in Diagon Alley, then we wouldn't need to rent the building. And if we didn't rent the building, we wouldn't have access to the two-bedroom flat above the shop. And if we didn't have access to the two-bedroom flat, then..."

"Then you could live here," said Ron.

The other three stared at Ron.

"What?" he protested. "It would be just as easy for them to move back here with Mum and Dad, and eat Mum's cooking, and fill the mail orders from here..."

Fred stared at his brother. "Are you serious?"

Hermione snorted, and gave Fred a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "No he's Ron...enough said?"

"Good point."

"Hey!"

"Is for horses, Ron," Harry said with a laugh. "So Fred...if you're so busy, why don't you just hire some employees?"

"We have, actually," the Twin replied. "Got a couple of lovely young ladies on the payroll. They're helping us get the storefront business ready, and will handle sales there once it opens."

"Couple of lovely young ladies, huh?" asked Harry. "So, how old are they, exactly?"

"Old enough, I'd wager," Hermione muttered. She then asked, "And are they working for straight wages? Or is room and board part of their compensation package?"

The blush on Fred's face was answer enough...for Hermione and Harry, at least.

"There's safety in numbers," he said defensively. "And they were burned out of their old place, and the Ministry says witches and wizards shouldn't go out at night if they don't have to, and...Felicity and Verity are doing a bang-up job."

Harry snorted.

"Well, they are!" Fred protested.

"So...these two witches...sisters, I suppose?" Hermione asked.

"Not twins, though," noted Fred. "Verity is almost two years younger."

"But still old enough?" asked Harry.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and asked, "Did you say that this flat has two bedrooms?"

"Yes," Fred cautiously replied.

"So you and George are still sharing a bedroom, then?"

"Why would they need to share if there's two bedrooms?" Ron asked.

Harry snorted, and gave Hermione a conspirator's wink.

"She's wondering if they're sharing, just not with each other, Ron."

"What he said," Hermione replied, pointing a finger towards Harry.

"I don't get it," Ron muttered.

Hermione giggled. "So are *you* getting it, Fred?"

"Please!" the twin said indignantly.

Harry nudged his best friend's shoulder with his own. "Not actually a denial, is it, Hermione?"

"No, it isn't," she agreed. "So, Fred...when are you and your brother bringing Verity and Felicity home to meet your mum and dad?"

"Erm...why would we..."

"Relax, Fred," Harry interjected. "Hermione and I are just giving you a bit of good-hearted grief...right, Hermione?"

The Muggleborn witch gave her best friend an evil-looking grin.

"Of course, Harry."

"Why would Fred deserve any grief?" asked Ron.

"Why, indeed," said Harry. "So, Fred...you've got the store covered. What about the production side?"

The red-haired wizard sighed, appreciating the chance to change the topic. "We've thought about subcontracting some of the work," he noted. "But...with everything else going on, we haven't had time to review our options...have to be careful about safety and quality control...we've got a brand name to protect."

Hermione chuckled. She saw where Harry might be heading, and picked up the line of questioning. "So how many of your products involve potions?"

Fred shrugged. "We've got a full line of love potions, and then there's the potions-based products like our Skiving Snackboxes...maybe twenty percent of our products, total?"

"Love potions!" Hermione said indignantly. "How could you be selling love potions?"

"We can sell them quite easily," Fred said proudly. "We've got the best range you'll find anywhere."

"But do they actually work?" Ron asked.

"Certainly they work," Fred replied. "But only for up to twenty-four hours at a time...a bit less if the boy is heavier than normal, or the girl less...attractive."

"I can't believe it!" Hermione spat.

Neither could Harry.

"Fred, I'm thinking that your investors might have some serious concerns about that specific product line."

"Really?" the Twin asked, genuinely surprised by Harry's reaction. "Why? It's not like we're selling Amortentia, or any of the other illegal potions."

"It's unethical," Hermione said firmly. "Tricking somebody into having feelings for a person."

"Oh, jeez, they only last a day...where's the harm?" asked Ron.

Hermione glared at her red-haired friend.

"Where's the harm?" she asked. "So let's say that they were sold to somebody like...I don't know...Romilda Vane? A fan-girl who has the hots for Harry?"

"She does?" Harry asked.

"Yes, she does," Hermione replied.

"But she's only twelve!"

"Thirteen, actually," said Hermione, adding, "Ron, my point is...Imagine that she spiked a box of chocolates with a love potion keyed to her and gave them to Harry. But then you got hold of them first, and ate half the box. Would you be okay with that?"

Ron thought for a moment, then asked, "What kind of chocolates?"

"Gah!" Hermione shrieked, pulling on her bushy-brown hair as if she were a cartoon character.

"What if it were your sister, Ron...fancy lusting after Ginny for twenty-four hours straight?"

"Yechh!" Ron spat.

"No worries, there, Hermione," said Fred. "We're not selling them to our sister."

"Why not?" called a voice from the doorway.

The teens all turned and spotted black-eyed Ginny, who was channeling her mum in the way that her fists were grinding into her hips.

Hermione and Harry both found it very interesting that the younger witch ventured out of her room and entered into the conversation at that exact point in time. They kept this observation to themselves, however, as they took a step back and watched Ginny and her two brothers argue over the number of boyfriends she might or might not have. Harry found the back-and-forth informative; he hadn't known that Ginny had even dumped her "bad loser" boyfriend Michael Corner, much less bounced back with his dorm mate Dean Thomas.

The strongest and loudest words were exchanged by Ginny and Ron, which immediately made them the focus of their mother's ire when she heard the yelling and entered the fray. Ron was dragged by the ear to his room, while Ginny was ordered downstairs (if she was well enough to be out of her room, she was well enough to help her mum do the daily dusting).

Fred didn't find the conversation any more enjoyable once he was left alone with Harry and

Hermione, even though it was quieter and more civil. Fred seemed genuinely shocked to learn that his mum had brewed a batch of Amortentia... his brother George and he hadn't had much contact at all with their parents over the past few weeks.

Harry's opposition to the sale of love potions by any business that he had invested in was mitigated when Fred proposed that they sell love potion neutralizers, and give them equal shelf space and product promotion. The red-haired wizard also mentioned that his brother and he were working on a potion that would make it easier for a person to resist an *Imperius* curse and other types of controlling agents.

The-Boy-Who-Lived turned to his best friend and asked, "So what do you think?"

Molly didn't give Hermione a chance to respond.

"Fred? It's been an hour!" she shrieked from the kitchen. "Get down here and help your sister!"

The red-haired wizard looked back over his shoulder towards the doorway and sighed as he picked the charmed bag up off the floor. He looked towards his still-crated stuff and snorted.

"I've half a mind to leave the rest for her to sort through," he said quietly. "You two might get a laugh out of some of the ways she could be pranked."

Harry arched an eyebrow. "Only if you're certain that you got all of those rubber chickens."

Fred grimaced. "Right, thanks for the lovely image,"

Hermione shook her head as she cautiously kicked the unsorted pile down to the point where she could see everything that was left.

"No worries, Harry... Fred has them all."

"Except for that one you tossed under Harry's bed," Fred noted with a sly smile.

"Oh, well...I'll take care of that," she said off-handedly.

Fred chuckled as Hermione reached under Harry's bed and retrieved the charmed chicken.

"Got a safe place to put it, then?" he asked. "A nice, cozy home?"

Hermione gave the wizard a fair approximation of a hag's evil eye.

"Think your mum would wonder the same thing about Felicity and Verity? Whether they are letting you two into their cozy homes?"

The wizard's eyebrows disappeared underneath his bangs, as he held up his hands in surrender.

"Truce?" he asked.

"Sounds good to me," Hermione replied.

"FRED! Do I need to send another howler?" Molly shrieked from downstairs.

Harry winced, and shook his head.

"Would anyone know the difference?" he whispered.

"We better head down," Hermione decided.

Harry and Fred agreed, and were halfway out the door before Harry turned towards his best friend and whispered, "Hermione?"

"What?" she whispered back.

"The chicken?"

Hermione's eyes shifted down to what she still held in her hand.

"Oh...right, probably should leave it behind," she decided.

Fred and Harry's eyes went wide when Hermione decided that the best place to temporarily hide the charmed chicken was underneath his mattress. But neither said anything as she led the way downstairs.

Fred held his tongue because he was mindful of the just-negotiated truce.

Harry held his tongue because he was "mind full" of naughty thoughts about sitting rooms and charmed chickens.



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# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 4: Present Opportunities

The residual afterglow generated by spreading the good news about her son's test scores (and accepting the return compliments) occupied Molly's mind so completely that she failed to notice when the clock hand tied to a different son's magic temporarily shifted from "Mortal Peril" to "In Transit." That son tried to take advantage of her distracted state by quietly slipping from the floor connection out the Burrow's back door in search of his fiancée. He didn't get very far.

"Oh...there you are, Bill," Molly shouted from the stove, her voice carrying over the music playing on her radio. "Be a dear and help Harry bring the table out into the back yard, will you?"

"Erm...sure thing, Mum," he muttered, as he dropped his carry-all bag by the side of the door. Bill then turned back towards the kitchen and gave both Harry and Hermione a smile.

"Hey, you two...what's the occasion?"

Hermione snorted as she set salt and pepper shakers onto a tray and lifted it off of the now-cleared kitchen table.

"We got our OWL results this morning," she said. "Ron exceeded your Mum's expectations."

"More OWLs than Fred and George combined!" Molly loudly noted. "And it's not just Ron's scores, Dear...you did well, too!"

Bill grinned as he grabbed the side of the table opposite Harry and lifted. "So?" he asked.

"Hermione's results were brilliant," Harry noted brightly, as they guided the table through the doorway leading to the backyard garden. "More than Ron and me combined."

His Muggleborn friend glanced back over her shoulder and shook her head. "Oh, don't exaggerate, Harry!"

"Okay, fine...she *only* got eleven OWLs. Not bad, considering she was only taking ten classes this year..."

"You could have petitioned to sit for the Muggle Studies OWL exam and passed it just as easily as I did," Hermione countered.

"Yeah, I probably could have gotten the OWL," Harry reasoned. "But gotten an Outstanding? Just as easily as you did? Don't think so."

Hermione shook her head again as she bit her tongue. They had been down this road before, and she saw little gain in the rehashing of old arguments.

"So, Harry?" Bill asked, as they maneuvered the table onto the flat patch of lawn used whenever

they dined al fresco.

“Seven...same as Ron,” he replied.

“Well done!”

“They’re not the same as Ron’s,” Hermione countered. “He didn’t get an O in DADA...you did.”

“Just the one though,” Harry noted. “Not like I got ten Outstanding...or twelve, for that matter.”

Hermione looked down at the tray in her hand, trying hard not to dwell on the painful decision that she’d made at the end of her third year to give up her time-turner and drop Divination.

“Will you two spread out the table linen?” she asked, nodding towards the brightly-colored cloth that was tucked under her arm as she held the tray in her hands.

“Might need to enlarge the table first,” Harry noted.

“How big is the guest list?” Bill asked.

Hermione thought for a moment. “George was pressed into coming home to help his brother clean their old room...they’re probably both staying for dinner. And I heard Molly floo your dad asking him to invite Auror Tonks...”

“When will she give up on her matchmaking?” Bill wondered. “We better not start eating before Fleur can join us!”

“We aren’t,” Harry quipped. “Ron specifically asked that she be at the party.”

“He did, did he?” Bill asked in a dangerous tone of voice.

“Don’t mind your brother,” said Hermione. “He’s still befuddled after she zapped him this morning.”

“And why in Merlin’s name did she do that?”

“Bit of a story there,” Hermione replied.

“Looking forward to hearing it,” Bill said firmly. Putting the issue aside, he mentally counted heads, then declared, “Okay, so if that’s everyone, we’ll only need to fetch two extra table leaves.”

“Why don’t you just magically enlarge it?” asked Harry.

“For the same reason why we had to carry the table out here like this,” Bill countered. “Mum had it made magically-resistant years ago.”

“Why would she do that?” asked Hermione.

“Cut down on the accidental magic and pranking. Mum got tired of the veggies disappearing from plates and annoyed when little Ronnikins always managed an extra helping of pudding,” Bill replied. “Easier to charm one table than a dozen different plates, I guess.”

“Ah...makes sense,” Harry decided.

“Oi! Hermione!” someone shouted. “Mum wants you to give me a hand with hanging this banner.”

The three turned back towards the house and spotted Ron struggling with a Muggle stepladder along the back side of the house.

“Why doesn’t she just levitate it into place and use sticking charms?” Hermione called back. “Or have Bill do it?”

Ron shrugged. “Why did we clean out Headquarters by hand? It’s what Mum wants.”

The Muggleborn witch rolled her eyes.

“Speaking of giving up on her matchmaking,” she muttered. Hermione then set her tray on the table and turned towards the other two.

“Think that Ginny will be sent out next with a job to share with you, Harry?”

The-Boy-Who-Lived shook his head. “Not until Auror Tonks shows up to mind my liegeman,” he quipped. “Wouldn’t want to free him up for a bit of muddling with Fleur, would we?”

“Sounds like a fine idea to me,” said Bill.

“William?” Molly shouted from inside the house. “Will you and Harry come fetch the benches?”

Harry chuckled, observing, “The matchmaker thinks otherwise.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “C’mon then, Milord.”

The-Boy-Who-Lived nodded, and, having picked up on his bushy-haired friend’s mood, waited until they were a few steps away from her to ask a question.

“Speaking of twelve OWLs...how the hell did *you* do it?”

The older wizard shrugged. “Hard work, careful planning, and a monastic lifestyle?”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, right. I’m asking how you did it...not how Percy did it.”

“No, really,” Bill insisted. “I would have never gotten twelve OWLs if Fleur and I had hooked up while I was still in school.”

This caused Harry to laugh out loud. “I suppose that’s true enough, Old Man. Fleur would have

been, what...six-years old during your Fifth Year?"

"Nine," Bill said defensively.

"Six, nine...same difference," Harry declared. "Would have been hard to sit for twelve exams after you had been expelled for under-aged sex."

Bill growled. "Notes the man who really does have an eight-year old part-Veela who wants to sit on his hook?"

Harry winced as he followed his potential liegeman back inside the kitchen. "Okay, okay... truce!" he hissed, not wishing Molly to pick up on the conversation as she stirred in front of the stove.

Bill nodded his agreement and shrank down the two long wooden benches with a wave of his wand. "I'll get the leaves if you can get these, then?"

"Sure," Harry replied. He picked up his line of questioning once they were back outside, and had walked past the argument that had already begun between Ron and Hermione over how best to hang the "*Well done, Ron!*" banner.

"So Bill, what I was really asking was...how were you even able to fit twelve courses into your school schedule? Did McGonagall get you a time turner as well?"

The red-haired wizard squinted at Harry and cocked his head in confusion.

"So the rumor was true, then?"

"Which one?" Harry asked.

"The one where a third-year Muggleborn student was entrusted with a heavily-regulated magical object capable of destroying the time-space continuum just so that she could sit for all twelve classes at Hogwarts?"

"Erm...yeah, that one's true enough," Harry replied. "So I'm guessing you just sat for two extra exams, rather than one like Hermione did?"

Bill shook his head. "No, I sat for all twelve classes, and didn't need a time turner to do it...same with Percy."

"How, then?"

"The schedule allowed for it," Bill admitted.

"Not when we had to sign up for electives," Harry noted.

"That's true as well," Bill replied. "They changed the schedule the year after Percy ran the table."

“How?”

Bill shrugged. “Mostly by lengthening class hours, from what I hear...and rearranging the class schedules to ensure that there would be conflicts between certain electives.”

“Why, though?”

“You’d have to ask Dumbledore and the Board of Governors,” said Bill. “I think the stated rationale involved increasing the focus on core subjects.”

“So what was the unstated reason? Saving money on staff?”

Bill nodded. “Students were signing up for all twelve courses just for the challenge of bagging all twelve. Made for larger class sizes...but now that it is impossible to do all twelve OWLs, the enrollments in elective courses like Ancient Runes and Arithmancy have really dropped. Those professors only teach part-time now, right?”

Harry shrugged.

“It also allows Dumbledore to keep a ghost on staff, salary-free,” Bill noted. “Most of the students shooting for twelve OWLs got tripped up on History...Binns doesn’t exactly teach to the test, what with all of the time he spends on the Goblin Wars. Parents were complaining.”

“With good reason,” said Harry.

Bill nodded. “Those weren’t the only complaints, though...the Board of Governors used to get all kinds of grief from the pureblood parents over Muggleborn curriculum bias.”

“Bias towards Muggleborns?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Yeah, I know...it sounds ridiculous,” Bill admitted. “Pureblood students get a big head-start over Muggleborns just by growing up in the Magical world...”

“And get their other leg up by being able to practice magic in their Pureblood homes over holidays!”

“Not here,” Bill said defensively.

Harry nodded. “You know what I mean, though.”

“Sure I do, since it put me at the same disadvantage.”

“So how in Merlin’s name could the curriculum be biased towards Muggleborns?”

“Muggle Studies,” Bill replied. “It’s essentially a free OWL for anyone raised in the Muggle world. Pureblood parents argued that there wasn’t an equivalent ‘Easy O’ for their children that centered on the Wizarding World.”

“As long as you don’t count History of Magic, or Transfiguration, or Charms, or Care of Magical Creatures...”

“Fair enough,” Bill shot back, his hands held up defensively.

“And anyone who thinks that Muggleborns don’t have to revise for the Muggle Studies exam must be...I’d say crazy, but Pureblood is probably also applicable.”

“Because the curriculum is a little dated?” asked Bill.

Harry snorted. “A little dated? Try a hundred years out-of-date. Hermione actually had to revise for the exam by reading Muggle history books on what life was like during the Victorian Era.”

Bill nodded in understanding, then changed the subject.

“So...decided on your coursework yet?”

Harry nodded. “Just the core five for NEWT level. Caught a bit of a break on Potions...my E wouldn’t have been good enough to get into Snape’s NEWT-level potions.”

Bill chuckled. “I’m sure that you’ll be paid back in spades in DADA, though.”

“No doubt,” whined Harry.

The two wizards finished getting the dinner table set up and dressed just about the time that Ron and Hermione got the banner hung, which was also when Arthur and Tonks stepped out of the floo, and Ginny finally emerged from her bedroom bruise-free, and Molly announced that the food was ready. This all happened a full fifteen minutes before Fleur’s shift was done, and it was only Fred and George’s insistence that they only needed a few more minutes to finish in Harry’s bedroom that kept Bill and his mother from having a huge row over whether to wait for his fiancée... Fleur’s replacement popped out of the floo just as the Twins emerged from the stairwell with beads of sweat dripping from their brows and large bags slung over their shoulders.

Molly grudgingly dispatched Kingsley Shacklebolt to the ward line with a full plate of food. She then insisted that everyone sit down according to her seating chart once Fleur arrived. The chart was as predictable as it was obvious. Ron at the head, with Hermione on his right and Harry on his left. Ginny next to Harry, Bill next to Hermione with Tonks on his other side...and as many other bodies as possible separating the Gringotts employee from his fiancée’s place at the end of the table opposite Ron. Those affected generally took the machinations in good humor, knowing them for what they were.

Harry and Hermione paid close attention to the food as it was passed around the table. Bill and Fleur were just as diligent, although they all tried not to appear that way. None of them wanted to touch anything that Molly had cooked until somebody else had tasted or sipped it first. Ron’s lack of table manners made this a relatively easy task, and Fred helped out by quickly taste-testing whatever his younger brother didn’t immediately inhale. That Molly and Ginny didn’t seem to be

tracking who ate what (and in what order) caused Harry to wonder whether all of the concern over love potions was perhaps a bit overblown.

Ginny spent most of her time at the table pouting over just how beautiful Fleur looked despite spending a full day out in the sun on the ward line. Her occasionally audible snarky comments were left unchallenged, though, with almost all of the dinner conversation centered around Ron's OWL results. The ill-mannered wizard winced each time that his mum repeated the fact that he'd been awarded more OWLs than his twin brothers had gotten behind...more from worry than embarrassment. He didn't at all like the way that Fred and George looked at him each time that Molly spouted off, and was therefore relieved when his brothers apologized for not having enough time to customize the fireworks display that they planned on setting off after cake. The Twins, in turn, were relieved that Hermione had been keeping up her side of the truce, and hadn't insisted that a couple of more plates be added to the table for Felicity and Verity.

It was towards the end of the meal that Fred and George tried to make amends with Ginny over the telescope incident. She eyed the garishly wrapped box that they placed before her with a healthy (and justifiable) amount of suspicion.

"What's this then?" she demanded.

"Just a little something to make amends," said Fred.

"Although you really shouldn't have been mucking around in our stuff in the first place," George added.

"George!" Molly spat.

"Yes, Mum?"

"Fred!"

"What, Mum?"

"This isn't another one of your jokes, is it?"

"No, no...not at all!" he protested.

"So it's not going to explode in my face if I open it?" Ginny asked warily.

"Promise!" Fred declared.

"Fine...then you open it!" said Ginny, as she rose and stepped back from the table.

Her older brother sighed.

"Is that level of distrust called for?" Fred asked.



“Yes!” Ginny and a number of others replied.

Molly took matters (and her wand) into her own hand and vanished the wrapping paper with a well-aimed *Evanescio* down the length of the table. This revealed a small metal cage that held two balls of thick fur...one pink, and one purple.

“Oooh! They’re so cute!” Ginny squealed, as she snatched the cage away from her brother and took hold of its door latch. But then she remembered who the gift-givers were, and pulled her hand back.

“They aren’t going to explode once I touch them, will they?”

“Of course not,” Fred scoffed.

Ginny’s curiosity overcame caution, and she quickly liberated the two living fur balls.

“Fred? George? What are they?” Molly demanded.

“They’re called ‘Tribbles’,” said George.

Hermione snorted out a loud laugh.

“Didn’t realize you two were Trekkies.”

“We’re what?” asked Fred.

“Trekkies....Star Trek fans....?”

“Dunno what you’re talking about,” said George. “That’s what we were told they are called. Maybe it’s because it’s in French...hey Fleur, how do you say ‘Lez Tribbles’ in English?”

The part-Veela shared some eye-contact with Hermione as they both giggled.

“Eet eez ze same een English,” the French witch noted.

“Well, then we’ll have to come up with a better name, then,” said George.

“They look like baby puffskeins to me,” Bill noted.

“Actually, they’re full-sized adults,” countered Fred. “At least we hope that they are...they are supposed to be a mating pair, after all.”

“A mating pair?” Arthur asked in a rising tone of voice. He glanced nervously towards Tonks and added, “You two boys do know that there are laws against breeding new magical species, right?”

“Of course we do, Dad!” George protested. “Do you think that Fred and I would blatantly disregard Ministry regulations?”

Amidst a table-full of guffaws, Arthur shook his head and replied, “No, you two are usually discreet in your disregard.”

Fred rolled his eyes. “Well, sorry to disappoint everyone.”

“We really should take it as a compliment, oh brother of mine!” said George.

“How so?”

“That they would think we are industrious enough, and devious enough, and clever enough to develop an entirely new breed of magical species in such a short period of time...on top of everything else that we are doing to get the shop ready for business.”

“I suppose so,” Fred agreed brightly. He glanced around the table and added, “Just to be clear, when we bought these two little balls of fur they looked just the same as they do now.”

“You bought them as a gift, to make up for that stupid telescope?” asked Ginny.

“Erm....”

“You’re forgiven,” the red-haired witch decided brightly.

“I’ve never seen anything like them before,” said Bill. “I can’t believe that you two went all the way to France to buy them.”

George shook his head. “The bloke we bought them from was French, but we met him down on his boat off the coast...Isle of Wight, I think.”

“You can buy them on Wight, then?” asked Harry.

George sighed and shook his head. “Only place in Britain that you’re supposed to be able to buy them was our store...at least, that’s what it said in our franchise agreement.”

Auror Tonks chose that moment to join the discussion.

“So let me get this straight,” she asked. “An unlicensed breeder smuggled these two pygmy-sized puffskeins into the country from France. You bought the little fur balls and planned on breeding them so that you could sell the offspring in your new store?”

Fred and George locked eyes and held a silent, but extensive discussion. Reaching a conclusion, they turned towards the Auror and shrugged.

“That’s a pretty good summary,” Fred admitted.

Tonks snorted. “Do you know how many licenses and permits you need from the Ministry to do all that?”

“Why yes, actually,” said George. “Seven.”

“And you have all of those licenses and permits?”

George scoffed at the accusation as he reached into the inside pocket of his robes and slammed a small stack of parchment down onto the table. “Six of the seven, actually,” he said defensively. “No sense bribing the official who would issue us the permit needed to sell them in our store until we actually have something to sell.”

“Huh,” Tonks snorted. “Well okay, then.”

“Bribing officials?” Hermione asked.

“Erm...how else do you get things done at the Ministry?” asked George.

Hermione narrowed her gaze, then shifted it from the Twin to his father. Arthur shrugged.

“It’s a fair question,” he admitted. “Galleons get things done...not in my Department, of course...”

“Or in the DMLE,” Tonks was quick to add. “But if you need a permit or license to open a shop, or import some exotic potion ingredients...you mean that it isn’t the same in the Muggle world?”

Hermione shook her head. “Maybe in some countries, but not in Britain.”

Harry chuckled. “As far as you know.”

The Muggleborn witch rolled her eyes. “Fine. Can I at least say that if there are bribes being made that it’s not as commonly accepted a practice or as openly talked as it appears to be here in Magical Britain?”

The-Boy-Who-Lived shrugged. “Sure.”

Ron let out a deep breath and jumped in with what he thought was a more worthy topic of discussion.

“So why are you giving ‘em to Ginny?”

“Would you please lay off on the jealous git routine, Ron?” asked Bill.

Molly pursed her lips. “It’s still a fair question, though, given all of the effort you spent getting them.”

“Erm...because we felt so bad about inadvertently pranking our little sister?”

“And?” Molly asked with a rising tone of voice.

“And because she’s obviously better suited for playing with the little puffs of fur than we are?” asked George.

“And.....?” asked Ginny.

“And...we haven’t had any luck getting them to mate,” Fred said with a sigh. “Been following the translated care and feeding instructions, and done what you need to do in order for them to shag like bunnies...”

“Language!” Molly scolded.

“How do you know that they haven’t?” asked Harry. “Maybe one of them is still pregnant, or something?”

“Supposed to pop out a litter every two weeks,” George replied. “We’ve had them for three.”

“Are you sure that you bought a mating pair?” asked Harry, glancing down at the pint-sized pets who were licking food off of Ginny’s plate. “You know...male and female?”

“Of course they bought one of each, Silly,” Ginny chided. “The purple one is a boy, and the pink one is a girl.”

“How can you tell?” asked Ron.

George laughed. “Well, little brother, the boy has the wand, and the girl has the wand holster...”

“Hush!” Molly hissed.

“Right,” said Fred. “So we haven’t had much luck, and don’t have any more time available to figure out how to get them to mate....”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Ginny scoffed. “You’re boys.”

Arthur cleared his throat. “Should I wonder what you know about getting pets to mate, young lady?”

“Father!” Ginny whined. “I’m not a little girl any more. And whose job is it to mind the chicken coop, and collect the eggs and to keep the rooster from fertilizing them unless we want chicks...”

“Alright, alright,” Arthur cut in, quickly backing down.

Harry smiled at the exchange.

“So what do you think it would take, Ginny?” he teased. “Build them a little love nest in front of the Wireless and play some Celestina Warbeck tunes?”

“Oh, please, Harry!” the red-haired witch protested.

Bill snorted, and said something under his breath about his mother's musical tastes that only Hermione and Tonks were close enough to hear. They both broke out into giggles.

"What was that, William?" asked Molly.

"Nothing!" he quickly declared.

"So are you two giving up on breeding the fur balls?" asked Ron, "Or are you just fobbing off the work to Ginny?"

"They are presents," George insisted.

"No strings attached," his brother added.

"Although, if Gin-Gin was able to actually get the little buggers to boff..."

"We would be more than happy to take the offspring off of her hands..."

"Just so the Burrow isn't overrun with the furry-little sprogs, of course."

Harry laughed. "So you *are* fobbing off the work, aren't you?"

Ginny frowned. She loved the little creatures, but didn't like the idea of her brothers taking advantage of her.

"Of course they aren't going to fob off the work," she insisted. "They're going to pay me for it."

"What?" asked George.

"You are asking me do breeding work for you two, aren't you?" asked Ginny sweetly. "And you are going to pay me a salary for that work, right?"

"Erm...but they're a gift!" George insisted.

Fred's eyes darted from his brother, to his sister, and then to his Mum. Taking in their apparent attitudes, he made a command decision.

"We can't afford to pay you a weekly salary right now, Little Sis," he stated. "But what we can offer is a pay-for-performance plan."

"We can?" asked George.

"Yes, we can," Fred replied firmly. "If Ginny can get the fur balls to perform, then we can pay."

"How much?" asked Ginny.

"Erm...five sickles a pup?"

“Only five?”

“Fred!” Molly shouted.

“Yes, Mum?”

“You will not take advantage of your sister!” she declared. “And you are not going to occupy her time this Summer with wild schemes and unreasonable demands on her time.”

“But Mum!” Ginny whined. “You never let me get a summer job...this could be a way for me to earn some money.”

George arched an eyebrow and leaned across the table.

“Ten sickles, then?” he whispered loudly towards Ginny.

“Fifty,” she replied.

“Fifty sickles?”

“Fifty percent of the retail price,” Ginny replied.

“No!” Molly barked. “You have more than enough chores to do while you are home, young lady!”

“But I’m not doing chores all of the time,” Ginny countered. “Why can’t I decide for myself how to spend the rest of the day?”

“You know perfectly well that you should be spending your free time with Harry,” Molly snapped. Hearing somebody catch their breath, she quickly added, “And Hermione of course, and your brother Bill now that he’s back home...”

Arthur tried to defuse the situation by placing a hand on his wife’s arm and talking in a reasonable tone of voice.

“Now Molly, it’s not Ginny’s fault that she can’t venture out beyond the ward line to earn some spending money this Summer...”

“That doesn’t mean that...”

“And we’ve already established what chores the children are responsible for, correct?”

“Yes, but what if something comes up and I need her help?”

“Then it would be far better that she be earning money at home, rather than working outside the home on a fixed schedule, wouldn’t it?” Arthur asked. He turned towards the Twins and asked them, “These...Tribbles...will they require a large amount of Ginny’s time?”

“Not at all,” Fred replied. “Supposed to be very low-maintenance...we wouldn’t have bothered with them otherwise.”

“There you go, then,” said Arthur.

“But Ginny doesn’t need to earn spending money, now that you’ve been promoted, Dear,” Molly countered.

“Which makes this an even better opportunity,” Arthur reasoned. “If she wants to make this her pet project over holidays...”

“So to speak,” quipped Bill.

Arthur chuckled. “If Ginny can help her brothers and be adequately compensated for that help without shirking her duties around the Burrow, great. And if it doesn’t work out, then...where’s the harm?”

Molly scrunched her lips together in a way that puffed out both cheeks and jowls.

“I won’t have those fur balls cluttering up the house,” she declared.

“No worries, Mum...I’ll keep them in my room,” Ginny promised.

“Where?” asked Molly. “You’ve already been complaining about sharing space with Fleur?”

“I’m sure that they won’t take up much room, Mum!”

The Weasley Matron sucked in a deep breath, and held it as she mulled how the request might be meshed within the weave of all of her other plans for the holidays.

“Alright, then,” she declared, expelling that deep held breath. “Ginny, you will keep those animals in your room.”

Thanks, Mum!”

“Fleur?”

“Yes, Mrs. Weasley?”

“I would like you to share a room with Hermione. That will give Ginny the room she needs for raising her pets.”

The part-Veela made eye-contact first with Hermione, and then with Bill. Biting on the inside of her cheeks so as to avoid revealing her excitement with a wide smile, Fleur nodded solemnly and replied, “Eef you think zat eez best, Mrs. Weasley.”

Molly nodded, then turned to Hermione. “Sharing a room with Fleur will take care of that other

problem that you asked about earlier this afternoon, don't you think?"

The Muggleborn witch caught her breath as she caught Harry's eye. He shrugged. She nodded.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," she replied quietly.

Ron might have wondered what this last exchange was all about, had he not more important things on his mind.

"Can we have cake now?"

**oo00O00oo**

Later that evening, Bill was cutting through their small orchard when he came across Harry reading a book with his back up against one of the plum trees.

"So what are you doing out here alone?" he asked, taking a seat on the ground next to the younger wizard.

"Isn't it obvious?" Harry replied, placing a bookmark on the page and setting the text onto the ground next to him. "I have been waiting to hear all about my liegeman's courtship stroll along the ward line with the lovely Miss Tonks."

"Oh, sod off."

Harry cleared his throat.

Bill rolled his eyes and tried again.

"Sod off...Milord?"

"That's better," said Harry. "So where is the lovely Miss Tonks, then?"

"Stepped across the ward line once we made the circuit and apparated home. Any particular reason why you are asking?"

Harry shrugged. "Just curious."

"So...really," said Bill. "Why *are* you out here by yourself? Wouldn't think that Mum would allow it."

Harry shrugged.

"Your brothers are supposed to be keeping an eye on me," he stated, pointing towards the backyard Quidditch Pitch.

"Obviously," Bill said sarcastically, as he watched Fred and George gleefully pepper his youngest



brother with Quaffles. “Thought that they’d be back in their flat by now.”

“And miss the chance to hurl hard objects towards the boy who got more OWLs than both of them combined?” asked Harry.

Bill laughed. “Shame that you can’t be up there as well.”

“S’alright,” said Harry, picking his reading material off of the ground. “This book you brought back from the bank on estate management makes for interesting reading.”

“Really?” asked Bill. “I kind of think that high finance accounting business is rather... unexciting.”

“Oh, I haven’t even skimmed those areas,” Harry replied. “I’m talking about the chapters that cover inheritance laws, magical guardians, and the training of scions within Ancient and Noble Houses.”

“Ah...so I was right in assuming that your magical guardian hadn’t made you aware of your rights and responsibilities, Milord?”

“Quite right.”

“So why are you so calm right now?” asked Bill.

Harry sighed. “Spilt milk, water under bridges, and all that. Plus, things are bound to be better now that I’ve got a liegeman in my corner, right?”

Bill didn’t understand the Muggle metaphor (a metaphor that Harry had heard far too many times on Privet Drive given his cousin’s boxing lessons), but guessed its meaning and nodded in agreement.

“A very mature attitude, Milord.”

“I try,” Harry said with a smirk. “But I also have to admit that it’s hard to stay angry about anything when there are so many more pleasant things to dwell on. The last twenty-four hours have been rather...eventful.”

Bill chuckled, thinking that Harry was alluding to Hermione’s response to Fleur’s release the night before. He then asked, “So where is everyone else?”

“Let’s see...your dad is puttering in his shed, and your Mum is doing a bit of brewing in the kitchen...healing potions, don’t you know?”

“Of course.”

“Ginny is in her room with the Pygmy Puffs...”

“So that’s what they finally decided on calling them?”

“Guess so. I voted for ‘Tribbles’, but your Mum...well, as far as she knows ‘Tribbles’ is a French word, and she isn’t very fond of imports these days, is she?”

Bill sighed. “Fleur and Hermione, then?”

“Sorting out their new room,” Harry replied.

The older wizard nodded. “What was that shared look between you and Hermione about when Mum decided on the switch?”

Harry sighed as he lamented a lost opportunity. “You know that Hermione needs to practice low-level spells each day as part of her treatment regimen, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she decided that she needed somebody other than Crookshanks to aim at, and asked Molly if I could be the target.”

“She wanted you alone in her bedroom, huh?” Bill asked.

“Not necessarily,” Harry quickly replied. “She just needs somebody to help her practice spells. Ron and Ginny aren’t supposed to know that she’s spellcasting over the hols, so that’s why she’s kept it in her room.”

“But you?”

Harry shrugged. “You and Fleur aren’t around all the time, are you?” he asked. “So that’s what the look was about. Moving Fleur in with Hermione keeps me out of her bedroom...and allowed your Mum to draw that ward line.”

“What ward line?” Bill asked.

Harry snorted. “Oh, yeah...you were out courting Tonks when she did that....there’s a new ‘*No boys allowed*’ barrier across the doorway to Percy’s bedroom.”

“She didn’t!”

“Afraid so,” Harry replied. “Which is why I’ve got a new roommate as well.”

“Me?”

“No...Crookshanks...poor guy got a heckuva shock when he tried to walk into Hermione’s bedroom tonight.”

“Oh.”

“Not that I wouldn’t mind you bunking with me,” Harry was quick to add.

“Guess we’ll have to line up a summer project for Ron to make that happen,” Bill reasoned.

“We’re working on that, actually.”

“Really?”

Harry nodded, and proceeded to describe everything that had happened while Bill was at work. Or almost everything...no mention was made of how his fiancée was able to comment with authority on Harry’s ‘dragon-sized’ bits.

“So that’s our grand plan, then,” Harry concluded. “We want to do more than just sit around and play Exploding Snap all Summer. Just need to do is convince your Mum that Fred and George’s shop will be more successful if we help them brew up some of their product line...maybe even do some spell work and help charm the shield hats and shield knickers.”

“It’s a decent idea,” Bill reasoned. “Although at your age, you should be more worried about getting into a girl’s knickers than shielding them.”

Harry chuckled. “Yes, I suppose that once I get to be an old man like you that I won’t be so interested in that sort of thing.”

“Oh, no,” said Bill. “The interest is there...it’s just a little more focused.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, I heard about your focused interests. And about Fleur’s as well.”

Bill gave Harry a rather hard, closed-lip glare.

“Only indirectly, of course,” the younger wizard replied, realizing how his comment could be taken the wrong way.

“I’m listening.”

“Right, well...it’s actually something that I was hoping to ask you about,” Harry replied, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand.

“You want to ask me about Fleur’s taste in knickers?”

“No, no...not at all,” said Harry. “I’m talking about the catalogs she uses to buy her knickers.”

Bill glared at the younger wizard.

“Erm, yeah...doesn’t sound that much better, does it?” Harry asked nervously. “What I meant was...Hermione and I were talking about shorts and knickers this afternoon...”

“You and Hermione, huh?”

“It was a perfectly innocent conversation,” Harry replied. “We were doing the laundry.”

“Of course, it makes perfect sense...I always talked about knickers when I helped Mum do the laundry,” Bill quipped.

“Eeew! Don’t know if want to know the details, Mate.”

“Sod off...Milord.”

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “during the course of that conversation I let slip the fact that I only own one decent pair of boxer shorts. Hermione said that she wanted to fix that situation, and noted that my birthday was coming up.”

“And what does this have to do with Fleur’s choice in knickers?”

“Her mail-order catalogs,” admitted Harry. “Hermione said that Fleur lent them to her...and that you and Fleur have...well...made use of them.”

“You’re putting me on!”

“No, really...that’s what Hermione said.”

“Oh, bugger me!” Bill hissed.

Harry snorted. “No thanks, I wouldn’t want to risk your fiancée’s fireballs.”

“Oh will you just...Merlin, I hope that she erased the images first.”

“What images?”

“The ones in the catalogs.”

Harry frowned. “Kind of hard to know what to order if the pictures have been erased, isn’t it?”

“No, you don’t understand,” Bill insisted. “They are magical mail-order clothes catalogs.”

“Okay...so they sell robes and pointy hats?”

“No, I mean the catalogs themselves are magical!” Bill snapped. “They have a built in magical camera on the inside cover...and once you strip down and take a picture of yourself the catalog swaps your body for the manikins on both the cover and the inside pages.”

“Okay, sounds like a useful idea...”

Harry’s face paled when he realized the fuller implications.

“Unless it’s an underwear catalog that gets passed around after you’ve swapped your body,” he whispered.

“Exactly,” said Bill. “No big deal if it’s just your girlfriend who is ogling at you wearing thongs in twelve different colors...even if you haven’t ever worn one in real life. Shopping that way with Fleur turned out to be a very enjoyable...erm, experience.”

“When you two were shopping for you, or for her?”

“Yes.”

“So...there’s this way to erase your image after you’re done shopping that keeps the next person from seeing a dozen different pictures of your thong-covered bits?”

“You make it sound like it’d be a painful experience.”

“And you make it sound as if my opinions matter when it comes to how you’d look in a thong!” Harry quipped.

“Don’t care about you seeing those pictures of me...it’s Hermione. Or what if Mum got hold of that catalog?”

Harry chuckled. “Reckon’ it depends on how naughty those catalog outfits get.”

Bill let out a loud sigh. “Ever hear of something called a poser pouch?”

“Should I have?”

“Remember what Fleur had on last night?”

“Erm...yeah. Vaguely. Very vaguely.”

“Well imagine something that is a hundred times smaller and a hundred times naughtier, then imagine me wearing it.”

Harry shook his head. “Do you really want me imagine you wearing a black lace corset?”

Bill rolled his eyes. “Guess you’ll be able to see for yourself...and *see* yourself, for that matter.”

“Guess so.”

A snort escaped from Bill’s nose.

“What?” asked Harry.

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“I just remembered what you said earlier...that Hermione wanted to shop for birthday presents. Guess she’ll get to see yourself for herself, then?”

“Oh, shit.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh....*shit!*”

“Yes, we’ve established the existence of excrement.”

“No, I just remembered...when she offered to help pick out new underwear for me, I teased her by saying that it would only be fair if I got to help pick out a few items from Fleur’s lingerie catalog for her.”

“And?”

“And she agreed with me.”

“Right, well...that’s interesting, isn’t it?”

“Aren’t you going to worry about Fleur forgetting to erase her photographs before I get my hands on the lingerie catalog?” asked Harry.

“Not a problem.”

“You don’t care?”

“Of course I do,” Bill said. “It’s not a problem because it wouldn’t happen.”

Harry frowned as he balanced Bill’s confidence against the glimpse that Fleur had provided the night before.

“Think so?”

“Of course,” the older wizard replied. “If Hermione is going to let you help pick out some lingerie for her to wear, it’s going to be her barely-covered bits displayed in the catalog, not my fiancée’s.”

“Oh. Right. So that’s....that’s better then,” Harry reasoned.

“I think so,” Bill replied with a grin. “So you...and Hermione...?”

“What?” Harry asked. “Do you think that we are....”

“Doesn’t matter what I think. I’ll just say that it’s a pretty brave step for you two to be taking if you aren’t more than just good friends.”

“Well, we are Gryffindors.”

“So is McGonagall...plan on swapping nudie pics with her?”

“No!”

“Dumbledore, then?”

“No!” Harry protested. He took in a few large breaths as he gathered his wits, then asked, “Will we really be swapping nudie pics?”

Bill chuckled and shook his head. “No I was just teasing you a bit. She won’t get to see your dangly bits dangle...much.”

“Well that’s good.”

“You think so?” Bill asked. He shrugged his shoulders. “Of course, the other way to look at it is that you have to give something to get something. The catalogs work the same way...so if she got to see all of you, you would be able to see all of her.”

“Yes, well...I’m not sure that we’re ready for something like that,” said Harry.

“Fair enough...nice pronoun, by the way.”

“Which one?”

“The ‘we,’ that are taking shared steps towards a shared display of bare bits,” Bill quipped.

“Oh, sod off!” Harry hissed.

“Yes, Milord.”

Harry rolled his eyes and sighed. He was halfway to mentally composing better answer when Molly interrupted his train of thought with a *Sonorus* -aided shout out the Burrow’s back door.

“Time to come inside!”

Bill shook his head. “That’s my mum,” he sighed. “So when does the fashion show start, Milord?”

Harry shook his head as he stood up and brushed the dirt and leaves off of his trousers. “Might be never,” he replied. “We didn’t discuss the details, and with the way that all of us are being monitored by Matchmaker Molly...how do you suppose she’d even be able to get the catalog to me?”

The older wizard chuckled as he patted Harry on the back. “Where there is a will, there’s a way Milord. If she wants you bad enough...”

“You mean if she wants to see me bad enough?”

“That too.”

The strong smell of a simmering potion hit Bill and Harry's olfactory senses as they followed Ron and the Twins inside. The curse-breaker arched an eyebrow and drifted towards the stove.

"That really is a healing potion, isn't it?" he asked, with a touch of surprise in his voice.

"What did you think it was?" Molly quickly replied. "If you're looking for something to eat, there's leftovers in the cold box."

"Excellent!" Ron declared, making a beeline towards the roast beef.

Fred and George saw their chance and said their good-byes. The smiles on their faces as they called out their floo address and disappeared into the flames were a little disconcerting to Harry. The twins were either up to something (and they were always up to something), or they were just really happy to be escaping their mother's purview. Or maybe they were just anticipating getting back to the flat they shared with their female employees. Those two last possibilities would have definitely put a smile on Harry's face so he shrugged it off.

Molly suggested that Bill, Harry and Ron play a game of gobstones in the sitting room. Bill reminded his mum that he was twenty-five years old, and not five, but she didn't care. She did, however, yell up the stairs for Ginny and Hermione to come down and join "the other children" to play the game.

If Harry weren't so distracted, he would have laughed out loud.

It was torture for him...the pervy thoughts about unsupervised activities in flats shared with girlfriends just amplified the worrying and wondering about what might happen that evening with the catalogs. Fleur and Hermione only made it worse when they came downstairs full of smiles and conspiratorial winks that were suitable for opened-ended interpretations. Ginny was right behind the other two witches with a Pygmy Puff perched on each shoulder. She quickly slipped into the sitting room before her mum noticed, pulled a deck of Exploding Snap cards out of her pocket, and pushed the coffee table to one side of the room.

"Let's play on the floor," she decided, as she sat down on the carpet and leaned her back against the front of the sofa. "Easier for us to relax and spread out that way."

The-Boy-Who-Lived coughed up a bit of spittle as his eyes darted towards Hermione in search of a reaction. She arched an eyebrow.

"Something wrong, Harry?"

"No, I'm fine...thanks," he wheezed, trying desperately not to react physically to the mental image of Hermione "spreading herself out" and playing in that very same room the night before.

Ginny ignored the exchange. "Come sit next to me, Harry," she asked. "Arnold wants to say hello."



“Arnold?”

“The boy pygmy puff,” Ginny replied, nodding towards the purple fur ball on her left shoulder.

Harry started to worry when he noticed just how close the spot that Ginny was patting on the carpet was to her hip. Crookshanks came to the rescue, though, when he curled his tail around Harry’s leg and began staring at the Pygmy Puffs the same way that Ron stared down his supper.

“My new bunk-mate and I should probably sit across from you Ginny,” Harry said. “Just in case.”

The red-haired witch looked disappointed, but quickly recovered and nodded as she began to calculate just how far forward she could bend without the others realizing she was offering Harry a view of her relatively modest cleavage.

Fleur gave Hermione a little push towards Harry’s left side as she dropped down onto her knees on his right. Ron claimed the spot next to Hermione, Bill sat in between his sister and his fiancée, and the places (and stage) were set.

Harry proceeded to play his worst game of Exploding Snap ever, losing every other hand with a loud bang. It was just too hard for him to focus, given his musings about Hermione’s rubbing the night before, and her potential modeling later that night. Ron was quick to tease Harry about his string of bad hands, but was equally slow to pick up on the reasons behind it. Ginny, of course, thought that she was the distraction. The other three either knew or strongly suspected the real reasons, but hid their assumptions well.

There was more to the-Boy-Who-Lived’s poor game play than just his pervy imagination, though. He was certain to be chaperoned the entire night, by either Ron, Ginny or Molly. There wouldn’t be an easy way for Hermione and him to steal any private time that would allow for catalogs and plans to be shared. But like Bill had said, Hermione was a clever girl, and if she wanted to convey a secret message or pass contraband right under their minders’ noses, she would find a way. And since this way might involve hidden code words or other clues that only he could decipher, he paid close attention to everything except his cards. Every innocent comment made by Fleur was scrutinized just as thoroughly, since Harry couldn’t discount the possibility of her acting as a co-conspirator.

But there was nothing. Or at least, he couldn’t find anything, which meant that he was either too dense to pick up on the offered clues, or that she might have changed her mind, or gotten scared off. Not knowing which was the case was annoying...but not half as annoying as the wry grin that was glued to Bill’s face. The older wizard claimed that he was just happy to be playing a game that he hadn’t played in years, but Harry knew better...he knew that the older wizard was mentally laughing like hell at his future liegeland’s predicament.

Molly had called them into the house at dusk, and given the time of year and Devon’s latitude that was fairly late in the evening. So it was only an hour or so before the Weasley Matriarch walked into the sitting room and announced that it was bedtime. Harry accepted this directive with a mixture of angsty disappointment and relief, and hoped that there would be opportunity during the

next day for a private chat with his bushy-haired friend.

Travel to individual bedrooms and between bedrooms and baths was closely monitored...if not directly by Molly, then indirectly by her magic (or so it was assumed). Harry was vigilant for any last-minute signals as Hermione gave him a loose hug in the hallway and wished him a good night, which led to even more disappointment when he failed to recognize any.

Unless there was something to be read into the Cheshire-like grin on her face as she picked up Crookshanks, gave him a tight hug, then transferred him into Harry's arms and headed down the hallway to her bedroom.

"Well, okay, then," Harry muttered as he turned and balanced Crookshanks in one arm so that he could open his bedroom door with the other.

The tinkling bell above the door was the first indication that something was off. He cautiously opened the doorway.

"Effing Twins!"

"Language, Harry!"

The-Boy-Who-Was-Pranked looked over his shoulder and glared at a grinning Hermione, who had suspiciously only travelled halfway down the hall.

"Did you have a hand in all this?" he hissed.

"Not me," the Muggleborn witch quipped, as she walked up to Harry and peeked inside his room. "I'm restricted to first-year spells, remember?"

"Did you know about this, then?"

Hermione giggled. "Maybe."

Ron and Bill popped their heads out of their shared bedroom to find out what all the fuss was about. They too walked down towards Harry's bedroom door and glanced inside.

And then they all had a good laugh...all but Harry, that is. He didn't think the joke was very funny.

Fred and George had done what their mum had ordered them to do and removed all of the crates and half-opened boxes of joke-related stuff from their old bedroom. But that task obviously hadn't taken all afternoon to complete, which allowed them to do a little redecorating...borrowing interior design cues from Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop.

Crookshanks jumped from Harry's arms into the bedroom. He landed on peach-colored wall-to-wall shag carpeting, then bounced up onto the lace-trimmed pink duvet that now covered the bed. Harry sighed as his gaze shifted from the half-kneazle to the mass of heart-shaped pillows that

were stacked against the headboard.

“Well if Crooks didn’t trip anything it’s probably safe to go inside, right?” Hermione glibly suggested.

“Unless we’re attacked by killer kitsch,” Harry replied, as he followed his friend into the room.

It was overwhelming. The walls were painted two shades of pink, and the windows were trimmed with pink polka-dotted drapes. A white bear-skinned rug was spread out in front of a fireplace whose bricks were now dripping in fuschia. Red and pink ribbons were wrapped around the pole that supported Hedwig’s roost. Frilly white lace and cherubs and hearts were to be found wherever you looked...unless you were looking at the “Heartthrob Harry Potter” posters that now hung on the walls.

“It’s so you, Harry!” Bill quipped, as he walked into the room.

“It’s something, alright,” the raven-haired wizard replied.

“What’s going on?” Molly demanded, as she pushed past Ron and Hermione. She stopped, made one full turn around, then began to laugh.

“Oh, those two...” she said. “Although, this would be perfect for Ginny’s room.”

“She can have it,” Harry muttered. “Plenty of room for her and those two critters of hers.”

“That’s not a bad idea, actually,” offered Bill. “After all, this is the right sort of decor if you want to encourage mating.”

The smile disappeared from Molly’s face. “No, Ginny will not be moving into this room. I’ll have Fred and George back here in the morning to set things straight.”

“Tomorrow?” asked Harry. “Could you and Bill change this all back now?”

Molly shook her head. “I’m sorry dear, but their pranks have an annoying tendency to trigger a secondary effect whenever somebody tries to cancel out the magic. It’s best if they are...encouraged...to do the work themselves.”

“Erm...yeah. Good point,” Harry replied. He looked around the room and shuddered.

“Can I sleep downstairs on the sitting room sofa, then?” he asked.

“You’ll be fine here, Harry...it’s only going to be for the one night,” said Molly.

By this point, Fleur had finished her shower and left the bathroom. She wandered into Harry’s room and began to giggle. This, of course, drew attention to her...and to the damp clingy bathrobe that she was wearing.

“Okay, then, Fleur’s here...so where’s Ginny?” Harry asked, shaking his head. “And Arthur? Might as well let everyone enjoy the joke.”

“Oh, don’t be such a poor sport,” said Hermione, frowning at the way that Ron was staring wide-eyed at her new roommate.

“They can see it in the morning,” declared a disapproving mother. “Everyone back to your rooms. The show is over.”

Ron didn’t think so, of course, and had to be literally dragged out of the room by Hermione.

Harry sighed as he watched his friends and adopted family shuffle out of the room. Bill hung back just long enough to whisper a quick comment.

“Hey look at the bright side, Harry.”

“Do I have a choice?” he asked. “It’s bright everywhere that I look.”

“Yes, but...did you notice who also got a close look?”

Harry thought for a moment, then shrugged.

“So there’s no ward line across my threshold that keeps girls out,” he realized. “Same kind of logic used in Gryffindor Tower.”

“You make it sound as if that’s a bad thing.”

Harry rolled his eyes as he pushed the older wizard out the door.

“Good night, Bill,” he said, as he shut the door behind the older wizard.

The-Boy-Who-Was-Pranked groaned as he made his way over to the bed and pulled back the garishly covered duvet. He ran his hand across the pile of heart-shaped pillows, hoping to find one that was more fluffy than frilly. Once his selection was made, Harry climbed onto the bed, slipped his feet under the covers, and pulled them back over his torso as he dropped his head backwards onto the pillow. This gave him his first view of the ceiling. It was (predictably) mirrored.

Harry shook his head and shifted his gaze from his reflection to Crookshanks's reflection further down the length of the bed.

“Good night, Crooks,” he said.

“Meow.”

“Yeah, you and me both.”

“Meow?”

“Oh, relax, Crooks. It was just a joke.”

Harry shook his head as he reached over to dim his nightstand light, not really believing that he was beginning to understand Hermione’s familiar in the same way that he could converse with Hedwig. He sighed in relief as his head fell back onto the pillow; the darkness was definitely less distracting. But that only allowed slightly older distractions to push into the front of his mind.

The catalogs.

“Right,” he decided during a deep yawn. “Worry about that in the morning.”

Harry closed his eyes. It had been such a long and eventful day, and he felt so tired. He was quite certain that he would quickly fall asleep. But pushing the issue of underwear modeling to the side only allowed an even older distraction to rise to the surface.

Harry’s eyes shot open as he caught his breath.

“Meow?” asked his curled-up bedmate.

“Sorry, Crooks...just thought of something.”

“Purrrrrr....”

“Yes, I do have thoughts occasionally,” Harry protested. “Merlin, Crooks, it might just as well be Hermione sharing my bed, the way that you’re mimicking her.”

“Meow?”

“Never mind,” said Harry, as he pulled off the covers, rolled off of the bed, and dropped onto his knees. He thought about groping around in the dark, but then remembered he had just been pranked by the Twins. Harry could only imagine what would happen if he blindly slipped his hand underneath the mattress.

Crookshanks protested when the lights were turned back on and his perch was upended.

Harry shook his head as he peeked underneath. “This will just take a second...” he explained.

“Ha!”

“Meow!”

“Sorry Crooks...just found what was making the mattress so lumpy.”

It wasn’t quite what he expected...instead of a vibrating rubber chicken Harry was now staring at a thin package wrapped in brown paper.

“Hmmm....”

Harry reached for his glasses, which had been sitting on the nightstand, then looked over his shoulder towards the door. Seemingly alone (except, of course, for his feline bedmate), he pulled out his wand and cast a detection spell on the package. He swore quietly when the wrapping paper glowed blue.

“So it’s either a prank that will be triggered when I touch it...or a security charm,” he mused. Harry knew that pranking the wrapping paper was beyond the first-year spell list, but also knew that Fleur could have easily helped Hermione. He looked around the room, and spotted a wrought-iron poker leaning against the side of the fireplace. Ignoring the heart-shaped handle for a moment, Harry retrieved the poker and used it to slide the wrapped package out from under the mattress, and onto the shag carpeting.

There was a large Muggle post-it note fixed to the top of the package, adding weight to the possibility that this had been Hermione’s doing, particularly once Harry noticed that the message left on this note was written in her handwriting with a Muggle felt-tip marker.

“*Were you expecting something that clucks?*” the message read.

Harry rolled his eyes as he lifted the unsecured edge of the note with the fireplace poker. This revealed a small map that had been hand-drawn on the wrapping paper. A closer look at this map revealed two large dots labeled “Little Whinging” and “Weybridge” (which he knew was Hermione’s hometown). These dots were connected with marked lines, apparently identifying all of the roads and motor routes one would take if they were to travel from one place to the other.

A snort escaped from Harry’s nose as he used the fireplace poker to turn the wrapped package over. He didn’t find any seams or bits of cellophane strip to cut through.

“So it’s charmed wrapping paper,” he mused, turning the package back over. He cast an *Alohamora* spell on the package. Nothing happened.

“Maybe the map is a clue on how to get inside....?”

Harry touched his wand tip to the dot marked “Little Whinging.” Nothing happened. He went through a series of simple commands (e.g. *Open!* ) without success. He did the same thing with his wand tip touching Weybridge, and then he traced the route from one place to the other.

Still no success.

The raven-haired wizard thought about sticking to his earlier plan...to wait until the morning to sort things out. But this was a challenge...a challenge that he was wagering Hermione had set for him, and he wasn’t about to give up on something like that.

Harry glanced over at Hermione’s familiar, who was watching with almost a bemused look on his face.

“So Crookshanks, if this goes bad and I need medical attention...should I crack open the door now, or can you howl loud enough to call for help from here?”

“Meow!”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Harry replied, as he cautiously reached down and touched the wrapping paper with his bare finger. He sighed in relief when nothing bad happened. But then, having gone through all of his previous steps using a finger tip instead of his wand tip, he sighed in frustration.

“What the devil do I need to do in order to...oh, I am *such* an idiot!”

“Meow.”

“You didn’t have to agree so readily, you know,” Harry informed the half-kneazle. Then he grabbed his wand and touched it against the map.

“I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good.”

Harry let out a little cheer as a seam magically grew down the length of the wrapping paper and the two sides opened up like French doors.

Underneath the paper was a mail-order catalog whose cover was labeled “*Fredrick’s of West Hollywood.*” A small piece of parchment obscured the rest of the page. The handwritten note read:

*Dear Harry,*

*To help cut down on the back and forth, I decided to give you both catalogs. I’m trusting that you won’t abuse my trust. You can keep the lingerie catalog overnight if you think you’ll need more than one night to make your selections. But since you’re such a thoughtful boy...you will be sure to allow me the same amount of time to mull over your poses, right?*

*Love,*

*Hermione*

Harry’s heart rate progressively quickened as he read the note, then jumped when he shifted his attention from the message back down to the catalog. Underneath the store’s name was a moving picture of a Muggle manikin...an anatomically correct male manikin, judging from the bulge in the fringed leather thong it was wearing. It was some sort of cowboy-themed costume inspired from the American Wild West...although Harry doubted that real cowboys would ride bare-arsed in their saddles. And you could definitely tell that the manikin’s thong was baring its arse by the way that it pranced and spun about, clicking the heels of its cowboy boots, and waving a cowboy hat in its hand.

Wondering if all of the other mail-order outfits were just as silly or just as revealing, Harry reached for the catalog with the intention of flipping through its pages. But he didn’t make it past

the cover page, as his full attention was drawn to the cover of the second mail-order catalog than had been underneath.

On that cover was a moving picture of his belly-dancing best friend, swaying seductively under the words "*Fredrick's of Salem* ." At least Harry assumed it was Hermione...the bushy-haired dancing figure was wearing a veil that covered the bottom half of her face. And as for the dancing girl's bottom...it was only half-covered as well, with a pair of silky harem pants that exposed a bum cleft almost as deep as the cleavage on display with the gauzy cropped top.

"I love magic!" Harry whispered, as he reached down and pressed the heel of his palm against the bulge in his pajama bottoms.

"Meow?"

Harry glanced over at the bed.

"Oh give me a break, Crookshanks. You're a guy, right? And you think she would expect me to act any differently?"

The half-kneazle shook its head, jumped off of the bed, and walked over towards Harry. It stopped in front of the lingerie catalog, looked up at the wizard, then sat down on its cover, blocking his view.

"Meow!"

Harry stared at the half-kneazle in disbelief.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake...so you're in on this scheme to?"

"Meow," the familiar replied, as it reached up and pawed at the catalog held in Harry's hands.

Harry snorted.

"You are one loyal familiar, aren't you?"

"Meow."

The-Boy-Who-Lived got up onto his feet, feeling the need to both stretch his legs and (more importantly) readjust the front of his pants. Once the pressure was relieved he began flipping through the male underwear catalog's pages. The same anonymous manikin served as the model for all of the outfits on display. Harry shook his head as he turned each page...the first few pictures were relatively tame, but things got hotter (and barer) beyond that point.

He was sweating by the time he reached the back cover. The amount of skin that he'd be showing his best friend if the catalog worked as advertised would be huge. Harry flipped back to the inside cover and examined the camera lens that had grown out of the page like the pop-up display in a Muggle children's book. Then he read the instructions...twice.



It seemed straight forward enough. But did he dare to bare?

Harry looked down at Crookshanks and snorted. Hermione lived up to her house's reputation.

He walked over to the nightstand, propped the opened catalog up against the wall, and stepped in front of the lens.

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Hermione was gossiping with the part-Veela on her bed when Harry's familiar flew through their opened window (although if anyone had challenged her, she would have claimed that she was just practicing her colloquial French).

"Zee moment of truth?" Fleur teased, as the Muggleborn witch quickly untied the brown paper package from the owl's leg.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," Hermione pronounced.

"Maybe more so once you see zee pictures, no?"

"Hush!" hissed Hermione. And then she gasped in delight as she watched Cowboy!Harry wave his hat and shake his bare bum.

"That's my boy!" she exclaimed.

"Your very *big* boy, no?" Fleur teased, as she glanced over the younger witch's shoulder.

"Not like you didn't already know that after this morning."

"Perhaps."

"You were right about zee scars."

"I told you that he wouldn't care enough to use the magical airbrush."

"He was probably een too much of a rush to send eet off."

"Maybe."

"I still think zat you should have done zee same and not done zee retouching on your scar," said Fleur.

Hermione shook her head. "It's not that I ashamed of it...I just knew that Harry would only focus on the scar and feel guilty."

"Rather zen focus on your breasts and feel... 'ow do you say eet....'orny?"

"Yes, horny," Hermione agreed. "And yes, I'd rather he look at the rest of me." She patted the bed

next to her and asked, “Have a seat?”

“Eet ees okay?”

The Muggleborn witch nodded as she opened the catalog.

“Fair is fair...you let me look at this catalog when Bill was still the model.”

Fleur smiled. “Shush....eet ees our leetle secret, no?”

“Just like this will be?” asked Hermione, as she flipped past the few pages in order to get to the good stuff.

“No...you should have zee first chance to enjoy zee catalog by yourself.”

“Are you sure?”

Fleur nodded. “You can consult wiz me on potential presents een zee morning, no?”

Hermione snorted. “True enough...since Harry decided to hold onto the other catalog overnight.”

“I am so ‘appy for you, ‘Ermione,” Fleur gushed, pulling the other witch into a one-armed hug.

“Thanks,” the Muggleborn said with a blush. She turned a page and squeezed her thighs together at the sight of Harry wearing nothing more than a smile and sheer black shorts.

“Oh, my!” she hissed.

Fleur giggled at Hermione’s reaction.

“Zees catalog...eet’s effect ees just as strong as my allure was last night, no?”

Hermione gasped and slammed the catalog shut.

“No!”

“Do I ‘ave zee Veela blood een me?”

“Yes,” Hermione sighed, understanding the question’s underlying premise.

Fleur smiled as she patted the other witch’s leg.

“I suspect zat zee other catalog ees ‘aving zee same effect on your Harry.”

A giggle escaped from Hermione’s lips.

“Oh, I know for a fact that it’s having the same effect,” she declared, as she opened the catalog back up and searched for where she had left off.

“Based on past experience?” Fleur teased.

Hermione shook her head. “Based on the emotions that Crookshanks is broadcasting right now.”

“Your familiar ees excited sexually by zee pictures of you?” Fleur asked.

Hermione caught her breath as she considered the question. Then she relaxed and shook her head.

“He’s never acted like that before when he’s seen me nude,” the witch reasoned. “Crooks must be picking up on Harry’s emotional state right now.”

“But he ees your familiar? ‘Ow could he do zat?”

The Muggleborn witch smiled. “Maybe the two of us are somehow bonding with each other’s familiars?”

“Eet would be better eef you two bonded with each other first, I zink.”

“No argument here,” Hermione said coyly, as she looked down at the catalog and flipped another page.

“Merde!” Fleur exclaimed, as a new wave of pheromones assaulted her Veela-enhanced senses.

“Yes, I agree,” Hermione replied, using a very sultry tone of voice. She bent the page corner over and declared, “I definitely want to order that one.”

“Eet was you zat I was responding to,” the French witch stated. She looked towards Harry’s familiar, who had been perched the whole time on Hermione’s headboard.

“Did you feel zat as well, ‘Edwig?”

“Brek!”

Hermione let out a little gasp. “So she’s probably broadcasting back to Harry?”

“Ees zat a problem?” asked Fleur.

The Muggleborn witch looked away from the catalog page for a moment, hoping that she could both “listen” to her familiar’s broadcast and compose her own thoughts.

The first task made the second task very difficult.

“I’ll muddle through somehow,” she said slyly.

Fleur laughed brightly, and let out a torrent of French that Hermione could barely follow. The general sentiment was clear enough, though.

“We’ll see,” the Muggleborn giggled.

“Alors, I will now give you zee alone time for fluffing ze muffin,” Fleur teased, as she rose from Hermione’s bed, pulled out her wand and transfigured it into a four-poster model with thick curtains.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Isn’t it a little late for me to worry about privacy after you monitored the sitting room last night?”

“So you do not wish me to cast zee privacy and silencing charms on your bed?”

The bushy-haired witch shook her head as she reached up to the nearest bedpost and untied the curtain sash.

“I might be up late,” she said, waggling her eyebrows. “Wouldn’t want to interfere with you having a good night’s sleep.”

Fleur giggled as she looked up at Hedwig.

“And are you going to allow ‘Edwig to broadcast while you...?’” she asked.

Hermione snorted as she turned towards Harry’s familiar.

“Wouldn’t you rather be out on your own hunt for a mate?”

“Brek!” the owl replied, as she launched off of the headboard and flew out the window.

“I guess the broadcasts are over,” Hermione quipped.

“Een both directions?” asked Fleur.

Hermione concentrated for a moment, then nodded.

“I think he’s fallen asleep.”

“Crookshanks?”

“No. Harry.”

Fleur giggled.

“Bill usually does too, afterwards,” she admitted.

“Oh, that’s terrible!” Hermione laughed.

“Yes, eet ees, but I ‘ave not finished Bill’s training, so zere ees still ‘ope.”

Hermione rolled her eyes as she pulled the older witch into a hug.

“I think that I am going to enjoy sharing a room with you this summer.”

“Me too,” Fleur replied, as she kissed each of Hermione’s cheeks, stepped away from the bed, and held out her wand.

“Oh, just a second!” said Hermione, as she swung her feet off the bed and stood up.

Fleur grinned from ear-to-ear as she watched her new roommate slip her hand under the mattress and retrieve a rubber chicken.

“Now you ‘ave everything?” she asked.

Hermione smiled as she looked down at the adult toy in her hand.

“Not yet,” she replied. “But it will do for tonight.”

Fleur nodded knowingly as she said good night, then cast the strongest silencing charms that she knew on her roommate’s bed curtains.

*canoncansodoff*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 5: Sur La Cote Weasley

The shrieks and raucous laughter generated during the next morning's therapeutic spell-casting would have awoken most of The Burrow, were it not for Fleur's strong silencing charms. The amount of flesh bared during that same period of time would have aroused most of The Burrow, were it not for locked doors and drawn curtains (there being a 2:1 wizard/witch ratio outside of Percy's old bedroom).

Fleur had been singularly unimpressed with the list of First Year spells offered under the Hogwarts curriculum. When Hermione had asked her to replace Crookshanks as a live target, she had expected to be subjected to jinxes that tickled her or forced her to dance...the kind of spells that she'd learned during her first year at Beauxbatons. But anything that would be fun to hurl towards an opponent was at least a Second Year spell for Hogwarts, and absent from Hermione's approved spell list. There were, of course, spells on that list that did require a live target to judge effectiveness...the tripping jinx, for example, or *Petrificus Totatus*. And Hermione insisted that she do all of those spells, at least once. But Fleur was feeling rather playful that morning, and wanted to fire back.

Hermione was in a very agreeable mood, but was concerned about how her injury would respond to getting clipped by something like a *Expelliarmus* spell. So she improvised, and came up with a rather risqué type of practice that involved the color-changing spell.

It was a simple game with simple rules and a simple spell...change the color of a piece of clothing worn by your opponent, and they have to remove it. In practice, however, it proved challenging (particularly once the two witches stripped off their nightgowns and dueled in their knickers).

"It's not...fair!" Hermione giggled, as she dodged yet another spell that was flying towards her crotch.

"*Pingo!*"

Fleur ducked to her left and let Hermione's spell sail by.

"What eez not fair?" she asked.

"Your target is smaller than mine!"

"Would you like to borrow one of my thongs?" Fleur teased.

"No...got my own if...just want to....*Pingo!* ....Damn it!....Want to hit the one that you're wearing!"

“Never!” Fleur shouted, as she hurled three successive color-changing charms. Hermione sidestepped the first, then squatted down to avoid the second, only to be clipped on the bum by the third.

“J’ai gagné!” Fleur shouted with glee, as she watched Hermione’s knickers change color. She raised her arms into the air and exclaimed, “I see pink!”

Hermione sighed as she reached back and rubbed the slightly stinging point of impact through her (now) pink panties.

“So if you see pink already there’s no need for me to take them off?” she asked.

Fleur smiled as she placed her hands on her hips, lifted her chin and shook her head.

“Tout le chemin!”

“Alright, alright,” Hermione whined, as she hooked thumbs into her waistband and pulled down her knickers. After stepping out of them she did a slow pirouette and asked, “There...happy?”

“Very,” Fleur teased as she “holstered” her wand by slipping it through the waistband of her thong. Then she stepped forward, closing the gap between her roommate and her, and reached out with her finger.

“Eet ees a leetle less discolored today, no?” she asked, lightly touching the top end of Hermione’s scar. The Muggleborn witch caught a slight breath in her throat as Fleur’s finger began to trace down the length of her wound.

“Erm, yeah, I guess,” she replied. “Still think it’s too ugly to show Harry, though.”

“I disagree,” Fleur said, her finger stopping right where the scar met Hermione’s cleavage. The part-Veela dragged her fingertip off-course and playfully poked each of her roommate’s nipples. “Zis scar would not even be noticed eef these were also on display...or eef zey were tan like mine.”

Hermione snorted as she batted Fleur’s fingers away from her chest.

“Maybe if it was Ron that was perving on them,” she said. “But Harry? He would look straight past my baps and focus only on the scar. And then he’d feel guilty for thinking that it was his fault that I was injured.”

“I think zat eet would be a problem only eef you act as eef you are ashamed of ‘ow you look,” Fleur countered. “And you ‘ave no reason to zink zat...you are such a beautiful girl, no?”

Hermione shrugged.



Fleur tried to brighten their mood with a playful suggestion.

“And so, ‘Ermione...would you like to keep playing zee game for favors?’”

“Play for favors? Why Fleur...that’s a rather naughty suggestion!”

The part-Veela shrugged. “Only eef you ‘ave zee naughty mind,” she said slyly. “Eet would be a big favor eef you kept Ronald from making zee drool on me, no?”

“I suppose,” Hermione replied. She then looked down the length of her naked body and asked, “But what would you be aiming to change color if we kept playing?”

Fleur giggled as she pulled her wand out from her waistband and traced a horizontal line just above her roommate’s mound.

“Zee spell can change the color of hair just as easily as clothing, no?” she teased. “Une jardin rose...comme Tonks?”

Hermione looked down towards her crotch and batted away Fleur’s wand. “Would hardly be fair, though would it? I haven’t been able to cast a depilatory charm since the Ministry attack. My pubes are almost as big a target as my knickers.”

Fleur giggled.

“Eet ees not a First-Year spell at your school, zen?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Not on any of the spell lists, actually.”

“But you are also Muggleborn, no?” Fleur asked. “You do not have a razor?”

The bushy-haired witch shook her head. “Didn’t bring one with me...can you imagine explaining what it’s used for if Mr. Weasley spotted it in my toiletry bag? And besides...magic doesn’t leave stubble.”

“Zat ees true,” Fleur replied. “You know zat I would be ‘appy to cast ze spell for you...maybe you would like ze shape of a lightning bolt?”

“Fleur!” Hermione chided, as she reflexively covered herself with her hands.

The French witch was about to chide her roommate over her modesty, when the escape of a low-pitched growl from Hermione’s lips caught her attention.

“Ees something wrong, ‘Ermione?”

“Erm...no,” the Muggleborn stammered as she turned away from her roommate. “Just that...”

ooh!...think I'll have to take a break....I'd have...oh, geez....have problems concentrating on much of anything right now."

"Why eez zat?" Fleur asked, as she watched Hermione squirm.

The Muggleborn witch looked towards the locked bedroom door and giggled. "Because Harry is awake and Crookshanks is broadcasting again."

Fleur's eyes widened. "So he eez...what...flipping through zee catalog pages?"

Hermione closed her eyes, and nodded as she bent her clasped knees.

"One-handed, I imagine!" she moaned. "Crookshanks is really going to have to find someplace else to sleep tonight if he keeps transmitting like this."

Fleur laughed in delight and clapped her hands together. "Magnifique! And so...would you like to have some alone time een zee shower, or alone time 'ere while I shower?"

"I'd rather have some alone time with Harry right now!"

"You are sharing a moment with 'im right now, no?"

Hermione snorted.

"Yeah, yeah...very funny," she said, as she hobbled over to her bed and grabbed her bathrobe. "Think that I will take the first shower, if you don't mind."

The part-Veela shrugged as she took down the silencing charms.

"Of course I don't mind...would you like to use zee door opening charm?" she asked. "Eet eez a First-Year spell, no?"

Hermione shook her head as she loosely tied her bathrobe closed.

"Couldn't hold my wand steady right now if I tried," she gasped.

"I guess 'Arry eez not 'olding 'is wand steady either?"

"Anything but," Hermione replied. "Might need you to cast a contraceptive charm on me at this rate."

"Perhaps I should," Fleur teased. "Zey are good for forty-eight 'ours, no?"

"Fleur!"

“Oui?”

“Oh...would you just unlock the door, please?”

“Bien sur!”

Hermione chewed on her lower lip as her new roommate cast an *Alohamora* spell. Once the locking charm was removed she took hold of the door handle...then spun around and leaned back against the bedroom door.

“So Fleur...would you really be willing to...to cast that charm on me?”

The French witch smiled knowingly.

“You are going to go all zee way with ‘Arry?”

“No, silly...the *other* one,” Hermione whispered, as she pulled open the front of her robes.

Fleur giggled as she walked up to her roommate, dropped down to her knees, and aimed.

“Zee lightning bolt, zen?”

“No!” Hermione hissed.

“Une chat chauvre...like mine?”

Hermione shook her head.

“Not that far,” she declared as she put her hands together so that her thumbs and forefingers formed a small triangle. She then reached down and outlined her desired area of effect.

“This much?”

Fleur nodded. “You know zat zis spell tickles a leetle bit, yes?”

“I doubt that I’ll feel it, given the way that I’m being tickled right now,” said Hermione.

“And zis ees a complaint?” Fleur teased.

Hermione snorted, and shook her head while Fleur cast a grooming charm that every Beauxbatons students was taught in their First Year.

**oo00O00oo**

Molly had a strong suspicion that something funny was going on behind her back that morning,

but couldn't put her finger on exactly who was doing what. Her initial focus was on Bill and Fleur, since the part-Veela was working at Gringott's that day. But there wasn't anything she could really do about what took place beyond the Burrow's wards, so the best she could do was warn the couple about not engaging in any "funny business at the bank" as they took turns stepping through the floo.

Once the Weasley matriarch was down to just having Ron, Ginny, Harry and Hermione under her purview she acted on her lingering suspicions by segregating the sexes. This limited the ability for Hermione and Harry to discuss what had happened the night before to passing glances and a silent exchange of deep blushes. The two girls were kept inside to do the washing and cleaning, while the boys were kicked out into the backyard.

Ron wanted to play Quidditch, but his mum was still enforcing Harry's flying ban, so the two teens were forced into figuring out a semi-satisfactory work-around. Ron unfastened three of the goal hoops from their posts and brought them down to ground level. He then flew back and forth on his broomstick only a few feet off the ground while Harry stood twenty feet away and threw Quaffles towards those hoops. The raven-haired wizard couldn't get near the same velocity on the ball that he might have had he been flying towards the hoops, but it was better than nothing. And, given Ron's skill level and propensity for getting suckered into feints, it was good enough.

After lunch, Molly sat the four teenagers down at the kitchen table and forced them to revise and work on their summer assignments. Ginny spent far more time playing with her Pygmy Puffs than studying, until her Mum threatened to hurl them into the floo towards Fred and George's shop.

Ron, who had the most work to do of them all, spent the afternoon sketching out Quidditch plays in the margins of his parchment. Harry spent the afternoon rewriting the essays that he'd completed on Privet Drive, incorporating the edits that Hermione had suggested after her review.

And Hermione, having long finished and revised her homework, immersed herself within a book that Bill had given her that chronicled (in exhaustive detail) the history of the Ministry of Magic.

It wasn't until towards tea time that Molly remembered her promise and dragged one of the Twins back to the Burrow to change Harry's bedroom decor into something decidedly less erotic. She held Ginny and Hermione back in the kitchen to help make dinner, and held Ron back after catching him skiving off his homework. She did allow Harry to supervise George's work, though...so that there'd be no further need to redecorate the room. The-Boy-Who-Lived took this opportunity to lay out in some detail how the Twins might support certain Holiday objectives (at least those involving Molly and potions). George was quick to agree, and almost as quick to figure out just how he could help.

The red-haired wizard stopped in the kitchen before leaving the Burrow, and, as he munched on a plate of his mum's biscuits, lamented the fact that there wasn't enough time in the day for Fred and himself to monitor cauldrons within their shop. He then detailed just how much money could be made that summer if there only were a way to subcontract out the work to trustworthy individuals.

Ron made the link between this situation and Ginny's Pygmy Puffs and begged his mum to allow

him to have a job over hols just like his sister. He pointed out the fact that brewing didn't involve any "silly wand waving" that would violate laws against under-aged spell casting, and even went so far as to state that he wanted to take NEWT-level potions, now that Snape was no longer teaching that class. Ginny then reminded her mum that her O.W.L. year was coming up, and expressed her desire to get an "O" in potions, just like her mother (and some of her older brothers).

As Molly hemmed and hawed, George tried to seal the deal by noting that somebody would need to be supervising all of this work, and that it would only be fair if the person doing that monitoring was adequately compensated. But it wasn't until he mentioned that his brother and he were working on the development of a potion that provided resistance to the Siren's Song and other types of magical allure that she provided her blessing.

**oo00O00oo**

Hermione couldn't wait to be sent off to bed by Molly that night.

"Oh, Fleur, everything went brilliantly today!" she gushed, once her roommate magically silenced and secured their room.

The part-Veela smiled. "So, you and 'Arry were able to send off zee mail-orders?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not even close," she replied. "Didn't even get the chance to swap back catalogs."

"So you have another night to review your own choices for him behind your bed curtains?" Fleur teased.

"As a matter of fact..."

"I zink zat 'Arry would certainly consider that opportunity brilliant, n'est pas?"

"I suppose so."

"You do not know, though?"

Hermione snorted and shook her head. "I don't right now...Crookshanks has been out all day tomcatting."

"I see...so, what was eet zat made today brilliant, zen?"

"George came through for us," Hermione explained. "He convinced Molly to let us practice our potion making over hols, and brew the neutralizing agents to her love potions right under her nose!"

The Muggleborn witch proceeded to give a detailed accounting of the day as they changed into their nightgowns and took turns brushing out each other's hair, focusing mostly on how Molly was tricked. Fleur was quick to understand why brewing a neutralizing agent for the Siren's Song was what closed the deal for Molly, since such a potion might negate the allure that Molly was convinced the part-Veela had used to ensnare her son. The ill-feelings generated by this response, however, were dwarfed by her over-all amusement with the situation...Harry and Hermione had gotten one over on her future mother-in-law without either of them saying a word. And then there were her own schemes to discuss.

"And so, while you were solving one problem, I was solving another," she declared.

"Which one?" Hermione asked.

"Zee one zat will allow you to get zee mail-order knickers past Molly's noze," Fleur replied, as she spread her Gringott's work robes out on top of her bed. A spoken word and the touch of her wand tip to one of the buttons caused the leather-capped fastener to magically expand into a leather-capped, button-shaped box.

"What's this?" asked Hermione, as her roommate pried open the box top.

"A way to smuggle your orders," Fleur declared. "You can have zem sent in care of Bill or me at Gringott's."

"That's a great idea," said Hermione.

"And inside zee box ees a way for you to lessen zee visual impact of your scar," Fleur added.

Intrigued, Hermione reached out and pushed aside the tissue paper that lined the package's interior. Her curiosity was heightened when she then pulled out a black puffed-sleeve wool dress.

"Erm, thanks, Fleur," she said, as she traced a finger along the dress's sailor-style collar. Hermione glanced down at the matching stockings and bloomers that were still in the round box and said, "Now I won't have to borrow one of Ginny's."

Fleur giggled and shook her head. "Eet ees much more like my swim costume zen Ginny's, 'Ermione."

"Really?" the Muggleborn asked. "But your swim costume looks just the same as hers?"

"Eet may look ze same," said Fleur. "But zee fabric ees very different."

"How?"

"Eet ees French-woven," the part-Veela explained. "Eet magically allows zee sun to warm and tan zee skin underneath...did you not notice zis morning zat I 'ave no tan lines?"

Hermione snorted. “Yes, but...I just assumed that you spent some time on a Muggle clothing-optional beach back home.”

Fleur shook her head. “Eet would have been nice to have been een France this summer, but zere has been no opportunity.”

“Huh,” said Hermione, as she held the wool dress up against the light. “This looks and feels just like regular black wool fabric.”

“Looks and feels close enough to solid black wool fabric to pass Molly’s inspections,” Fleur said with a smile.

Hermione giggled. “Oh, Merlin...were you wearing this kind of suit when we went to the pond with Ron and Ginny? If he only knew...does the costume provide any sunscreen protection?”

Fleur nodded. “Zee same level of protection as zee sunscreen potion.”

“That’s good...I’d worry about missing certain critical spots,” Hermione laughed, as she slipped off her nightgown and pulled the conservatively cut knee-length dress over her head.

“Thank you, Fleur,” she said, checking her reflection in the mirror. “I was afraid that I might not get any sun this summer.”

Fleur smiled. “I said zat your curse scar would not be so noticeable against tanned skin...how else would you be able to do zat ‘ere at zee Burrow?”

Hermione giggled. “So does Bill like your all-around tan?”

“Just as much as I like ‘is,” Fleur quipped.

“What? So his swim costume is made out of the same fabric?”

“Of course!” Fleur giggled, removing the bloomers and stockings from the box. After shrinking it back down to size, she touched a different button and expanded a second hidden compartment. Once it finished growing she opened its cap and pulled out a male Edwardian-area one-piece swim costume.

“Pour votre amant, ma chere soeur,” said Fleur.

“For my lover?” Hermione asked, as she dragged her fingers against the male outfit. “Sorry, didn’t get much chance to advance on that front today, given Molly’s hovering.”

“Zis will ‘elp you with zee next step, I zink,” Fleur replied.

Hermione shrugged. “Next step beyond the catalogs?” she asked. “How would these swim costumes help? Molly seems determined not to let us have any time alone, and it’s not like Harry has sun-ray vision, right?”

Fleur giggled as she bent down and pulled two pairs of dark Muggle-style sunglasses out of the second secret box.

Hermione caught her breath. “No way!” she hissed.

Fleur smiled knowingly as she held one of the pairs of sunglasses to her lips and said something in French. She then handed the sunglasses to Hermione. As the Muggleborn witch put them on, Fleur snaked her hand into one of the leg holes of the male swim costume. Once her fingers were hidden underneath the fabric of the suit’s crotch, she waved to her roommate.

“*Merde!*” Hermione whispered, watching Fleur’s fingers wiggle clearly as if there was nothing in between. This French expletive was repeated a little more forcefully once the Muggleborn witch shifted her gaze to the swim costume that she herself was wearing.

Or not wearing, as far as it appeared through her magical sunglasses.

“Oh my...so...you and Bill each wear these swim costumes *and* these sunglasses to the beach?”

Fleur shrugged. “Eet ees just as you said...as eef William and I were sur la Cote d’Azur.”

Hermione was incredulous. “And you think that Harry and I are ready to see each other the same way?”

The French witch nodded as she placed the male swim costume back down on the bed and activated and put on the other pair of magical sunglasses.

“You ‘ave already seen each other like zis in zee catalogs, no?”

“*Almost* like this,” Hermione protested. “We weren’t completely starkers.”

“As eef eet mattered, given how transparent some of zee fabrics were?” Fleur chuckled. “Do you doubt zat ‘Arry knows just how ‘airy you were down zere zis morning?”

“No, but...it’s still not the same,” Hermione protested, as she pulled on the seemingly invisible wool fabric that was covering her chest, and lifted up the sunglasses to confirm the magical effect. “We were looking at pictures of each other, and it was our images that were wearing those outfits, not us. This wouldn’t be the next step...it would be the next giant-sized leap!”

Fleur shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“Do these X-ray glasses see through all swim costumes, or just these special ones?” Hermione



asked.

“Just zees ones,” Fleur replied. “Would you wish to see through someone else’s swim costume? Ronald’s perhaps?”

“Oh, hell no,” Hermione hissed. “So are the sunglasses keyed to seeing through only certain swim costumes, or any costume that’s made with this special weave?”

“Zey work on any of zem,” Fleur replied.

“So...Harry would be able to see through your swim costume?”

The French witch nodded. “Just as I would see through ‘is, and you would be able to see through Bill’s and Bill would see through yours...as eef we all were sur la plage, n’est pas?”

“I don’t know...”

“Are you worried about your ‘Arry?” Fleur asked. “You are forgetting how many times he polished ‘is wand last night as he flipped zee pages?”

Hermione snorted. “No, but why do you think that he would pay any attention to my body if you were lying starkers next to me?”

“Because ‘e ‘as feelings for you, and not for me,” Fleur replied. “Eet ees as simple as zat.”

“But you’re so beautiful,” Hermione whined. “And you’ve got perfect breasts, and a gorgeous bum...”

Fleur giggled as she took hold of Hermione’s shoulders and spun her around to face the full-length mirror.

“You are also a beautiful young woman, ‘Ermione,” Fleur purred, her lips only a few inches away from the Muggleborn’s ear. Hermione caught her breath when her roommate snaked her arms around and pulled her back into a hug; while she could feel Fleur’s hands resting against the outside of her swim costume, it looked in the mirror (and through their sunglasses) as if the French witch’s fingers were groping naked flesh.

“I’m just not sure that I’m ready to go this far,” Hermione whispered, as she looked down the length of the mirror. Her gaze stopped at the sight of her knickers.

“Fleur?”

“Yes?”

“What about the rest of the costume? Are the bloomers and stockings made from the same fabric?”

Fleur smiled as she released her hug, walked over to her bed, and retrieved the bloomers.

“See for yourself?” she asked.

Hermione worried her lower lip with her teeth as she took the offered garment, opened up the waistband, then bent down so that she could slip them on.

Fleur reached out and grabbed her roommate’s arm. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Seeing for myself?”

“Do you wear knickers underneath your swim costumes?”

“Well, no, of course, not, but...”

“Right now eet ees just us girls, no?” Fleur asked.

“Yeah, right now...”

“Just try it...for me?”

Hermione looked over her shoulder towards the door.

“You did cast that locking charm, right?”

“Of course.”

The Muggleborn sighed, and let the bloomers drop to the floor. Then she reached up under the wool swim dress and pulled down her white lace knickers. She stood, checked the mirror, and confirmed the full-Monty effect of the dress and sunglasses. Then she bent down, pulled the bloomers up underneath her dress, and rechecked the view.

She looked just as bare-arsed (and bare-fannied) as before.

“I can’t let Harry see me like this...let him see all of me!” she declared.

“Even eef you would be seeing him zee same way?” Fleur asked.

Hemione shook her head.

“Too much, too fast,” she decided.

Fleur nodded. “Well, zen...eet ees a good thing zat zese glasses are not strong enough to counter Molly’s magic, no?”

“What do you mean?”

The French witch released Hermione from her hug, took a couple of steps backwards, and cast a spell that hit the Muggleborn witch right in the back.

Hermione jumped in surprise and spun around to face Fleur. But then, recognizing the charm that had been cast, she glanced back over her shoulder towards the free-standing mirror. She smiled at the sight of some well-focused magic.

“Now this...this might be just fast enough,” she said, turning around to confirm the spell’s full effect.

**oo00O00oo**

Harry groaned with disappointment when, early the next morning, his familiar woke him with a gentle nip to the ear.

“Back already, Hedwig?” he whined, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “Damn, and I was going take one last look through that catalog before breakfast.”

Hedwig gave her master an unblinking stare.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I know...it’s far too late for me to start worrying about being modest around you.”

“Bark?”

“Because I don’t want Hermione to know that I’m perving on her pictures again!” Harry whispered.

“Bark, bark.”

“Of course I trust you, girl,” Harry replied. “But if I was able to pick up on Hermione’s emotions when Crookshanks was here, it makes sense that she might be able to pick up on mine through you, right?”

“Bark!”

“I know that she knows what I was doing...and she has to know that I know what she was doing with that rubber chicken, but still...”

“Bark!”

“I would if I could...but Molly or Ginny won’t leave us alone for a minute!”

Hedwig stared at Harry, then shook her head and flew over to her perch. She then ended the conversation with a few clucking noises before ducking her head underneath a wing.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I appreciate the offer, girl, but even if you can’t see me, you still can pick up on my feelings...at least from that distance...”

The messy-haired teen mulled over that last observation, then pulled the covers off of his legs and slipped out of bed. He smiled when his feet sank into the wall-to-wall chocolate brown carpeting, and he took a moment to look around the room. George’s interior decorating had been surprisingly tasteful under Harry’s watchful eye. The garish pinks and reds had been replaced with warm, earthy colors, and all of the tacky chintz and silk swapped out with brown leather and linen. It was easily the nicest, most welcoming bedroom that Harry had ever slept in...and it was all his for the summer. Unless, of course, Molly did another bedroom reassignment.

The thought of him having control of who slept where, and whom he might want to share his bedroom room with, brought him back to the fantasies and plans that he’d woken with. He stepped lightly over to his bedroom door, opened it, and stuck his head out into the hallway.

“Good, the shower is free,” he muttered to himself. Pulling his head back into the bedroom, he grabbed his lavatory kit, then glanced over towards a well-guarded hiding place. He decided that it was not worth the risk of taking the lingerie catalog with him into the bathroom. He then thought a few moments about his extensive review of that catalog the night previous, and decided that he really didn’t need it anymore.

The clear image in his mind of “Dryad Hermione,” dressed only in green-tinted gauze and a few small oak leaves, would provide more than enough inspiration that morning...and do so just outside of his familiar’s emotional reception area.

**oo00O00oo**

Hermione completed her morning spell regimen just a few minutes after Harry finished showering. It was a good workout...the Muggleborn had displayed enough foresight to wear one of her thongs, giving Fleur a target that was just as small as her own during the color-changing rematch. It was Hermione’s turn to have the winning shot, and she gloated mercilessly as the French witch stripped bare. Fleur had wanted to keep playing, going so far as to proactively grow a platinum-blond target using a hair-lengthening charm. But Hermione had other things in mind (or, more specifically, other bits in mind). So she dashed off down the hallway, and quickly finished her shower (as well as herself).

The first thing that Hermione spotted when she walked downstairs and entered the kitchen was

Harry, feeding Hedwig a rasher of bacon. She blushed when they made eye contact...while Harry was dressed in his usual summer-weight robes, her mind instantly transfigured those robes into the barely-there Roman toga that he wore on page 38 of the catalog. At the same time, Harry was busy mentally replacing her modest robes with the lei and grass skirt that her image wore on page 16 of the other catalog.

Hedwig rebroadcast the waves of intense emotions that she picked up from the two teens just as quickly as they came in...Initially lustful, but morphing quickly into mutual embarrassment as Harry and Hermione realized what they were unintentionally sharing with each other (and also realized that they were sharing them while Ron was sitting at the kitchen table) The majestic owl twisted her head around so that she could face each of the teenagers and bark out her amusement at their antics. Then she launched herself from Harry's shoulder and flew out an opened window.

"Where's she going, Mate?" asked Ron.

"Probably out for a hunt," said Harry, as he glanced down and readjusted the front of his robes.

"Doesn't she search for food at night?"

"Different kinds of hunts," the Muggleborn witch replied, as she took a seat across from Ron and struggled to control her blush.

Harry snickered, and shook his head. "Think her search might be a little more energetic today, Hermione?"

His best friend nodded, avoiding eye contact as she focused on filling her plate. "Have you seen Crookshanks this morning, Harry?"

The-Boy-Who-Lived shook his head and smiled.

"He was out all night. Going to give him a stern lecture after he does his walk of shame?"

Hermione snorted, and shook her head. "Can't blame him for being any less energetic than Hedwig, right?"

Ron shook his head in between large infusions of porridge.

"I wonder why Pig never has that kind of energy," he wondered.

"Yeah, especially since he's your familiar," Hermione quipped, risking a glance up at Harry so that they could share knowing smiles.

Ginny emerged from the stairwell with a smile on her face and a Pygmy Puff on each shoulder.

"Good morning, everyone," she said brightly, sitting down next to Hermione.

“Speaking of energetic pets,” said Harry, “Did those two make a love connection last night?”

Ginny shrugged her fluffy-mounted shoulders. “I’m not sure,” she replied. “They spent the night hugging each other...if they weren’t different colors you couldn’t have known where one stopped and the other started.”

Harry chuckled. “Sounds like they were connected alright...so do the cigars get passed out two weeks from now?”

The youngest Weasley wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “I think that they were just cuddling.”

“How could you tell?” Hermione asked.

“Because every time I checked there was pink fur on top of purple,” Ginny explained.

“So?” asked Ron.

His sister rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Ronald,”

“Hey, that’s my line,” Hermione quipped.

“Do I really have to explain the birds and bees to my older brother?” Ginny asked. “Everyone knows that if they *were* making babies, then the boy would have been lying on top of the girl.”

Harry and Hermione both snorted in amusement. Molly chose that moment to come in the back door, cradling a dozen eggs in her apron.

“Ginevra Weasley, I shouldn’t have to be the one collecting eggs for breakfast.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“If you can’t keep on top of your chores, then...”

“Yes, Mum...sorry, Mum.”

Molly would have continued to harangue her daughter, had her oldest son not chosen to enter the kitchen at that very moment with a box under one arm and his fiancée under the other.

“Morning, everyone,” Bill announced.

“It is a good morning, isn’t it?” asked Hermione, as she caught her roommate’s eyes and smiled.

Molly didn’t agree.

“Shove down, Ronald...Bill needs to eat breakfast now or he'll be late for work.”

“Alright.”

“Thanks, little brother,” Bill said, as he let go of Fleur's hand and stepped around the table. Before taking a seat he held the box out towards Harry and said, “Oh, before I forget...this is for you.”

“Erm...thanks,” Harry said with a bit of surprise.

“It was going to be a birthday present from the both of us,” the curse-breaker explained. “But Fleur thought it might come in handy beforehand.”

With nearly everyone watching Harry open the box, nobody saw Bill give Hermione a rakish wink. Except Hermione, of course.

“Hey, look...it's a swim costume,” Harry said, as he pulled the wool one-piece suit out of the box.

Ginny's eyes danced with delight as she asked, “Model it for us, Harry?”

The-Boy-Who-Lived chuckled as he pushed back from the table and stood up.

“What do you think?” he asked, holding up the suit that completely covered him from neck to knees.

“Ooh la la...tres sexy, 'Arry,” Fleur teased.

Molly was already making her way towards Harry before this comment was made.

“Let's have a look, then,” she demanded, reaching out to measure the thickness of the fabric in between her fingers.

“We didn't think that you'd have a Wizard-style swim costume,” Bill explained. “What with the one you wore for the Tri-Wizard Tournament still hanging inside the Hogwarts trophy case.”

“Hey Fleur, is that the same reason why you don't wear that silver swim costume?” asked Ron, while Molly held Harry's new suit up to the window.

Molly huffed loudly, then declared, “She doesn't wear that costume, Ronald, because it's scandalous and completely inappropriate...at least as long as she is staying at the Burrow.”

Harry snorted. “Well, thanks Bill...and Fleur...you were right about me not having one of these suits packed.”

“You are very welcome, ‘Arry, I think zat you will look quite handsome in that costume,” Fleur replied, as she casually placed her hand on Hermione’s shoulder and gave it a playful squeeze.

“Don’t you agree, ‘Ermione?”

“Erm...yeah...I can’t wait to see you wearing it,” Hermione said, waggling her eyebrows.

“So are we going to the beach, then?” Harry asked.

Ginny snorted. “Don’t have to go anywhere...we’ve been swimming in our pond .”

Harry arched an eyebrow. “Your pond?” he asked. “You mean that little green puddle just out past the apple trees?”

Ron nodded. “With Fleur’s help it cleans up brilliantly, Mate...you’ll see.”

“Erm..okay, then.”

Ginny loudly asked, “So can we go swimming, Mum?”

Molly looked out the window and rolled her eyes.

The answer was a definite no...at least as long as it was raining. And even if it had been a sunny morning, there were potion ingredients to prep and cauldrons to stir. Once Bill and Arthur left for work, the five teenagers were put to work under Molly’s watchful eye. They sliced, and diced, and made julienne-style newt’s eyes the entire day. Ginny kept asking her mum if they could swim, but the rain didn’t let up, providing Molly with an easy excuse to keep the five teenagers inside the house and under her eye.

Hermione couldn’t decide whether she was more disappointed or relieved that they didn’t have an opportunity to sunbathe that day. It might have been easier if she could get a few minutes alone with Harry to talk about things, but Molly’s hovering and Ginny and Ron’s near constant presence made that impossible.

Harry’s invisibility cloak wasn’t even an option for them...someone had told Molly about it (presumably Dumbledore), and she had demanded that Harry give the garment up for the Order’s use along the ward line. The raven-haired wizard was very reluctant to lend out the heirloom, and absolutely refused to let certain Order members get their hands on it (specifically, Snape and Dung). At the same time, he knew it worked far better than the cloaks that the Order members were using, and he felt some responsibility for there being constant guards along the ward line. So he reluctantly handed it over to Arthur and Molly, on the condition that he have final say on who got to wear it, and when. The Weasley Matriarch didn’t like having terms dictated to her, but her husband was quick to acknowledge (and accept) Harry’s concerns. It helped that the terms were easily met...there was always more than one guard on the ward line, and Snape and Fletcher never worked together.



Molly's hovering did give Harry and Hermione one more night to review their mail-order selections, although they were beginning to worry about their respective hiding places. Bill and Fleur solved that particular problem on the following morning, when they surreptitiously volunteered for courier duty. Both were working at Gringott's that day, so Fleur used the hidden buttons on her work robes to smuggle one catalog out of Hermione's bedroom, while Bill slipped into Harry's bedroom and (after a fifteen minute discussion) did the same. Once at Gringott's the two exchanged packages, and delivered them back to the two teens for their review and approval. They could then be sent out either by Hedwig or (if that was considered too risky), smuggled out in the same manner and sent from Diagon Alley.

While there wasn't a cloud in the sky that morning, the teenagers didn't bother to ask Molly if they could go swimming; Fleur was at Gringott's all day, and it was only her magic bag that could make the outing viable. So they spent another morning in the kitchen working on potions, then enjoyed another gender-segregated afternoon...boys outside, girls inside. Hermione would have been much more upset had she not been anticipating a smuggled delivery that night.

She practically ripped the button from Fleur's robes once they had "retired" for the evening. The French witch was understanding, and quickly liberated the package.

Hermione said, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good," (not caring or noticing that Fleur was standing by her side) and ripped the wrapping paper off of the catalog.

"Where did I go?" Hermione asked, once she got a good look at the cover. She turned it towards Fleur and showed her the image of a faceless manikin dressed in a harem outfit.

"Arry must have cleared all of the images," Fleur reasoned. "Een case someone else intercepted zee package?"

"Oh...I guess that makes sense," Hermione replied. "So how can I see how I'd look in the outfits that he picked out for me?"

Fleur rolled her eyes as she took the catalog from Hermione.

"By posing for anozer picture, silly!" the French witch teased.

A folded letter fell out when she opened the catalog's cover page and aimed the magical camera towards her roommate. Hermione caught the paper in mid-air and unfolded it. It was blank...at least until she repeated the Marauder's Oath.

"You were right about him clearing the image," Hermione told Fleur, as she read the first sentence. Then she swore.

"What eez wrong?"

"Listen to this," Hermione replied. "He said, '*I really needed to ask Bill for his advice on what to*

*pick, and I couldn't even imagine how embarrassed and angry you would be if I showed pictures of you dressed that way to another man' ."*

"Your boyfriend is so thoughtful," Fleur teased.

"He's not my boyfriend, though," said Hermione. "And probably won't be now...what will I do if he finds out that I showed you a couple of *his* pictures?"

Fleur shrugged. "Eef he asks, you can zay zhat I snuck zee peeks over your shoulders. And tell him zat you saw zee same pictures of Bill."

Hermione sighed. "But this is about Harry trusting me...you showing me the catalog pics of Bill dressed in a thong has nothing to do with it."

Fleur smiled. "So you will apologize to 'Arry, and I will apologize to Bill, zen we will both say we are naughty girls who deserve zee spankings?"

A loud snort escaped from Hermione's lips as she shifted her gaze back towards the letter.

"Aww...that's so sweet!" she said, a few moments later.

"What?"

"He said that he didn't know if he should make selections based on our current relationship, or where that relationship might be if Molly and Ginny weren't meddling so much. So he decided to mark the catalog with two different colors of ink. Black check marks next to outfits for his best friend in the world, and red check marks next to outfits that he'd like to see a future lover wearing."

"He ees zinking zat those might be different women?" Fleur asked.

Hermione shook her head. "He's just being careful, I think...here, he goes on to apologize for the fact that he couldn't think of anyone other than me being his future lover so long as I was modeling the outfits."

"Zat ees fantastique, no?" Fleur gushed, pulling Hermione into a hug.

Her Muggleborn roommate smiled, and nodded in agreement as she finished reading the letter.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione whispered, holding the letter against her chest. She then said, "Mischief Managed," and turned the page blank again.

"What did 'e say after zat?" Fleur asked impatiently.

Hermione smiled, and shook her head. "I can't tell you everything...can I?"

Fleur waggled her eyebrows. “Of course you can!”

“We’ll I’m not...at least not for now.”

“Fair enough,” Fleur decided. Then she held the inside page of the catalog in front of her roommate and asked, “Tout le chemin?”

Hermione giggled, and nodded in agreement as she slipped off her clothes. A wide grin formed on the French witch’s face as she activated the catalog camera.

“So are you now zinking of ‘Arry as your lover?” she asked.

“What makes you think that?”

Fleur smiled as she handed the catalog back to her nude roommate.

“Because you ‘ave zee witches teets, and I ‘ave zee Veela nose?” she quipped.

Hermione looked down and shook her head in frustration.

“I’m also going to have closed bed curtains if you don’t behave,” she said, taking the few seconds time necessary to cover the visible signs of her excitement with her nightgown. Not that the thin fabric did any good as she began to flip through the pages.

“‘Arry has excellent taste...for both ‘is best friend and ‘is bed friend,” Fleur declared, as they both studied the pictures. On facing pages, checks were placed where Hermione was wearing a classic white silk slip on one side, and where she sported a semi-transparent red silk teddy on the other.

“Ooh, la, la!” Fleur squealed, as she caught sight of some of Harry’s more daring selections.

Hermione couldn’t help but to agree...and to smile...and to squeeze her knees together as she reviewed the same pictures. She was still too proper to exclaim, “Ooh, la *fucking* la!” out loud (even with just Fleur present) but that phrase was certainly dancing inside her head.

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Harry had assured Hermione within his letter that Bill had assured him that there were more than enough galleons in his vault to purchase three of every outfit in the lingerie catalog. He also asked that she not worry about the aggregate cost. He even asked her to pick out a few outfits on her own, so as to surprise him, promising that he intended to do the same. Hermione still worried a little about the cost, until Fleur independently confirmed his wealth, and pointed out that purchasing outfits for her could be the same as a birthday present for him...so long as Hermione gave him a live model review of what he had lusted over in the catalog.

It wasn't a hard sell.

Bill left for work the next morning with a knowing grin on his face and two separate mail order forms hidden within his buttons. It was a partly cloudy day, and Fleur had neither work nor guard duty on her schedule. Ginny could hardly wait for breakfast to end before asking,

“Can we go swimming *now* , Mum?”

The Weasley matriarch looked at the teenagers sitting at the kitchen table, then looked down at the family clock that she was cradling in the crook of her right arm. While nothing had changed since the last time that she'd looked (some forty-five seconds previous), it gave her a bit of time for her to consider a response.

“The potions won't brew themselves, you know,” she declared. “Maybe after lunch.”

Fortunately, the weather held.

“Can we go swimming *now* , Mum?”

“I don't know,” Molly replied. “The pond is rather close to the property line...”

“No closer than it was a couple of days ago when you let us go,” noted Ginny.

“But Harry wasn't here a couple of days ago, either.”

“Even more reason to go today,” Ginny said stridently.

Hermione had to stifle a laugh when she spotted the obvious non-verbals that the red-haired teen was trying to send her mother.

“And we'd have a guard there too, Mum,” Ron noted.

“You can't expect the Order to spend all of their time patrolling next to the pond, Ronald.”

“They wouldn't have to...Fleur is in the Order, and she will be with us!”

“Be with you where, Ronald?” the part-Veela asked, as she walked into the kitchen.

“Now that the sun is out, Ginny wants to show Harry the pond,” he explained.

“I know what she really wants to show Harry,” Hermione muttered under her breath.

“And you wish me to accompany you?” Fleur asked with a smile. “As a guard, or in my swim costume?”

Ron blushed. “You could guard in your swim costume, couldn’t you? And bring your beach bag?”

Molly let out a deep sigh.

“Ronald, you can’t expect houseguests to jump at your command,” she chided.

“Yeah, that would be honing in on her job,” Hermione whispered to Harry.

“Hush,” he replied.

Fleur’s smiled. “Eet eez no problem, Molly,” she declared. “I would be happy to refashion *La Cote Weasley* .”

The matriarch frowned.

“I expect that you’ll go no further than the pond, and will follow the swimming rules and will not wear any scandalous attire,” she stated firmly. “Any of you!”

“Bien sur, Molly,” the blonde-haired witch replied brightly. She grabbed Hermione by the hand and dragged her up the stairs so that they could change. The other three teenagers were quick to follow.

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“Hold it right there, young lady!” Molly ordered, just a few minutes later.

Ginny reluctantly stopped short of the backdoor that she was trying to slip out of unnoticed.

“Oh, Mum...” she whined.

“Don’t you ‘*Oh, Mum,*’ me, Missy,” the Weasley matron bellowed, as she drew her wand from an apron pocket. “You know the rules.”

Ginny sighed as she turned to face her mother and began to unbutton her lightweight robes. The young teen waited until Molly had made her way over towards the door before she ripped them open.

“There....happy?” Ginny demanded.

“Harry might be,” Ron muttered, as he emerged from the stairwell.

“Don’t be crude, Ronald,” Hermione said, as she followed him into the kitchen. Harry and Fleur

were right behind, with Harry carrying Fleur's large, brightly-colored beach bag on his shoulder.

Molly was focused solely on her daughter, and scowled as she looked up and down the front of Ginny's Edwardian-era swim costume. The black, puffed-sleeve wool dress stretched down to the girl's knees. Those knees (and the rest of her legs) were covered by a pair of thick wool stockings that were accessorized by lace-up bathing slippers. Mrs. Weasley reached out and lifted the hem of the wool dress just high enough to confirm that her daughter was wearing proper bloomers underneath.

"Can I go now, Mother?" Ginny whined.

Molly shook her head as she stepped back far enough to provide clearance for the wand movements required for her intended magic.

*"Praetego!"*

Once the spell was cast, Molly reached out and tugged at the neckline of her daughter's costume. She smiled when she found the right amount of resistance within the fabric.

"Now you can go," the Weasley Matron declared. "Have your hat, then?"

Ginny rolled her eyes as she pulled a ribbon-trimmed black wool shower cap half-way out of her robe pocket.

"Yes, Mum," she sighed.

Molly smiled, and wished her daughter a fun afternoon as she moved down the line to inspect Ron's swim costume. It looked nearly identical to Harry's, save for the color (navy blue versus black). When Ron's mum cast the same spell on him that she'd cast on his sister, Harry leaned towards Hermione and whispered into her ear.

"Is she casting shield charms on everyone, then?" he asked.

Hermione let out a quiet snort. She shook her head, smiled, and turned so that she could whisper her reply into Harry's ear.

"The spell is *Praetego*, silly....not *Protego*. Although I guess the intent is almost the same."

"What's the..."

Hermione stopped Harry's follow-up question with a curt shake of her head and the mouthed promise of, "*Later*." He nodded, and quietly waited for his turn to be inspected, bespelled, and sent out the door.

An explanation came sooner than Harry expected, and from a different source. Ron was waiting

just outside the back door of the house, and held his best mate back from the girls as they all began walking out towards the pond.

“So...feel a little tingly in the danglies?” Ron snarked.

“What?”

“The spell that Mum cast on us.”

Harry winced. “Sorry Mate, but do you really want to talk about a spell cast by your mother that made your bits tingly?”

“Erm, right...never mind.”

“I certainly plan to.”

Ron snorted. “Still, though...it’s not all bad.”

“What’s not all bad?”

“The spell.”

“This sticking charm that is keeping me from stripping off my suit?”

“No...I mean, yes, it does do that,” Ron admitted.

“Is it something that Fleur can cancel once we get to the pond?”

The red-haired teen shook his head. “Sorry, Mate...it can only be cancelled by the spell caster.”

“Why did she...does she expect us to strip down starkers and go skinny-dipping, or something?”

“No, no...nothing like that,” Ron replied. “More like she wants to make sure that we don’t change into Muggle swim costumes...or adjust the ones that we’re wearing.”

“So what if we have to go?”

“Go where?” asked Ron.

“To the loo, you berk!” Harry replied, a bit more forcefully than he had intended.

The girls thought the question was rather funny, judging by the giggling that Harry heard coming from their position up the path. Ron thought that the question was more silly than funny.

“You like to squat in the bushes or something?” he asked.

“Of course not.”

“Then what’s the problem?” asked Ron. “Not like Mum is going anywhere if you need run back to the house to pinch off a few logs.”

Harry rolled his eyes, knowing that the pleased look on his friend’s face had more to do with the fact that he’d gotten away with making a coarse comment than anything else.

“But what if I just have to pee?” Harry whispered. “Do I have to run back to the house for that, too?”

“Course not,” Ron scoffed. “We’re going to the pond, remember?”

“And...?”

“And the water is chest deep near the center?”

Harry stopped short and stared at his best male friend. Ron took a few more steps before he realized, and looked back over his shoulder.

“What?” he asked defensively.

The-Boy-Who-Lived shook his head. “So I shouldn’t expect a sign nailed to a tree by the water’s edge that says ‘*Don’t pee in our pond*’?”

“Erm.....no?”

Harry shook his head. “And do the girls know about this?”

Ron shrugged. “What they don’t know, won’t hurt them, right? And who’s to say that they aren’t doing the same thing?”

“I think I might just stay out of the water this afternoon,” Harry said.

“You are such a prissy git,” Ron scoffed. “It’s not like I rub off in the pond...although I guess they’d never know, would they?”

“What do you mean?”

“That spell Mum cast,” Ron explained. “It’s more than just a sticking charm...keeps your bits from being noticed as well.”

“Really?”



“Yeah.”

“What’s the point, though?” Harry asked. “We’re already covered head to knee or head to toe with thick wool swim costumes that won’t come off.”

“The point is the points,” Ron quipped, laughing at his own joke. “The swim costume fabric is thick, but not thick enough to hide the perky nipples that the girls get when the water is cold, or keep us from seeing when the backs of their bloomers get stuck up their bum cracks.”

“So it’s a concealing spell too?”

“That’s right,” Ron replied. “Can’t see nipple bumps...or arse cracks...or any other kinds of cracks...rather disappointing, actually...were it not for the fact that it also hides stiffies.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” Ron declared. “A bloke can lie there by the pond with his tent pitched right in front of a girls’s face, and she won’t even notice.”

“Sounds like you speak from experience.”

“Not as far as they know,” Ron said with a laugh.

“As if they would notice your pup tent without the spell?” Harry snarked.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Ha, ha...very funny, mate...do I have to worry about you noticing the size of my tent, then?”

“Apparently not, so long as your mum’s spell is working.”

Ron chuckled. “I should have kept my mouth shut, and let you get all worried about hiding your tiny tent.”

“Is it really a problem?” Harry asked. “I mean, between the swim costumes and that spell, what’s left to perv on?”

“Are you kidding me?” Ron hissed. “Lying there next to them on the sand...knowing that there’s nothing underneath their costumes but bare skin...and standing next to them in the water, hoping that the next wave crashes down and throws them on top of you...”

“Waves?” asked Harry.

“Yeah...waves,” Ron gushed. “I’ve got dibs standing behind Fleur, okay?”

“Erm...okay,” Harry replied skeptically.

Harry's belief that Molly's spell casting had muddled Ron's mind just as much it muddled any kind of naughty views was strengthened when the two teen-aged wizards reached the edge of the orchard and walked out into a small grassy meadow. Fleur, Hermione and Ginny were already at the far end, standing at the edge of what only the most charitable person (or most myopic) might call a "pond." The oversized puddle was barely twenty feet in diameter, and was completely covered with a thick layer of pistachio-green algae.

"Hurry up, Harry," Hermione called out. "We need that bag!"

The-Boy-Who-Lived snorted as he looked down at the canvas tote that he'd offered to carry for Fleur.

"Yeah, come on, Mate!" Ron urged, as he ran towards the other teens.

"Okay, then," said Harry, as he trotted behind his friend.

"Oh, ye of little faith," Hermione chided, once the two boys reached the pond's edge.

"It smells almost as bad as it looks," Harry noted, handing the beach bag over to Fleur.

"Not for too much longer," she promised, as she set the bag on the ground and spread the handles out wide. The first thing she pulled out of the bag was a Muggle bath toy.

"Oh...can I do it this time?" Ron asked.

Fleur smiled as she tossed the yellow rubber ducky towards the red-haired wizard. He caught it, then turned and gave the toy a toss of his own, straight into the middle of the goopy-green slime. Ron then shocked Harry by clearing his throat and breaking out into song.

*"Rubber ducky, you're the one...you make bath time lots of fun..."*

The musical incantation activated both the floating toy and its imbued magic. The yellow duck began to quack and swim around the pond, leaving a wide path of clear, pure water in its wake.

"It'll only take a minute or two for him to completely clean up the water," Hermione informed Harry.

"Who thought that charm up?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged. "Some Yank Muggleborn, I imagine."

While Harry was getting this explanation, Fleur pulled a full-sized beach umbrella out of the bag, Mary Poppins-style.

“Mind your feet, Harry,” Ginny called out, as she helped the French witch push the pointed edge of the pole into the ground. They took a few steps backwards, seeing if the umbrella would stand up on its own. Once this was confirmed, they took a few more steps backwards so that Fleur could shout out a French activation phrase from a safe distance.

The umbrella responded to the magical command by slowly opening up. As the edges of the umbrella pulled away from its wood pole and spread out, pure white beach sand began pouring out. By the time the umbrella was fully opened, the shower of silica was so thick that you couldn't see through it. The sand piled up until it was two-foot thick, then began to spread out laterally. It kept spreading until a beach had formed that was a hundred yards long and fifty feet wide.

“Impressive,” Harry declared.

“Not done yet, Mate,” said Ron, as Fleur pulled two rune-covered wooded stakes out of the bag. The stakes were connected to each other by a thick length of blue twine. Ginny grabbed one stake, while Ron grabbed the other. They ran side-by-side to the edge of the almost-cleared water, and then separated...Ron running parallel to the beach to the left, as Ginny ran parallel to the beach to the right. They kept going until the twine was all played out, then stretched the rope taut so that it crossed over the small watering hole.

Once they planted the stakes into the ground, Fleur walked up to the nearest section of string, placed her wand tip on it, and muttered an incantation. The string began to glow, then dropped down towards the ground (or water), where it appeared to dissolve away. But then the surface of the pond began forming ripples where the string had disappeared. These ripples grew in size until they became small waves, and the waves began to ebb and flow towards the beach. As the waves grew higher they appeared to grow wider...pushing laterally out over the edges of the pond. The waves kept spreading until they formed a shoreline down the entire length of beach.

“Can we get big ones this time?” Ron yelled.

Fleur smiled and nodded her head. She raised her hands out and shouted something in French. The waves responded by growing in amplitude, until there were almost head-high white.

Harry and Hermione were so engrossed in the magic that neither realized that Ron and Ginny had left them unsupervised...at least not until the brother and sister had run back to their sides.

“Damn!” Hermione muttered.

“Language,” Harry teased.

“What's wrong?” asked Ron.

“Erm...nothing,” Hermione quickly replied. “I was just so impressed by what's been created.”

“Unbelievable!” Harry exclaimed, ignoring the two Weasleys.

Fleur smiled as she picked up her beach bag and dragged it back away from the surf zone.

“Zee waves are an illusion out beyond zee edges of zee pond,” she told Harry. “Zee magic will try to keep you within zee real water, but...you should watch where you wish to dive, just zee same.”

Harry nodded in understanding as turned back to face the waves. A slight breeze had come up (or at least seemed to have come up), and brought with it the smell of the sea.

“I’ve never seen this before,” Harry whispered.

“Yeah, it’s brilliant magic, isn’t it?” said Ron, as he shrugged off his robes and dug his toes down into the wet sand.

“No, I mean...I’ve never seen *this* before,” Harry said, as he waved his arm out in front of him.

“Never seen a beach?” asked Ginny.

“Never,” Harry whispered.

“But...we live on an island,” the red-haired witch declared.

Harry nodded. “I also live with my Aunt and Uncle.”

Hermione didn’t need any more of an explanation.

“Can I help you make up for lost time?” she asked, as she unfastened her robes. Harry turned towards Hermione, and gave her a wide smile.

“I’d like that,” he replied, before stripping down to his own modest swim costume.

Hermione grabbed him by the hand, then squealed when he threw her up over his shoulder, and carried her into the water.

They splashed each other, and dunked each other, and “accidentally” allowed the waves to carry them into (and occasionally on top of) each other for the next forty-five minutes. Ginny was rather blatant in her attempts to brush up against Harry, but he was having too much fun to realize why. Hermione knew what was going on, of course, but she really didn’t want to cause a scene that would ruin the moment for Harry. Ron was just as obvious in his attempts to splash and crash Fleur, and the part-Veela was getting frustrated. So the two witches told the other three that they were going to take a break, and walked back towards dry land. Harry offered to go with them, but Hermione insisted that he stay in the water and have fun with Ron and Ginny.

Ginny thought it was an excellent idea, since it gave her the unfettered opportunity to play with

Harry. Ron also thought it was an excellent idea, since it gave him the unfettered opportunity to wade into deeper waters and play with himself.

Fleur had left her beach bag partially-full in the rush to get wet. She was quick to rectify the situation, and pulled two beach chairs, a small table, and a picnic hamper out of the magically enlarged bag. Hermione opened the beach chairs while Fleur opened the hamper and pulled out a bottle of wine and two wine glasses.

“Glass...on a beach?” Hermione asked, while Fleur pulled the cork.

The French witch thumped one of the wine glasses against the side of the bottle.

“Unbreakable charms,” she replied.

“Nice.”

“Almost as nice as zee moment, no?” Fleur asked, as she poured a glass for Hermione.

The Muggleborn chuckled. “So nice that I forgot all about the sunglasses!”

Fleur nodded as she filled her own glass, then set the bottle back inside the wicker basket.

“So we should save zem for anozer day, zen?” she asked.

Hermione let out a girlish giggle as she looked back towards the other three teenagers.

“Now...why would we want to do that?” she asked. “Proper sun protection is just as important for your eyes as your skin, right?”

“Of course,” Fleur laughed, as she sat down on one of the chairs. She took a long sip from her glass, then reached into the outside pocket of her beach bag and retrieved two pairs of dark sunglasses.

“Zere ees still one more pair zere for ‘Arry,” she noted, while Hermione plopped down into the other chair. The younger witch looked at what Fleur had in hand and snorted.

“Can’t wear sunglasses when you crashing about in the surf, right?”

“Zat ees true.”

“So once he gets out...”

“Of course.”

“And it probably won’t be too much longer, right?”

“No need to wait for him...our eyes need zee protection now.”

“Erm...right,” agreed Hermione, while she reached out and took one of the pairs.

Fleur smiled as she opened the other pair up and made to place them on her nose. She hesitated when she noticed that Hermione wasn't doing the same.

“What?” she asked.

Hermione looked at the sunglasses, then looked down towards the water's edge.

“Still doesn't seem fair while he isn't wearing them as well...or when he doesn't even know what he is showing us...”

Fleur nodded. “But eet would be awkward to explain why we were waiting eef Ginny and Ron accompany Harry, no?”

Hermione sighed. “You do have normal pairs to offer them, right?”

Fleur nodded.

“And if you think about it,” Hermione reasoned. “I did give him first chance to look at me posing near-naked in the lingerie catalog...well before I got the chance to look at him doing the same.”

“Zat ees an excellent rationalization!” Fleur declared.

“Good enough, at least,” her roommate replied.

“So zen...we do eet togezer, on zee count of three?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “And give those two even more of a reason to wonder what's up?” she asked. “Just do it, okay? While I take a look inside the picnic hamper?”

“But he eez your boyfriend, no?”

“Fleur...I'm still a little nervous...please?”

“Very well,” the part-Veela replied. Fleur leaned back into her chair, glanced towards the other three teens, and casually put on her sunglasses.

And then she fell silent.

“Fleur?”

“Yes, ‘Ermione?’”

“So?”

“So...I didn’t know zat Molly didn’t care about ze boys’s bums.”

“What?” Hermione hissed, as she whipped her gaze away from the inside of the basket. Harry had his back turned to them as he battled Ginny in a splashing contest.

“Molly doesn’t care about boys’ bums.” Fleur repeated.

“I’d be worried if she did,” Hermione replied, turning back towards the other witch.

“No what I meant waz...since magic ees mostly intent, eet ees obvious zat she doesn’t zink zat we would care about ze boys’s bums.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Just put on zee damn sunglasses, ‘Ermione.’”

“Yes, Mistress Fleur!” the Muggleborn quipped.

Hermione then took a deep breath, and complied with the order. She did so while facing Fleur, so the first thing that she spotted were the black spots that hovered over the French witch’s breasts...black circles just slightly larger than the diameter of her nipples. An inch-wide black vertical stripe rested in between the baps, providing protective cover for her cleavage. Fleur’s chest was otherwise bared to Hermione’s enhanced view point. The Muggleborn let her gaze travel down the bronzed belly, until it fell upon a small black square that sat at the top of crossed bronzed legs.

Hermione could only assume that the black polygon would be more rectangular, had Fleur’s legs been spread.

“You are more interested een my body zen your lover’s?” Fleur teased.

Hermione shook her head, and replied, “Still building up my nerve.”

To prove that point, her gaze then shifted not toward’s Harry’s body, but her own. She had the same black polygons hovering the same otherwise bared bits. The only apparent difference was that her chest-mounted circles were slightly larger in diameter (corresponding with slightly larger underlying bits). There also would have been small tufts of brown bushy hair poking out from each side of her modesty strip, had she not asked Fleur to reapply a more expansive depilatory charm the night previous.

“Will you just look up at ‘Arry before he turns around?” Fleur whined.

Hermione sighed, then raised her gaze towards the shoreline.

“Oh, sweet sticky buns!” she whispered.

“See what I mean?” Fleur asked.

Hermione nodded as she admired an unfettered view of Harry’s backside.

“We still have strips over our behinds, right?” she asked.

“Yes.”

The Muggleborn witch whistled. “Why Molly wouldn’t think we’d appreciate that kind of view....”

“I am not complaining...are you?” Fleur asked.

“You really didn’t know that the charm wouldn’t cover his bum?”

“I have never seen zee spell cast on Bill,” the French witch replied. “He ‘as not been able to join us ‘ere...at least not yet.”

“You think he’s going to come out after work?” Hermione asked, reflexively (but slowly) moving her arm over her chest.

“Eet would be good four ze four of us to ‘ave ze equal footing, no?”

“Erm...yeah. Might need to let Harry in on the secret by...whoa!”

Harry had interrupted the sentence by turning around and waving at the two witches. A big smile formed on his face, and he called out, “How’s it going up there?”

“Erm...just fine, Harry,” Hermione called back. “You’re fine, right?”

“Zere is no doubt!” Fleur whispered.

“Shush!”

Harry nodded, then turned when a large splash clipped the back of his head.

“I’ll join you in a little bit, okay?” he asked, ducking underneath a second splash of water.

“C’mon, Harry...fight back!” Ginny whined.



“Take your time!” Fleur called out.

Harry nodded his head, and flashed another wide smile as he bent down to avoid Ginny’s next attack.

“Oh, Fleur...it’s like he knows that he’s putting on a show for us!” Hermione whispered, as Harry reached back and pulled the fabric of his invisible swim costume away from his skin.

“Eet ees hard to remember zat we are still wearing ze swim costumes, since eet appears ozherwise,” Fleur stated.

“I wouldn’t mind getting more used to remembering,” Hermione replied.

Fleur laughed. “And so... zee costume does not need magical help to hide ‘Arry’s ‘air.”

“At least not above the bulge line,” Hermione agreed, as she lifted her sunglasses up and down to compare the different views now.

“Ze bulge line?” Fleur asked. “Oh, ‘Ermione...zat is terrible.”

“I suppose,” the Muggleborn agreed.

“Although eet ees very thick,” said Fleur.

Hermione leaned forward in her beach chair and stared at Harry’s crotch.

“You mean his pubes are thick, right?” she asked.

“Zose too,” Fleur teased.

“Are your sunglasses charmed the same way as mine?” Hermione asked. “Because I can’t see anything south of the border.”

“Zey are zee same,” Fleur replied. “I was talking about what you showed me zee other day.”

“In the catalog?”

“No, silly...in ‘is shorts...when you pulled off zee bed linens een his bedroom? Don’t you remember zee dragon-sized tent?”

Hermione giggled. “Erm, right...guess I did show him off a bit, didn’t I?”

“More zan just a bit,” Fleur said. She sipped some more wine as she watched Harry, Ron and Ginny cavort in the surf, then added, “I must have Bill teach your boyfriend zee grooming charms.”

“What?” Hermione asked. “Why?”

“Because zey obviously do not teach zem to zee boys at ‘Ogwarts, no?”

“Erm...yeah...girls learn that particular spell from the older girls in the dormitory. But why would boys want to shave down there?”

“For zee same reasons as zee girls, n’est pas? ”

“So that they don’t have bikini lines?”

“No, silly...so zat their lovers don’t have zee curly hairs tickling their noses!”

Hermione snorted, thinking the racy comment worthy of a large swallow from her wine glass.

“You are so naughty, Fleur!” she finally replied.

“Eet ees a problem?” Fleur asked brightly.

“Not for Bill, I bet,” Hermione quipped.

Fleur chuckled she leaned down towards the opened bottle of wine. Hermione’s eyes drifted towards her roommate, and she gasped in surprise.

“What ees eet?” Fleur asked.

Hermione shook her head. “The way that you just lifted your leg,” she replied. “You gave me a clear view of your front and back...at least it would have been clear, without the spell coverings.”

“And so?”

“So there is a gap in the magic!” Hermione hissed. “You’ve got one spot covering your fanny, and a strip that hides the naughtier bits of bum...but they don’t overlap! I can see bare skin in between!”

Fleur shrugged. “Zere is really nothing een between zee two cracks to excite zee boys, ees zere?” she asked. “At least nothing zat would show through zee swim costume?”

“I guess not,” Hermione replied. “It just...surprised me, I guess.”

Fleur smiled as she filled Hermione’s wine glass.

“Do not worry, ‘Ermione...I made sure zat you are smooth down zere, too.”

The Muggleborn witch thought about Fleur's answer, then reflexively crossed her legs.

"Oh, Merlin...I can't believe that I am going to let Harry check your spell work," she groaned.

"Eet will only be eef you give 'im zee sunglasses, no?"

"Yes, I know...but it wouldn't be fair not to now that we've been ogling him for the past fifteen minutes."

Fleur nodded and raised her glass. "Liberte, egalite, et fraternite, n'est pas?"

Hermione nodded, and emptied half of her glass.

"Hey, Hermione! Why don't you jump back in?" Harry called out.

"Let me finish my glass, okay?"

"Okay," the grinning wizard called back.

Fleur shook her head as she watched Ginny let a medium-sized wave accidentally on-purpose throw her up against Harry, forcing him to wrap her in his arms just to keep his balance.

"Maybe you should drink quickly?" she asked. "Before zee waves carry Ginny's spread legs into your boyfriend's face?"

Hermione, who'd watched the same scene play out, shook her head and smiled.

"No worries," she replied. "He's been staring up towards us almost as blatantly as we've been staring at him."

"Zat ees true," Fleur agreed. "Even without seeing zee bare skin in between your front and back!" She giggled, then leaned towards her roommate and added, "I zink zat zee sunglasses will work better on him zan my allure!"

"Stop it!" Hermione protested, pushing Fleur away. Her eyes drifted towards the French witch's chest, and she noted how the magical block that covered her cleavage lengthened as Fleur squeezed her breasts together with the sides of her arms. The Muggleborn witch leaned back into her chair, looked down the length of her body, and tried to recreate the effect with her own cleavage.

"You do not need to do zat, you know," said Fleur.

Hermione dropped her arms and glanced over at Fleur.

"Just relax, and act as eef you don't know zat you are showing your body to 'Arry," the French

witch offered. “You look far more sexy zat way.”

The bushy-haired witch snorted. “Why Fleur, I didn’t know that you noticed.”

“Please, ‘Ermione...eet ees talking just between us girls, no?”

“Of course,” Hermione replied, as she stood up, set her wine glass on the table, and lowered the back of her chair until it sat horizontally.

“Tired of zee views already?” Fleur quipped, as her roommate laid belly-down on the canvas chair, facing away from the shoreline.

Hermione turned her face towards Fleur and shook her head.

“Working on my all-around tan,” she replied. “Can’t forget my bum, can I?”

“I am sure zat ‘Arry won’t,” Fleur teased.

The conversation between the two witches lapsed for a couple of minutes, as if they each needed a breather from all of their sexually-charged banter. Not that they weren’t each thinking sexually-charged thoughts, mind you...Fleur leaned back and spread her legs slightly apart, letting the sun soak through her costume and warm her bits as she ran her fingers up and down the stem of her wine glass and imagined that it was Bill she was caressing. Meanwhile, Hermione spread her own legs apart, fractional inches at a time, and imagined that Harry was wearing the special sunglasses, and looking straight up her dress and through her bloomers from the shoreline. What would he be able to see now? Or now, after she spread her legs a quarter-inch wider?

It was as just as arousing and exciting as it was scandalously worrisome. Would Harry like what he could see through those sunglasses as much as she did while she looked at him?

Hermione recalled each of the times that she felt Harry’s broadcast emotions as he perved on her pictures in the lingerie catalog. She recalled them...and recounted them. And then she relaxed.

“Fleur?”

“Yes, ‘Ermione?”

“How are we going to explain to Harry how the swim costumes and sunglasses work with Ron and Ginny around?”

“Eet would ‘elp if he spoke French, no?”

“Yes, it would,” Hermione agreed. “But short of fluency?”

Fleur nodded as she glanced back towards the other three teen-agers. She shook her head and said,

“Well, I thought zat I might release both types of allure, to send both of zem off to the bushes for a good rub. But zee look as eef zey are close to doing zat on zere own!”

“What?” Hermione hissed, as she flipped over onto her back. Ginny was doing her best to line herself in between Harry and the next big wave, while Ron was standing in chest-deep water, looking up towards Fleur with submerged hands and a goofy grin on his face.

“Well that’s enough of that,” she declared.

“You wish to pack up and head back, zen?” asked Fleur.

Hermione shook her head. “No, I want you to push them over the edge and send them off into the bushes...I’d like some alone time with Harry.”

Fleur smiled as she set her wine glass next to Hermione’s and stood.

“Are you going to stay within zee area of effect as well?” she asked. “I know zat ‘Arry would enjoy zee show.”

Hermione snorted. “Let’s limit it to what we’ve already planned on showing him today.”

Fleur smiled as she nodded towards the back edge of the beach and the nearest row of apple trees.

“Zat should be far enough, I zink,” she stated. “And eef eet ees not, zen...you are close to hiding behind zee tree, no?”

“Oh, get on with it!” Hermione hissed, as she walked towards the back of the beach. When she got to the edge she reached out and touched one of the tree trunks, as if she needed to confirm where the magic ended and reality began. Then she stepped off of the sand and stepped behind the trunk. She leaned her back against it, facing away from the beach, and took a few minutes to rehearse her prepared explanation for Harry. Once she felt mentally prepared (or as prepared as she could be at that moment) she peeked around the tree trunk to see what kind of mischief Fleur was making.

She was confused by what she saw.

Ginny, at least, was following the plan...she was in the water, riding on top of huge floating inflatable dolphin that Fleur must have pulled from her bag. She was likely riding it in more ways than one, given how hard she was rocking against the toy’s dorsal fin. Ron was out of the water, lying face down in the sand just above the water line. He wasn’t rocking against anything...seemed more asleep than aroused. Fleur was standing in waist-deep water, facing away from the shoreline....

And Harry was standing next to the beach chairs, staring straight towards the apple tree that Hermione was hiding behind.

Staring at the tree through a dark pair of sunglasses.

Hermione didn't know what to do...Fleur seemed unconcerned while Harry seemed bemused, with a good-sized smile on his face. She was certain that Harry was wearing the charmed pair of sunglasses...so why wasn't he appreciating the view that Fleur was offering behind him?

Because, Hermione decided, he was waiting to appreciate a different view. Of a different witch. "*Gryffindors forward*," she thought to herself, as she stepped out from behind the tree and stepped onto the white sand beach.

She was too nervous to say anything as she slowly walked towards Harry. He didn't need to say anything as he began to walk towards her...the widening smile, and the licking of lips told Hermione that he liked what he was seeing.

There had been many different times and many different fantasized scenes constructed by Hermione in which Harry and she realized their love for each other and rushed into each other's arms. This was just like that, except for the fact that they appeared mostly naked to each other.

When they were within ten feet, Hermione stopped short, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "Hi, Harry...like the view?"

He nodded, as he took a step closer to her. "Just as much as you and Fleur have, I imagine," he replied, using a saucy tone of voice.

"She explained things, then?"

Harry shook his head. "No, she said that you had a speech all ready."

"Erm, yeah...I did," Hermione replied. "Except that it doesn't seem necessary now."

He shrugged, and took another step towards her.

Hermione snorted, and shook her head. "You already knew...didn't you?"

Harry smiled. "I have a very loyal future liegeman to keep me abreast of these matters...so to speak."

"Ha, ha...very funny," Hermione replied, fidgeting a bit as he took another step closer. "So...you're okay with...things?"

"No, actually...I'm not," Harry replied.

"Why is that?"

Harry took another step closer, then reached up and pulled off his sunglasses.

“Because these are too distracting.”

“Really?” Hermione asked. “I would have thought that they would focus your attention, more than distract.”

“Not when I want to do something other than admire the view.”

“Oh...so what do you want to do, then?”

Harry snorted as he tossed his sunglasses back over his shoulder. Then he reached out, pulled Hermione’s sunglasses away from her face, and tossed them aside as well.

And then he leaned forward. Hermione’s eyes grew wide, and then they closed.

And then they kissed.

He only held his lips against hers for a moment before he pulled back. Hermione’s lips tried to follow as she leaned towards him. She opened her eyes and asked, “Why did you stop?”

Harry smiled. “Wanted to make sure you were okay with it.”

“Huh...so did you figure that out, then?”

The raven-haired wizard chuckled as he reached up and scratched the back of his neck.

“I think so,” he said, flashing a rakish grin.

Hermione took a step forward, pulled his hand away from the back of his neck, then grabbed his neck so that he couldn’t squirm away from the kiss that she planted on *his* lips.

They snogged for a few moments, before breaking the connection for some air.

“Been wanting to do that for a while,” he confessed.

“So have I,” Hermione whispered, as she caressed the side of Harry’s face.

“It’s been so hard,” he hissed.

Hermione looked down and giggled.

“Can’t really tell with Molly’s spell, can I?”

Harry laughed.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah...I think I do.”

They kissed a little while longer, before Harry stepped backwards.

“We better stop,” he said.

“Why?” Hermione asked, looking past his shoulder. “Ron still looks like he’s sleeping, and Ginny’s still grinding against Fleur’s toy.”

That description piqued Harry’s curiosity enough to warrant a glance over his shoulder.

“Hey!” Hermione protested.

“Sorry...the way you said it...”

“You’re forgiven...I guess.”

“Good,” said Harry. “But we still should stop...unless you’re ready to let everyone know that we’re...”

“That we’re what, Harry?”

“Erm...more than just best friends?”

“Would that make us boyfriend and girlfriend, then?” Hermione asked.

Harry chewed on his lip. “If that’s what you want.”

“You mean you have to ask?”

“Well...”

“Think that I’d let just anybody see a picture of me in that harem girl outfit?”

Harry laughed. “Erm, right. So...just to make it official...”

Hermione leaned forward and planted a tender kiss on his lips.

“I would love to be your girlfriend, Harry.”

“Brilliant!” he exclaimed. “But should we...”



“No, probably best that we keep this a secret...at least from anyone other than Bill and Fleur.”

Harry nodded.

“It’s hard enough to find time together as it is now,” he said. He turned back towards the shoreline, and sighed.

“That’s the signal, then,” he said.

“What’s the signal?”

“Fleur is facing this way,” Harry explained. “There was somebody else caught in the allure when she zapped Ginny...someone who was just on the other side of the pond watching us...Fleur smelled her.”

“Smelled her?”

Harry shrugged as they started walking back towards the chairs.

“Guess she was in the area of effect as well.”

“Who was it?”

Harry snorted. “Don’t know for certain, but for the sake of my sanity I am going to assume that it was not Molly.”

“Good idea.”

“Right, so...Fleur was playing lookout, until whomever it is out there managed to...”

“Finish off?”

“Yeah.”

“So she’s likely rubbed off and is back on her watch...but Ginny is still working?”

Harry stopped, looked down at the beach sand and retrieved their sunglasses.

“Just lie to me if Ginny’s looking towards me while she’s...”

“Masturbating?” Hermione teased.

“Well, if you want to get all clinical...”

Hermione laughed. “No worries, Harry...her eyes are still closed.” She looked closer to shore and

asked, “So what happened to Ron?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “He popped in his suit two seconds after Fleur zapped him. Then he got all weak and wobbly, so she suggested that he take a nap.”

“Face down in the sand?”

“She didn’t get that specific...she was thinking he’d use one of the chairs, but he obviously didn’t make it that far.”

“Ah...makes sense,” she replied. “So you didn’t get caught in that area of effect as well, then?”

Harry shrugged. “Almost wish I had...it’s painfully hard right now.”

Hermione giggled. “Would you be scandalized if I said that I was in the same boat?”

Her newly-proclaimed boyfriend smiled and shook his head. “Actually, I thought that might have been the reason why you were hiding behind that tree.”

“Harry!”

“What?”

“Never mind...let me assure you that I was not rubbing off behind the tree.”

“Oh...but you still kind of feel the need to?”

“As if you have to ask,” she replied. Hermione looked out towards the crashing waves and noted, “That water would be deep enough for you, you know.”

“For you, too,” Harry replied. “Unless you wanted to wait your turn to ride that toy?”

Hermione laughed.

“Let’s head back, before I have an accident.”

Harry arched an eyebrow.

“Not that kind of accident, you perv,” she said. “I have to use the loo.”

“Ah,” said Harry. “Ron seemed to think that the pond was suitable for that kind of thing.”

“Well he would...so is that why Fleur has the little yellow ducky swimming in tight circles around her?”

“I imagine so.”

“Hello, ‘Ermione...and ‘Arry,” Fleur called out. She plucked the rubber duck out of the water, waded onto shore, and asked, “Eet ees time to go?”

Harry nodded. “Hermione has to relieve herself.”

“Stop it, Harry!”

“What?” he protested. “Didn’t you just tell me that?”

“Yes, but that could have been taken another way.”

“Ah, I see,” Harry replied. “But didn’t you also just admit that the alternative interpretation was equally valid?”

“Harry!”

Fleur laughed as began packing her beach bag.

“Eet ees useless to deny zat to one wiz zee Veela’s nose, ‘Ermione,” she noted.

“Doesn’t mean that either of you have to announce it to the world,” Hermione pouted.

Harry and Fleur each had several snarky responses to this comment on the tips of their tongues. But they decided not to voice those witty comebacks, since it might have led to a lengthy discussion that could have delayed their departure. And they each were eager to have Molly’s spell undone, since Hermione wasn’t the only one who had developed compelling needs for relief.

*canoncansodoff*  
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# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 6: Hermione Hearts Harry

Molly's hovering grew even more insistent after Harry's eventful (and eye-popping) first trip to the beach. Hermione and her new boyfriend didn't want to give the Weasley matriarch any more reasons to develop fully warranted concerns, so they did everything that night short of snogging Ron and Ginny (respectively) to keep her off-trail. This included limiting interactions with their familiars, since they had now become even better emotional transmitters.

Crookshanks and Hedwig would have been more upset about these intentional snubs, had they not found outlets to channel their own urges in species-appropriate ways.

When Bill arrived home from work he quickly guessed far more about the situation than his mother actually knew. He wanted details, but realized that Fleur and he were probably under just as much scrutiny. So he bided his time, and mentioned more than once during dinner that both Fleur and he had work at Gringotts the following day (even though it was a Saturday). The-Boy-Who-Lived took the message to heart, and sat down in his room that night to write his first official love letter.

**oo00O00oo**

Harry was woken the next morning by a shake of his shoulder, rather than by a nip at his ear.

"Okay, Sleepyhead...time to rise and shine!"

The teen-aged wizard groaned as he slowly opened his eyes and looked up at his future liegeman, dressed in his Gringotts work robes.

"Didn't you *hear* the call to breakfast?" the red-haired curse-breaker asked, pointing first at his own ear and then towards the hallway.

Harry's lips formed into a lazy smirk as he nodded in understanding. He glanced towards the open door, and (once he saw that there was no one else watching) bounced the back of his head against the pillow.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he whined, in time with the bouncing.

Bill grinned, and stepped sideways so that his body blocked the view of Harry's head from the opened doorway. Once he did that, the prone wizard rolled over onto his side and pulled his pillow over his head.

"Ten more minutes?" he mumbled.

Bill spotted the unaddressed envelope that had been hiding under Harry's pillow and nodded. He expanded a button on front of his robes with a touch of his wand and quickly slipped the letter inside.

"Okay, but you should know that Fleur and I are heading out the floo now, and that Ron's already sitting at the table," the curse-breaker joked, as he reduced the button box back down to size.

Harry pulled the pillow away and sat up. He rolled his eyes when he spotted the older wizard applying wet (but silent) kisses to the button cap.

"Tell your mum that I'll be down in five," he muttered, throwing his legs over the side of the bed. Bill was thrown off-balance by a well-placed elbow to the ribs as Harry brushed by on the way to the bathroom.

**oo00O00oo**

Harry was surprised to see that there was still plenty of food left on the kitchen table when he got downstairs. He was also surprised to see that Arthur was at that table, dressed in his work robes.

"Have to go to the Ministry today, Mr. Weasley?" he asked, taking a seat at the table.

Arthur shrugged as he glanced up from the morning newspaper.

"I am supposed to have the weekend off," he replied. "But I've been out in the field all week, and haven't had any time to respond to correspondence or review the incident reports."

Molly let a "harrumph!" escape from her lips.

"You should have subordinates doing that now that you have staff working for you," she suggested.

"They've been just as busy as I have, Mollywobbles," Arthur replied. "And as long as I'm going to be out making that delivery...."

Ron nudged Harry in the ribs with an elbow to get his attention.

"Dad's taking our first batch of potions to Fred and George's shop," he announced. "There's four galleons, seven sickles and three knuts to be split amongst us."

"Bill will be depositing those four galleons, seven sickles and three knuts into the family vault," Molly corrected. "No sense having those coins burning holes in pockets when they can't be spent."

"But Mum..."

"None of that, young man," Molly snapped. She turned to Harry and said, "We'll keep your share safe as well, Dear...no reason for William to scurry around to different vaults every time there's a deposit to be made."

Arthur looked up from the paper. "Are we holding Hermione's share as well?"

"Of course, Dear," Molly replied. "Where else could she keep it?"

Harry bit down hard on a piece of toast to keep from audibly reacting to the presumption. He reminded himself to ask Hermione if she was aware of how helpful Molly was being with their portion of the money earned from brewing potions. Not that Hermione and he were all that much concerned after the discussion that he'd had with George during his bedroom redecorating.

As a silent partner in the Twins's business, Harry stood to receive roughly three times the amount that Molly and Ron were crowing over as his share of the profits earned when those potions were sold. He had also, as a Director in the company, signed off on the idea of hiring Hermione as an ad hoc consultant. Her first "paycheck" for that work would be disbursed within the next week, in the form of a direct Gringotts transfer into a new vault that Bill was secretly helping Hermione establish.

It was raining that morning, but not raining hard enough for Molly to keep Ron from dragging Harry outside for more ground-level Quidditch practice after breakfast had ended and Arthur left for work. The raven-haired teen didn't resist too much...Hermione was happily immersed in a book, while Ginny was upstairs in her room whispering procreative encouragements into the fluffy little ears of her Pygmy Puffs.

**oo00O00oo**

Deep within the back rooms of Gringotts, a goblin account manager was skiving off. Now, this was usually a very risky thing to do, given the expectations of senior management and their willingness to enforce a rather bloody corporate disciplinary policy. But this one particular account manager thought that he had just earned a "get out of shite free" card, given the amount of money that he'd just made for the bank.

The account manager was displaying this level of cavalier confidence by sitting alone in his office, with his vest unbuttoned and his feet up. A mug of ten-year old lichenale was in his hand, and the latest issue of the goblin equivalent of "Jugs" was balanced on his lap.

There was a scratch on the door. He ignored it.

"Dragnut!" a voice called from the other side of the door. "It's me! I know that you're in there!"

The goblin looked up from his magazine and sighed. There were times when it sucked having your wife's nephew working in the same department. Those times invariably coincided with normal bank hours.

"Hang a nail, Loafchuck!" he called back.

"But it's important!"

Dragnut sighed as he reluctantly slipped his feet off the desk and buried the goblin porn under a stack of parchment.

"Come in, then," he whined, pasting a fake smile on his face as his nephew walked through the

door.

"Loafchuck, it's great to see you...come share a drink with me, and I'll tell you my latest galleon-gobbling tale!"

The younger goblin entered Dragnut's office with a worried expression on his face.

"What did you do this time, Uncle?" he hissed. "Steelebridge just sent me to fetch you...and he was furious!"

"Really?" the older goblin asked. "He must be sharpening for somebody else's balls...all that *I* have done *this time* is earn the bank a dozen carts worth of coin!"

"Are you sure?" the nervous message runner asked. "Because he was really, really angry...and yours was one of the two names that kept flying from his lips alongside the froth and spittle."

Dragnut sucked in a short breath and held it for a moment. This didn't sound very good.

"So...what was the other name?"

"Knifensnap."

"*Shite!*" Dragnut thought. Trying to maintain a calm facade, he asked his nephew, "So... Loafchuck...just how angry was Steelebridge?"

The other goblin shrugged. "Maybe I am overreacting?"

"You think?" Dragnut snarked. "That's something that only happens every...what...every ten minutes or so?"

The young goblin slumped his shoulders and slinked into a seat in front of his uncle's desk. "Yeah, yeah, I'm a chronic worry-wart."

The older goblin sighed. "So was Steelebridge angry, or not angry?"

"Oh, he was angry, alright," said Loafchuck. "But it's not like it was the most important thing on his mind."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if it was, then I would have been the first runner dispatched from his office, rather than the second."

Dragnut arched an eyebrow.

"So...do you know where the first runner was sent?"



Loafchuck nodded. "The first runner was sent to the commissary."

"Ah...so maybe he wants to share a working lunch with me?"

The younger goblin shrugged. "If that's the case, then I hope you like pickled smugroot."

Dragnut sucked in a deep breath.

"What did you just say?"

"I asked if you liked pickled smugroot, because that first runner was ordered to bring a whole plate of the stuff back to Steelebridge's office."

"I see," the older goblin replied. "Are you sure about that...he ordered-out for *pickled* smugroot?"

The younger goblin nodded.

"Bat scat!" Dragnut hissed, as he bolted up from his desk and began to pace back and forth. A few seconds later he stopped, reached for the mug that he'd left on his desk, and chugged it. Then he walked over to the credenza, refilled the mug from a large decanter...and then chugged the decanter.

"That bad, Uncle?" the young goblin asked nervously.

Dragnut glanced towards his nephew while the decanter was still at his lips, which caused him to dribble a fair amount over his chin and shirt. The goblin snorted, slammed the decanter back onto the credenza, then cursed his nephew for making him waste perfectly-good intoxicant.

"Are you sure that you want to go there like that?" Loafchuck asked nervously, as his uncle wiped his face with the sleeve of his ale-stained shirt.

Dragnut glared at him for a second, then glanced down at the front of his shirt, and nodded.

"You are a persistent worry-wart," he stated, while he slipped off his silk vest and draped it against his desk chair. "But sometimes that's what's needed to keep your head," he added. Buttons scattered into the air as Dragnut suddenly and violently ripped open the front of his dress shirt.

"Erm...thank you, Uncle."

The now bare-chested goblin shrugged as he walked back behind his desk, reached down to the lowermost drawer, and pulled a crisply-folded dress shirt from the top of a pile that he kept for just this kind of contingency.

"Don't you think you should hurry?" Loafchuck asked.

Dragnut glanced over at the young goblin and shook his head.

"Someday you'll learn how this place is run," he muttered, as he slipped the shirt on and began to button it. "I don't want to finger scratch Steelebridge's door until he's had a chance to eat that take-away."

"But doesn't delaying only make things worse if he's angry?"

Dragnut shook his head, and patted his nephew on the shoulder. He slipped his vest back on and began to slowly button it up.

"Not in this case, son...not in this case."

The older goblin checked his appearance in the reflection on the door glass. He smoothed down his hair, checked his teeth, then brushed a piece of lint off his vest. Grimly satisfied, he opened the door.

"Go on, then," Dragnut encouraged, swinging a hand out towards the hallway. "Inform Steelebridge's secretary that you've completed your task, and that I'll be down there as soon as practicable."

The young goblin look as if he might break out into tears as he rushed up to his uncle and wrapped his arms around him. Dragnut smiled, and tried to be reassuring.

"Don't worry, Loafchuck," he said, patting the younger goblin on the back. "You were right. If Steelebridge was *really* angry, he would have only sent one runner, rather than two."

"If you say so," the youngster said. "Good bye, Uncle," he added, as he dashed out the door.

Dragnut glanced down at his watch and nodded. He watched his nephew disappear down a hallway, then turned and began to walk in the opposite direction...towards the Goblin Resources Department. A short visit there would add ten minutes to his trip, and might make his boss even angrier. That said, there were good reasons for him to double-check that his next-of-kin contact information was accurate, and that his employer-provided life insurance and long-term disability plans were up to date.

Pickled smugroot wasn't a goblin delicacy...it was goblin medicine. And as far as Dragnut knew, there was only one medical condition for which pickled smugroot was prescribed....

Bloodlust.

The very-worried goblin cringed as he thought about the blood-stained edges on the double-bladed axes that hung behind his superior's desk. Steelebridge's first day at the bank came right after his last day in the army. He'd spent twenty-five years in the barracks, and had brought all of that experience (and all of his bloodied axes) with him to Gringotts.

Dragnut's walking pace became even more deliberate. He wanted to give his boss every opportunity to digest that pickled smugroot.

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Harry tossed one last Quaffle towards the hoops, then told Ron that he was going to rest his tired arm. The red-haired wizard would have protested more vigorously if the rain hadn't been picking up.

When the two boys went inside they were surprised to hear Fleur's voice drifting into the kitchen from the sitting room.

"Why is she back so early?" Ron asked.

Molly didn't think that an answer required her to turn away from her stove.

"Fleur was sent home," she explained.

Ginny, who was playing with her pets at the table, was all too happy to gleefully elaborate.

"Apparently, one of the bank customers complained to her boss," she said. "Claimed that he couldn't understand her French accented-English, and said that he should not have to tolerate incompetent foreigners."

"What a lousy git!" Harry declared.

Ginny shrugged. "It's not his fault that Phlegm can't speak proper English."

"So how good is your proper French, Ginny?" Harry snarked.

The red-haired teen snorted, and loudly declared, "Doesn't matter, since I am here *in England* !"

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed, as she entered the kitchen.

"What?" she shot back.

Fleur pushed past Hermione and entered the kitchen just long enough to cross over to the stairwell and disappear silently up the steps.

Hermione let out a deep sigh. "We could hear everything you just said in the other room!" she hissed.

The youngest Weasley shrugged. "So? Did I get the story wrong?"

"No," Hermione replied. "But you could have been more sympathetic, or kept your voice down."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "So are we going to have to walk on zee eggshells around zee 'ouse?"

The Muggleborn witch shook her head in disgust.

"Hermione," said Molly, nodding towards stove-top cauldron. "It's almost time for you to add the

valerian root."

"Why don't you let me do that, Mrs. Weasley," Harry volunteered. "That way Hermione could go upstairs and talk with Fleur?"

"Mollycoddling," Molly muttered to herself.

"But then you wouldn't have to worry about eggshells," Hermione reasoned. "And maybe...maybe I could use the time to work with Fleur on her accent?"

Molly snorted.

"So when are you going to find the time to prepare all of the potions that you begged me to allow you to brew?" Molly asked.

"I can do it," said Harry.

"Then who is going to play Quidditch with me?" Ron whined.

Harry didn't like the way that either Fleur or Hermione were being treated. Seeing how fruitless it would be to argue based on reason or compassion, he decided to tap into some Slytherin cunning.

"Well, Ron, it seems like Fleur will have lots of time to play Quidditch, if Gringotts keeps sending her home because of her accent," he stated. Then he turned to Molly and added, "And if she's not going to be working part-time at Gringotts then she'll have plenty of time to help us brew...guess we'll be seeing a lot more of her here in the kitchen, huh?"

Ron kind of liked this idea. Ginny...less so.

"Oh, that would be a disaster," she hissed.

"Well it sounds like that is how it's going to be, unless her English improves," Hermione stated, following Harry's lead.

"She could always go home to France?" Ginny suggested.

Harry arched an eyebrow. "That is a possibility," he said slowly, as if he were considering the idea. He then shrugged and added, "So long as there is no *other* reason for her to live at the Burrow this Summer?"

Molly shook her head. "Fleur still has her guard responsibilities," she reluctantly admitted. "She's here for the entire summer."

"Well that's that, then," Harry stated. "Look at the bright side, Ginny...this will mean a lot more time at the beach with Fleur."

Ron really liked this idea now. Molly, much less so. She sighed, and turned towards Hermione.

"Do you really think that you could help her learn proper English?"

Hermione shrugged and nodded her head. "Maybe...I don't know anything about teaching English as a Second Language, but...she knows the vocabulary. Seems like it's mostly the accent that needs work...not dropping the "h" when it starts a word, or turning her 'th 's' into 'z 's'."

Molly nodded towards the stairs. "Off you go, then. But there'll not be any skiving...I expect to see some improvements in short order."

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione replied dutifully. She barely managed to keep a straight face as she walked up the stairs.

**oo00O00oo**

"Yes?" the retired warrior barked, in response to the finger-scratched door.

His secretary opened that door just wide enough to pop her head through.

"Dragnut is here to see you, Sir."

"Send him in!"

"Yes, Sir," the secretary replied.

Dragnut had his gaze focused towards his feet as he entered his superior's office. He walked slowly up towards Steelebridge's massive desk, careful to appear contrite, and to not speak until spoken too.

"Sit down, Dragnut, sit down."

The nervous goblin was caught off-guard by the friendly tone of voice. He looked up a bit...not enough to risk making eye-contact, but enough to notice a large plate on that large desk, empty save for a bit of pickle juice.

"You asked so see me, Sir?" Dragnut asked, as he carefully shifted into one of the two chairs that faced the desk.

"Why yes...yes I did," the older goblin replied. "Relax, son...I'm not going to bite your head off."

Dragnut nodded. His boss's assurances weren't all that comforting, though, since Steelebridge had a well-earned battlefield reputation for lopping off heads with his axes, rather than biting them off with his teeth.

"Would you like a drink?"

"No, Sir."

"Well, then...why don't you sit back and tell me about your day?" the older goblin suggested. "I hear that it has been quite profitable so far."

Dragnut was surprised enough by the question to look up at his boss's scarred face. Steelebridge was showing him a pointy-toothed grin.

Maybe his wizard-brained nephew had got it all wrong?

"Erm...certainly, Sir," Dragnut replied. "Well, as you know, Billy Beck was here this morning to negotiate several different contracts on behalf of the North American wizard-run bank that he works for."

"Yes, I understand that these were very important...and potentially very profitable contracts. Profitable for Gringotts, that is."

"Yes, Sir. As the account manager, I have been working closely with all of the different departments to make sure that all of that favorable contract language was in place, and that everything was ready for Beck's visit this morning."

"You've been the manager of this account for, what...three years?" Steelebridge asked.

"Yes, Sir."

"And you've worked with this wizard before?"

"Yes, Sir...we've met several times, both here in London and in Salem."

"So you've gotten to know Billy Beck pretty well, then, I take it?"

"Well...I guess as well as any of us can actually know a wizard," said Dragnut confidently. "That's one of the main responsibilities of an account manager, after all."

"Yes, it is," Steelebridge agreed. The senior manager then picked up a small folder from his desktop.

"I just reread the internal client profile that you worked up on this wizard," he stated. "Very detailed work, Dragnut...very detailed, and very impressive."

"Thank you, Sir."

The older goblin turned to a dog-eared page and read out loud.

"At the present time, the wizard Billy Beck has a wife, two children, and three mistresses. He considers himself to be a so-called 'ladies man,' and flirts shamelessly with every pretty witch that catches his eye. He is therefore easily distracted and readily manipulated. These serious character flaws have been exploited to Gringotts's gain during previous transactions."

Steelebridge glanced away from the report.

"You wrote that, correct?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And you have acted on this assessment during Beck's latest visit?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Tell me more."

Dragnut nodded. "Well, Sir...I was going to wait until Monday to submit my expense report, but...but when I do, you'll no doubt notice a receipt from Madame Maxine's."

"The brothel?"

"Yes, Sir," Dragnut replied. "Very discreet and very professional."

"So to speak?"

Dragnut chuckled, and nodded at his boss's joke. Things were going far, far better than he had feared.

"I've set this sort of thing up before," the account manager explained. "Two of Madame Maxine's employees were dispatched to the Leaky Cauldron last night, where Beck was staying. They spotted him in the bar, and allowed themselves to be beguiled by his charm."

"Allowed themselves to be charmed out of their knickers?"

"Yes, Sir," Dragnut replied. "The contrivance is that the whole time they pretend that they aren't professionals, and allow Beck to believe that he successfully seduced his way into a three-way."

"So he doesn't even know that Gringotts is paying dearly for these services?"

"No, Sir."

"And this is advantageous, how?"

"It always puts Beck in a very agreeable mood," Dragnut explained. "Makes him feel confident, and virile, and eager to come to London to do business with us as often as possible."

Steelebridge rolled his eyes. "Wizards, always thinking with their other heads."

Dragnut grinned. "Perhaps years from now he might realize that it is more than just coincidence that he falls into bed with two witches every time he does business with us...not that I imagine that he'd actually be all that upset if he realized that he'd been fooled."

Steelebridge nodded.

"I understand that you took some initiative and expanded your client management program this morning?" he asked.

Had Dragnut's mind not drifted back towards profits and pictures of bare-naked goblin jugs he might have noticed the slight hardening in his boss's tone of voice.

"Yes, Sir," he replied, pride dripping in his voice. "We took advantage of a new employee."

"That you did, Dragnut...that you did," Steelebridge muttered under his breath.

"Go on, then," he said in a louder-volumed voice.

"Well, Sir...there's this part-Veela, part-human witch working at the new reception desk. For a non-goblin, she is admittedly very pretty... I've seen more than one wizard swoon in her presence." Dragnut chuckled, then added, "She might even be a more effective way of keeping the wizards standing in those long queues than our hobgoblins and their halberds!"

"What's her name?"

"Erm...Flower, I think. Of maybe Floor...Floor de la Bore?" the account manager asked. "Doesn't matter, I guess. So...I called in a favor from her boss Knifesnap, and got him to reassign her to me for the day."

"What did you then assign her to do?"

Dragnut shrugged. "I tasked her with looking pretty...to give Beck's wandering eye a reason to wander. I also told her to act as his hostess during his visit. Make sure that he had coffee or tea, and escort him from one department to the next...nothing strenuous."

"*Nothing* strenuous?" Steelebridge asked.

Warning bells rang inside Dragnut's head...there was no mistaking the sharp edge to *that* question.

"Nothing more strenuous than holding a pot of coffee," he said rather meekly.

Steelebridge clamped down on the medicated urge to reach for his axes.

"It is standard Gringotts policy for an account manager to escort their high-end clients from department to department as they conduct their business...is it not?"

"Yes, Sir, and I've done that before, but...well...I just thought that if the Veela walked him around, then his eyes would wander over her, instead of over the fine print in each of those contracts. He does prefer yellow-haired witches, after all."

Steelebridge ground his teeth.



"So...you met your client at the door, introduced him to Miss Delacour, then disappeared?"

"Erm..no, Sir. I was scheduled to meet with him at the end, but...he had to cut his visit short."

"Yes...I understand that he left before he signed the last contract."

"Erm, yes, Sir. Although...that is not exactly bad news."

"How is that?"

"Because that last one involved the least amount of profit to Gringotts, Sir," Dragnut explained. "I always like to get the gouging done early. Clients tend to remember the last contracts they sign more than the first, so if they remember the one that they think they made a profit on, then...they leave happy, and we stay profitable."

Steelebridge glared across his desk, causing the younger goblin to shrink down into his chair.

"Tell me, Dragnut...was your client happy when he left the bank this morning?"

Dragnut winced, now realizing why his boss might be a little upset.

"Well, Sir...I'm understand that Beck got a little frustrated with his Veela hostess. She is very pretty, but she is also French, and he found it difficult to understand her accent."

"And how did you handle that situation?"

"Erm, well, Sir....to be honest, the Veela's boss dealt with that issue before I was made aware of it. I understand that he dismissed her for the day, and told her not to come back until her English had improved."

"Is that what you understand?" Steelebridge asked. "Or is that what you know?"

Dragnut cowered. "That is what her supervisor Knifensnap told me happened, and how he said he defused the situation."

Steelebridge snorted.

"So you didn't ask the young woman for her side of the story?"

"She was gone before I would have had a chance to do that, Sir," Dragnut replied.

"Well if you had, you might have learned that in between the signing of the sixth and seventh contracts that Beck fondled her buttocks, pushed her into an empty office, and tried to lift up her robes."

"That's what she says happened?"

Steelebridge nodded. "Yes. Fortunately, Miss Delacour was able to follow the policies in her Gringotts Employee Handbook to resolve the situation."

"How did she do that?"

"She kneed him in the balls."

"Oh."

Steelebridge nodded. "And that was when Beck got angry, ran to the young woman's boss, and started to complain about her accent."

"Oh, well...I didn't hear anything about that...assuming that it's true," Dragnut said. "And since it was her superior who managed the situation, and since he was the one to decide on any disciplinary actions..."

"Yes, yes...it is always better when your direct supervisor deals with disciplinary situations, isn't it?"

Not knowing what to say to that, Dragnut said nothing.

Steelebridge glanced up at his axes, then reluctantly returned his gaze to his subordinate.

"Remind me, Dragnut...who is your direct supervisor?"

"Erm...you are, Sir."

The retired soldier slammed his fist against the desk and bellowed. "Yes, I am, you little piece of flobberworm shite...so now your arse is mine!"

The outcome of this outburst was remarkably similar to a successfully cast *Petrificus Totalus* spell...at least when that spell is combined with a bladder relaxing jinx.

"Mossbite!" Steelebridge shouted.

The goblin's secretary nervously popped her head inside the door.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Send in Chokebar and Toetwist."

"Yes, Sir."

A moment later, two grey-haired goblins strode into the room. Rather than take seats in front of the desk, they each walked around that desk and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Steelebridge.

"Dragnut, I assume that you know Chokebar...senior account manager for the Potter and Black

estates?"

The cowering (and wet) goblin winced.

"You probably haven't met Toetwist, before," said Steelebridge.

Dragnut looked at the other goblin, who looked every inch the retired warrior that Steelebridge was, and shook his head.

"Let me make introductions, then. Dragnut, this is Toetwist. He is the bank's Senior Vice-President in Charge of Curse Breaking and Tomb Raiding."

Steelebridge then gestured across the desk and said, "Toetwist, this is Dragnut...the unfortunate son of a bitch who, I'm sorry to say, might have just lost you the services of Bill Weasley."

Toetwist's eyes narrowed as he growled at the account manager.

"Have you ever met Bill Weasley, Dragnut?" asked Steelebridge.

The self-soiled goblin shook his head.

"He's one of the wizards that works for us... happens to be one of the very best curse-breakers working in Toetwist's department. He also just happens to be engaged to the Fleur Delacour, the French witch that you tasked with distracting Billy Beck."

Dragnut swallowed hard (and audibly).

Steelebridge shook his head. "Toetwist, how much will it cost you to replace Weasley if he decides he no longer wishes to work for the bank that just dismissed his fiancée?"

The other goblin snorted. "He's damn near irreplaceable. Don't know how much we'd have to pay someone to do his job...that assumes that someone like that even exists!"

"But if you had to put a galleon amount on his value?"

Toetwist growled. "Let's just say that in the last fiscal year, Bill Weasley led expeditions that yielded bank profits of over four hundred and fifty thousand galleons."

Steelebridge nodded. He turned towards Dragnut and asked, "And how much profit did the Beck account clear over the same period of time?"

The account manager let out a very small yelp, then replied (with only slightly louder volume). "Seventy-four thousand galleons and change, Sir."

His boss snorted derisively. "Right, then...moving on...maybe you are wondering why I asked your colleague to join us today?"

Dragnut nodded.

His boss turned towards Chokebar, and yielded him the floor with a gesture. The grey-haired goblin nodded, and turned angrily to Dragnut.

"Did you see the internal departmental memo that I wrote earlier this summer, announcing that with the execution of the late Lord Black's will that his estate would now be run in conjunction with the Potter account?"

Dragnut squeaked out a "yes."

"Do you remember why that is the case?"

"Because...he left his title and the bulk of the estate to his godson, the Potter scion?"

Chokebar snorted as he turned to Steelebridge and said, "Well, he's got a good memory, at least... might be worth salvaging."

Dragnut didn't care for that last assessment.

"You are correct about the joining of the two estates," Chokebar told him. "We anticipate that they will, in fact, become melded into one account in two weeks time, when the Heir Imminent to both the Potter and Black lordships reaches his sixteenth birthday."

Dragnut nodded his head.

"So maybe you read that memo as well?" asked Chokebar. "Well, then...have you read the guest list for the future Lord Potter-Black's birthday party?"

Dragnut shook his head.

"Want to guess who is going to be on that list?"

Dragnut squeaked, "Erm...Bill Weasley and his fiancée?"

Steelebridge couldn't help laughing.

"Well, he has both a good memory and makes good guesses!" he declared. "Things are looking up for you, Dragnut."

Chokebar agreed. "I haven't seen that guest list either, but it is reasonable to assume that those two will be attending...*since Harry Potter and they are presently sleeping under the same roof!*"

Steelebridge played tag-team, and added, "Harry Potter has spent a portion of each Summer with Bill Weasley's parents for several years now, and his best male friend is Bill's younger brother."

Toetwist wanted to pile on, so he said, "And I have taken my best curse-breaker out of the field,

and asked him to spend an hour or so each day meeting with Chokebar." The tomb raiding vice-president then asked, "Do you know why I did this?"

Dragnut shook his head.

"Because Bill Weasley is presently the only point of contact that Gringotts has with Harry Potter, you arse!" Chokebar shouted.

Steelebridge growled. "If Bill Weasley leaves Gringotts, we lose that only point of contact. And if Bill Weasley tells Harry Potter why he left...how much did we clear last year on those two accounts?"

"One point three million galleons," Chokebar replied.

Dragnut's boss turned away in disgust and spat onto the floor.

"So, Dragnut," asked Toetwist. "What is going to be Gringotts net profit if we balance what we gained from your piddling efforts today against the potential loss of my best curse-breaker and Chokebar's biggest accounts?"

The very junior account manager bowed his head down in shame.

"Yes, Sir. I'm very sorry, Sir."

Steelebridge's eyes widened. He snatched the pickle-juiced stained plate and smashed it to pieces against his desk.

"You should be fucking sorry, you lizard-fucking shite!"

Dragnut's boss regained just enough control over his residual bloodlust to reach down and brush pottery shards off of a piece of parchment. He then pushed parchment across his desk.

"This is what is going to happen," he declared icily. "You are going to sign this very sincere letter of apology, which will immediately be sent to Miss Delacour. Then you are going to be marched down to meet with Bill Weasley, where you will explain exactly what you did to his fiancée. And then, once we've scraped what is left of you off of the floor, you'll immediately begin your new assignment."

Dragnut nodded meekly, raising not a word in protest when it was strongly suggested that he demonstrate his remorse by signing the letter of apology in his blood. Once this was done Toetwist grabbed the former account manager by the scruff of his neck, and began to frogmarch him out of the office.

"Hold on," Steelebridge requested.

Toetwist roughly spun Dragnut around.

"There should be a shovel leaning on the wall just outside my office," he noted. "Take it...unless you would rather spend the next six months mucking out the dragon pens by hand?"

Dragnut whimpered, then gathered just enough courage to ask a question that had been lingering in the back of his mind.

"But...but I wasn't the one that dismissed her, Sir!" he weakly protested. "Knifesnap was her supervisor...so what's happening to him?"

Steelebridge grinned. "Oh, don't worry, Dragnut...I'm sure that you will see Knifesnap in two or three days."

"I will?" he asked.

Toetwist let out a rough laugh as he dragged Dragnut (and his new shovel) down the hall.

"Seeing him in three days sounds about right," he told the former account manager. "Usually takes the bastards that long to work their way through the dragon's digestive tract."

**oo00O00oo**

Dragnut's apology was attached to a separate letter of apology written by Steelebridge. There was a Gringotts mail owl waiting to deliver those letters to Fleur when she walked into the bedroom that she shared with Hermione. The French witch read the apologies while Hermione was downstairs negotiating with Molly, finishing them just before the Muggleborn witch joined her upstairs.

Hermione arched an eyebrow when she entered the bedroom and found Fleur sitting on her bed, looking closely at a Muggle charge card.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Eet ees a charge card."

"Yes, I know that, but..."

"Eet ees compensation from Gringotts," Fleur stated, as she gestured towards the two letters that sat on the duvet. "Zey wish me to return to work on Tuesday."

"That's great, Fleur...but what's that got to do with a Muggle charge card?"

Fleur smiled. "One of zee senior goblins fixed it to the bottom of his letter of apology, saying zat when 'is wife is unhappy zat she always feels better after she goes shopping."

"But why not something you could spend in Diagon Alley?"

Fleur snorted. "The goblin said zat after being treated zat way by a wizard that he thought I might

rather do my shopping in the Muggle world."

Hermione snorted. "So...*now* they have regrets about the situation?"

Fleur couldn't help but giggle.

"I am certain zat my old boss ees now regretting 'is situation," she replied.

The Muggleborn's facial expression clearly conveyed her confusion. Fleur helped clear that confusion up by sharing the two letters, and by providing a more complete explanation than what she'd been able to give downstairs.

Hermione had been furious when she heard the whole story, and was still in the mood to commiserate and castigate with righteous indignation (in spite of the apologies and disciplinary actions). But Fleur wanted to talk more about shopping than sexual harassment, and was anxious to calm Hermione down. She did this by handing her roommate a third letter...a letter that had arrived at the Burrow not on the leg of an owl, but inside the hidden compartment of a button.

It was Harry's love letter. And, needless to say, it abruptly shifted Hermione entire focus and attitude.

The prose was a little mushy, and a little flowery, and a little apologetic (Harry explaining that he had no real role model or examples to base this type of letter on). But it was also sweet, and endearing, and surprisingly tender.

Hermione was enthralled...and desperate in her hope that her letter to Harry had the same effect on him.

Fleur had no reservations about playfully teasing her roommate over her reaction to this love letter. Hermione tried to put a stop to it by insisting that they take some time to actually work on Fleur's accent (even if it was no longer an issue at the bank). That worked for a little while.

The French witch didn't have any problem correctly pronouncing individual words in English...it was when she had to navigate multiple problem words, and multiple problematic sounds, where she would begin to stumble. Hermione decided that it might help if they made a game of it, taking alternating turns giving voice to made-up sentences. One would start by creating a short sentence that contained a single problem word. The other witch would respond by saying a sentence with two of those words...and then there would be three problem words in a sentence, and then four, and so on, until somebody messed up and miscounted. The only other rule was that each new sentence had to use at least one of the words from the previous sentence.

This was where Fleur found an opportunity to incorporate some good-natured teasing into Hermione's lesson's plans...

"You start this time," said Hermione.

Fleur nodded. "*Harry* ."

Her roommate sighed. "You always start with that one."

Fleur shrugged.

"Fine," said Hermione. "*Harry attends Hogwarts .*"

"*Hermione hearts Harry !*"

"Oh...right, then. "Does *the house* salad *have* artichoke *hearts* ?"

"Zat's only three!"

"No...that includes four," Hermione claimed. "Three letters that begin with the letter 'h', and *the* rather than *zee* ."

Fleur sighed.

"Well, then...does *Hermione* want to *hold Harry's huge hosepipe* ?"

"No, Fleur, *Harry's hosepipe* is kept *in his* pants, rather than *in the* shed."

The French witch counted on her fingers.

"Ah hah! Zat has seven instead of six! I win!"

Hermione restated the sentence in her head, then sighed.

"Why am I the one that's losing this game?" she asked.

"Because you are being distracted by Harry's huge hosepipe?" Fleur quipped. "Because you weesh zat zee 'uge 'ousepipe was eenside your warm leetle 'ouse, and not een anyone else's shed?"

"Oh, stop it, Fleur," her roommate whined. "You're regressing"

"Alors....perhaps we must think up a different lesson, then?"

Hermione shrugged. "If you really want to tone down your accent...Merlin, Fleur...I'm a witch, not a linguist."

"Perhaps 'arry ees a cunning linguist?" Fleur asked.

In response to this horrible (and horribly overused) pun Hermione did three things in quick order. She snorted, she reached for a pillow, and she whacked Fleur on the head.

Fleur retaliated in kind, and the two witches started in on a rather intense pillow fight.

**oo00O00oo**



A huge frown formed on Molly's face when Hermione and Fleur walked into the kitchen later that afternoon, wearing Muggle clothes and carrying small overnight bags.

"What are you two doing?" she demanded.

"We need to do some research," Hermione replied. "Like I said before, I'm a witch, and know little about teaching the English language. It would help me a lot if we got hold of some instruction manuals."

"And just how do you think you'll be doing this?"

"By visiting some Muggle libraries or Muggle bookstores?" Hermione asked. "It's our best option...I've never seen that sort of manual in a magical bookshop ...have you?"

Molly shook her head. "Now why would I ever need to look for that sort of thing?"

Hermione shrugged. "I really want to help Fleur do whatever the Goblins want her to do...so that she can get back to work as soon as possible...don't you?"

"What are the bags for, then?"

"For the books," Hermione replied. "And...well, we might need to look at more than one place, and it'd be a lot quicker if my parents drove us from one public library or shopping area to another."

"So are you shopping, or visiting your parents?" Molly demanded.

Hermione sighed. "I know this is rather sudden, but...well, nobody could anticipate this morning's events, right? And if it takes a while to locate what we need, it would be easiest to just spend the night with my parents."

Molly frowned. "You two know that it's not safe out beyond the ward line."

Hermione nodded. "We realize that. But that doesn't stop Fleur from commuting back and forth to Gringotts, right? And if it weren't for my need to...well, you know...each day, I might still be at my parents' house."

The Weasley matriarch thought about the situation for a few moments. She didn't like the idea of letting either of the two witches do as they pleased, but...if they left right now, there would still be enough time to throw a roast into the oven, and invite Tonks to dinner before she started her nighttime shift on the ward line. That would give her son the chance to get to know the metamorph better without the French witch's interference. And Ginny would at the same time gain some quality time with Harry without Hermione's constant hovering.

Letting the two witches go for the weekend did nothing to improve Ron's chances with Hermione, but...that one was always going to be a longer-term project, given what Molly was working with. And when it came down to it...two out of three wasn't bad.

The Weasley matriarch nodded. "What time do you expect to return?"

"No later than dusk tomorrow, Fleur replied.

Molly was liking the idea more and more...a French-free Sunday dinner, in case Tonks couldn't make it that night.

"Right...off you go, then," she said. "Stay away from the Alley, and remember the rules about under-aged magic and spell casting amongst the Muggles.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," Fleur replied. "We...*will* ...remember...*those* ...*things* ."

"There, you see?" Hermione asked. "She's making progress on that accent already!"

"Where are you going, then?" Molly asked, as the two witches made their way to the back door.

"To *H*ermione's *h*ouse?" asked Fleur.

"Thought it safest if Fleur side-apparated me once we walked out past the wards," said Hermione. "If we avoid the floo, we can by-pass magical locations and travel straight to the Muggle world."

Molly chewed on her lower lip, then nodded.

"Say good-bye to Ron and Harry along the way, then," she instructed.

"Wouldn't dream of doing otherwise," Hermione replied brightly.

Fleur and Hermione once again found Harry and Ron in the backyard, playing ground-level Quidditch. "What's up, Hermione?" Harry asked, as Ron quickly abandoned his hoops and flew towards the other three teens.

"We wish to make our good-byes," Fleur announced.

"Your what?" Harry asked.

"Our good-byes," Fleur repeated, as she walked up to a hovering Ron, took him by the shoulders, and kissed him on both cheeks.

When she released her grip on his shoulders, he released his grip on his broom...and promptly fell off.

"Oh...are you okay, Ronald?" Fleur asked.

"Just peachy," the red-haired wizard gushed as he lay flat on his back.

"Good," Fleur replied. "Zen, will you walk wiz me to zee ward line, so as to say good-bye?"

Ron thought this was a brilliant idea, and jumped up off the ground.

Harry was so busy watching this little scene play out that he didn't at first hear Hermione's whispering.

"Harry!" she said more loudly, as she tugged on his arm.

He turned, and asked, "What's going on, Hermione?"

"Walk with me, Sweetheart," she whispered, as she took a step towards the path that meandered through the orchard.

Harry looked over towards Fleur and a goofy-happy Ron, then glanced back towards Hermione . He made a decision, and rushed to catch up with his girlfriend.

She swatted away his hand when he did so.

"Not out in the open," she hissed.

Harry nodded, and looked back over his shoulder.

"What did Fleur just do to Ron?"

"Gave him a good-bye kiss?"

"Did she add a little of her zing to those kisses?"

"Would you be able to see his hands right now if she had?"

Harry shook his head and smiled.

"We shouldn't become over reliant on Fleur's special abilities," Hermione quietly stated. "Especially when she can induce that kind of euphoria without them."

"So why did she do that?"

"So that I can explain why we are saying our good-byes?" Hermione asked.

The Muggleborn witch quickly outlined Fleur's situation at the bank, and the plans that Hermione and she had subsequently made. The French witch gave them some privacy by walking behind them at a much slower pace, keeping Ron right by her side (and keeping him in a goofy-happy state by talking to him using an exaggerated accent).

Harry was happy that Fleur and Hermione were going to be able to escape the mad house, if only for a day. But he was also very disappointed that he was going to lose his girlfriend just a day after he had gotten her. Hermione understood completely, and...once they were deep enough into the orchard so as not to be seen, reached out and grabbed Harry's hand.

"Be a good boy, and maybe we'll bring presents back tomorrow," she purred, as she lifted up on

her toes and planted a kiss on her boyfriend's lips.

"I don't need presents, baby...all I need is you!"

"Oh, Harry...we've got to work on your lines."

"Is that a complaint?" he pouted.

Hermione smiled, and placed another kiss on his lips.

"Not really," she admitted.

Hermione looked back down the path, and smiled when she spotted Fleur's back...the French witch was blocking Ron's view of them, which gave her enough confidence to pull Harry into a deep, open-mouthed, bum-grabbing snog.

He was more than happy to play along.

Twenty seconds later, Harry noticed that his girlfriend was reaching for something in her overnight bag, even as they continued to lock lips.

"What are you doing, Hermione?" he gasped, during the very short period of time in which his lips traveled from her lips to the nape of her neck.

"Hold...ah, got it!" she replied, pinching something in between thumb and forefinger.

Harry began to wonder when Hermione dragged the hand that had been squeezing his bum up to the back of his collar.

"What?"

"Hold still," she whispered, as she dropped whatever she'd just pulled from her bag down his neck.

"What did you just do?" he hissed, as he felt something squiggling underneath his robes.

"I just gave you a tape worm."

"A what?" Harry shouted, as he jumped out of Hermione's arms and started to rip open his robes.

"Relax, Harry....it's not going to hurt you."

"No? Then what *is* it going to do, then?"

"Measure you, Silly," Hermione teased, as she stepped within arm's reach of her boyfriend.

"Now hold still," she instructed, pulling him back into a close embrace. "The charmed notebook in my bag has to be close enough to the worm to record your measurements."

"What measurements? And what for?"

"For your presents, of course," Hermione replied. "Gringotts gave Fleur a Muggle charge card loaded with two thousand pounds sterling, and she wants to go shopping."

"And..."

"And some of that shopping might be for you, silly."

"Me?"

"You can't deny that you could use a new wardrobe," Hermione stated. "At least more than just new knickers. And with your birthday coming up...."

Harry squirmed within in her arms, not at all comfortable with how the "tape worm" was going about its work.

"So these are clothes measurements?" he asked.

"That's right...why?"

"Because I don't think that the length and circumference of my....damn, that tickles...makes a difference!"

Hermione giggled, having felt through their close contact exactly where the tape worm had been taking measurements.

"Sorry, sweetheart...but no matter what they say, size does matter."

"Even when you're clothes shopping?"

Hermione laughed.

"Guess we covered those areas with the mail-order, huh?"

Harry relaxed just a bit once the magical measuring tape worm inched its way out of his robes, then tensed right back up when he felt it slip down a sock.

"Careful, Sweetheart, you wouldn't want to stomp on it before it records your shoe size!" Hermione gently chided.

Harry groaned in discomfort.

"So, when do you get your measurements taken?"

"When I'm at the store?"

"That hardly seems fair," Harry whined. "Besides, I bet this thing would be a lot more..."

thorough...and a lot more...intimate, than any Muggle sales clerk."

"Would you want them to be?"

"No, but..."

Hermione laughed, and gave his bum a squeeze.

"I'll make you a deal, then," she promised. "When we get back, we'll try to figure out a way to get you those details."

"Using this blasted tape worm?"

Hermione blushed. "Unless you'd rather take them yourself?"

Harry snorted.

"Now *that* would be a birthday present," he declared, as he reached down and picked the tape worm off of his shoe laces.

"Here you go," he offered.

"Thanks," Hermione replied, as she pulled the notebook from her bag and carefully pressed the flattened measuring device against the inside cover. "So, let's see how close I was to...yup, got your waistline and inseam right...pretty darn close on your collar size. Oh, well...I knew it was big but...?"

"What?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked up from the opened notebook, smiled, then snapped the cover shut.

"Never mind," she declared, using a sing-song voice.

There was still fifty meters distance between where the measurements had been taken and the ward line. Fleur managed to occupy Ron's attention well enough to allow Harry and Hermione to stroll hand in hand over that distance, and to stop next to the tree that she had hidden behind the day before. They christened the location with an extra-special going-away snog.

**oo00O00oo**

When Gringotts' most promising young curse-breaker arrived home that evening, he was only slightly surprised to learn that Fleur and Hermione weren't there. Molly and Ginny tried to make it sound as if the two witches were going to go out and have a wild girls' night out on the town, but he knew better, having gotten both a groveling apology and a copy of each letter while still at work. He guessed that if they made a night of it, that that night would be far more likely spent at a Muggle shopping centre than in some hedonistic den of iniquity.

Molly was disappointed when Tonks sent her regrets, and when Ginny spent more time talking to her Pygmy Puffs than to Harry. That didn't mean she hovered any less, though, so Bill had to work hard that night to find a few minutes of private time with Harry. In those brief minutes, he both delivered a letter and fleshed out a few details over what had taken place that day.

Harry liked the letter that Hermione had written very, very much. So much that he risked sending out an immediate reply, using Hedwig as his courier. The letter was delivered to Hermione's house in Weybridge just before she went to bed. Hedwig slept overnight in her bedroom as a second house guest.

Harry's familiar was too far away from the Burrow to pick up on (and subsequently broadcast) any of his feelings for his girlfriend. Not that it mattered, as he had conveyed those feelings with an amazing degree of clarity within the letter.

**oo00O00oo**

Molly insisted that the Ministry of Magic could survive without her husband's services for at least one day a week, and told Arthur this in so many words. While he didn't protest, he also didn't waste any time heading out to his shed after Sunday brunch. Harry and Bill asked for a tour of the wizard's collection of Muggle bobbles, gizmos, and artifacts, so that they could escape from the kitchen just as fast (and as effectively) as Arthur did.

The two wizards grew instantly worried when Molly agreed that this was a splendid idea, explaining that she only needed Ginny and Ron to help her with the potions work that day. While Harry and Bill still lacked any direct evidence that Molly was slipping anyone love potions, and only had strong circumstantial evidence that she had even brewed Amortentia, it still made them nervous. They resolved to strengthen their vigilance, and to re-dose themselves with another vial of neutralizing agent.

The only chore that Molly had assigned to Bill and Harry that day was the de-gnoming of the garden. As Arthur showed the two younger wizards around his shed, Harry became inspired, and suggested that there might be a way to combine Mr. Weasley's passion with Mrs. Weasley's chores. The three spent the entire morning designing, and building, and arguing about the limits of and possible loopholes within the Muggle Protection Act. The outcome of this effort was wheeled out of the shed that afternoon.

Molly, Ron and Ginny were too busy inside the house to notice. Hermione and Fleur, however, were too out in the open not to notice when they crossed back inside the ward line early that evening, and found themselves within a series of concentric circles cut into the long grass.

It almost looked like a Muggle crop circle. That idea was quickly discarded, though, when they heard the screams of a garden gnome that was flying towards them along a ballistic flight path.

They ran for cover, then watched the garden gnome land head first on the bulls-eye. It was only after Hermione watched the gnome stand up and groggily scamper away that she kicked herself for the missed opportunity to yell, "*Run away! Run away!*"

oo000O00oo

"Fire in the hole!"

"Gnome out of his hole!"

"Three-two-one... liftoff!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Harry Potter's eyes were drawn back down to earth by a different kind of screaming.

"Harry Potter! What the hell are you doing!" Hermione shouted from the far end of the field.

"Cease fire!" Harry yelled.

"Ceasing fire, Captain!" Bill quipped. The curse-breaker then turned to his father and added, "That means you can stop pedaling, Dad."

"Oh...right," Arthur replied.

"Looks like the girls made it home safely," Harry noted, as Hermione and Fleur marched directly towards their emplacement.

"Wouldn't it have been ironic if it wasn't until they got home that they got hurt?" asked Bill.

"I'm sure that they'd agree," Harry replied. He then called out, "Good evening, Ladies...have a nice stay in the Muggle world?"

"Don't you start with that," Hermione snapped, as Fleur and she closed the distance between them and the garden. "What do you think you're doing?"

Harry looked at Bill. Bill looked at his dad. Arthur looked towards Harry. They all three shrugged, and then they grinned.

"De-gnoming the garden?" Harry asked.

"Wiz zat...device?" Fleur asked.

Arthur nodded. "I'm afraid that it's my fault, girls," he admitted. "You see, I was showing these two my collection of Muggle artifacts, lamenting the fact that nothing I had in the shed really worked. So Harry was explaining what some of the pieces were used for, or could be used for with only minor modifications, and then Bill reminded Harry that they needed to de-gnome the garden, and well..."

"We invented the world's only bicycle-driven ballistic de-gnoming device," Harry said proudly.



"It is a rather ingenious tool," Arthur gushed. "To think that Muggles can do this sort of thing..."

"Yes, it is rather...ingenious," Fleur said with a laugh.

Hermione stared at the three wizards open-mouthed, then stared open-mouthed at what they had cobbled together. Mr. Weasley was sitting on a wheel-less bicycle frame, whose sprockets were connected to a series of gears that linked the bicycle to an over-sized tire pump. The pump tube was attached to the end of what appeared to be a clear plastic empty tennis ball canister...so long as the tennis was being played by giants. The seven-foot long, eight-inch diameter tube was connected to the canister via a series of intermediate valves and pistons and pulleys, and rested at a forty-five degree angle on the rear axle from a Muggle lorry.

Bill stood at the back end of this tube, with one hand on a valve and another holding a very squirmy gnome. Harry stood closer to the front of the device, holding what appeared to be the world's largest Q-tip cotton swab.

"How does this device work?" Fleur asked.

"That's great, honey...you said this instead of zis!"

"Thank you Bill...now, if you will answer my question?"

"Ah, right...we'd be happy to show them how it works, wouldn't we?" Bill asked the other two wizards.

"We'd be delighted to," said Arthur. Harry replied with a grin and another shrug.

"Right," Bill said. "First thing we need to do is clean out the barrel."

"Clean out the barrel!" said Arthur.

"Cleaning out the barrel!" Harry cried, as he pushed one end of the eight-foot long cotton swab into the end of the barrel, then pulled it back out.

"Ewww...looks like another one shat himself," the raven-haired wizard complained, once he examined the soiled fluffy swab at the end of the stick.

"No worries, Harry...still plenty left in the box," said Bill.

"Yup," the teenager agreed, throwing the dirty swab off to the side.

"I can't believe that you actually enlarged a box of Muggle Q-tips!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry chuckled. "Hey, it could have been worse," he whispered. "Mr. Weasley had a Tampax box sitting on one of his shelves."

"Oh, that's just....."

"Yeah, I know," Harry agreed, as he walked over to a large clear container and pulled out another over-sized cotton swab.

"Load the launch device!" Arthur gleefully yelled.

"Loading the launch device!" Bill replied, as he walked up to the front of the canister and stuffed a gnome down feet-first.

"Loading the launch device," mimicked Harry, as he used one end of his enlarged swab to push the gnome down the length of the barrel. He then called out, "Prime the chamber!"

"Priming the chamber," said Bill, as he opened a few valves and closed a few others.

"Priming the chamber!" Arthur replied. He then began to pedal at a furious pace.

"It works like a compressed air gun," said Harry. "You know...like those things they use at Premier League football matches to launch t-shirts into the stands?"

"So the bicycle gears drive zee pumps, which push air into the back of zee canister..."

"Slow down, Fleur...you're slipping," said Hermione.

"Ah...sorry."

Bill smiled as he monitored the needle movement within a pressure gauge. He then said, "Yes, Fleur...that's exactly how it works....hold on, Dad...Chamber is primed!"

"Chamber is primed!" Harry shouted.

Arthur stopped pedaling, took a deep breath, then replied, "Chamber is primed!"

"Permission to fire, Captain?" Bill asked.

Harry looked downrange and nodded.

"You may fire at will, Bill."

"Fire in the hole!"

"Gnome out of his hole!"

"Three-two-one...liftoff!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Harry laughed as he watched the garden gnome sail through the air and land in the middle of their home-made target.

"This is too much fun," he decided.

"Well, I'm glad that you didn't decide to skive off in my absence," Hermione muttered.

"I didn't!" Harry protested. "This is serious work!"

"Yeah, I can tell."

"But Mum really did tell us to de-gnome the garden," said Bill.

Fleur noticed a small pile of ripe melons sitting next to the improvised cannon and snorted.

"I am certain that she did," she stated.

"And that's not the only reason for building this," added Harry. "It's research and development!"

"For what...the next great Magical circus trick?" Hermione quipped.

"No, no...I'm serious," said Harry. "We're going to add this to the Burrow's perimeter defense system...right Mr. Weasley?"

"That's right, Hermione," the older wizard agreed. "If we can launch a gnome that far into the air...just imagine what this device could do if we were attacked!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "So, instead of releasing the tiger, you release the gnome!"

"Nah...that's just killing two birds with one stone," Harry claimed. "Had to get rid of the gnomes anyway. Once we've figured out how to accurately aim this thing, and set up some kind of forward observer post to call in adjustments...well, imagine what this could do if a bunch of Death Eaters showed up one night and started to overpower the ward line?"

"Or stood outside the line and took the time to set up their own overlapping wards," added Bill. "That'd take at least a couple of minutes, and once they got through the lines almost as much time before they got within range of their wand fire. Plenty of time for us to aim this device and start lobbing things their way."

"Yeah...things other than gnomes," said Harry.

"Fetchez la vache?" Fleur asked.

"Nah...we'll need to build a catapult for that," said Harry. "We've only started to brainstorm... canisters of silver grapeshot if we're up against a pack of werewolves, for example."

"Or a container filled with magical laughing gas...or Peruvian Instant Blackness Powder."

"Or a dung bomb," added Arthur.

"That doesn't sound very damaging," said Hermione.

"It might be if you're using Nundu dung."

Hermione sighed. "But how is any of this even legal?" she asked. "You should know about the Muggle Protection Act better than anyone, Mr. Weasley."

"I think that I do know it better than anyone else," Arthur replied. "Which is why I'm quite certain that we're in the clear."

"But...you magically enlarged Q-tips. And enlarged a tennis ball canister. And you certainly had to have hardened the plastic, or else the barrel would have exploded in your face!"

"Yes, we did all that, Hermione...but we didn't enchant any of those pieces...we just changed their physical properties."

"But what about the gnomes?"

"No harm, no foul?"

"I think that they actually enjoy it!" added Bill. "I've seen at least one of them running back so that they could get caught and launched again."

Hermione frowned. She was certain that there had to be something illegal about the device, but if Mr. Weasley wasn't worried...and if the boys were finding ways to have fun despite the dark days...and if there was even a chance that the cannon might turn into another layer of defense...

The Muggleborn witch let her overnight bag slip off of her shoulder and drop to the ground. Then she kicked the rubber tire attached to the lorry axle, and asked, "So just how easy is it to mobilize this bad boy? Have you considered mounting it on rotating platform? Figured out how to account for varying wind velocities? What kind of magical friction-reducing efficiencies have you applied to the pumps?"

Harry smiled as he wrapped his arm around Hermione.

"That's my girl!" he exclaimed, leaning a "friendly" head onto her shoulder.

"I'm glad that you're back," he whispered.

Hermione smiled, and kissed the top of Harry's head.

"I'm glad to be back."

The group spent the next couple of hours brainstorming and gnome throwing. Nobody was all that eager to head inside the house...whether it was because they were having too much fun, or because they were expecting the Spanish Inquisition once they did...or both. When they finally did venture in for dinner, they did so as a pack, which went a long ways towards diffusing Molly's

interrogative attacks.

**oo00O00oo**

The next morning, Harry chuckled when Hedwig swiveled her head away from an offered ration of bacon, and converted it into take-away.

"She's coming, huh girl?" he asked.

"Bark!" Hedwig replied.

"You know I meant down the stairs," Harry whispered.

Hedwig turned her head from side to side, then launched herself out the opened window and into light rain.

"Bill and I should be going as well," Arthur stated, as he gave his wife a good-bye kiss. The curse-breaker squeezed Harry's shoulder, then nodded towards his brother and sister.

"Stay out of trouble, you three," he said.

"I'll ask the same of you, William," Molly said.

Bill chuckled as Fleur emerged from the stairs and pulled him into a good-sized good-bye kiss.

"Too late," Ginny muttered as Hermione appeared and her oldest brother followed her father out the floo.

"Good morning, ladies," Harry said cheerfully, as his girlfriend and her roommate sat opposite him at the table.

Fleur smiled and deliberately said, "How are you today....Harry?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Hey, you got the 'h's' right!" Ron exclaimed (failing to note the irony behind the fact that his chewing-impinged comment was itself barely decipherable).

"Sounds good, Fleur," Harry added warmly (and more clearly).

The French witch smiled. "Thank you...Harry. Hermione has been a big help."

"Oh, I haven't done much at all," the Muggleborn witch declared. "Fleur was up most of the night practicing with her new phrasebook."

"That...is...an...exaggeration," Fleur declared.

"A phrasebook?" asked Harry. "I thought you already knew the words...that it was more about the

pronunciation?"

"Yes, and yes," Hermione replied. "She's doing great when she really slows down and thinks about each word as she says it."

"But I need to say certain everyday phrases at normal conversation speeds," Fleur agreed. "So I have been practicing...*the* ... phrases until I can say...*them* ...without...*thinking* ."

"Like what?" asked Ginny, deciding to finally join the conversation.

"There is a cart waiting to take you to your vault, Sir," Fleur replied (in perfect English). "Also, 'please return to the queue,' and 'my hovercraft is full of eels'."

"Ah...work-related then?" Harry asked with a laugh.

Fleur smiled in agreement. "Yes, but also what I use in everyday conversation. Phrases like, "You look very happy, Harry...Have you eaten Hermione?"

Harry choked on his toast.

"You should slow down when you eat, Mate," said Ron, as he slapped his friend on the back.

"I'm okay," the raven-haired teen protested. He then turned towards Fleur and asked, "There is a comma somewhere in that last phrase, right?"

"A comma?"

"You were asking Hermione if *she* had eaten, right?" Harry asked.

"Of course!" Fleur replied. She turned towards Hermione and asked, "Did I say...*it* ...wrong?"

The bushy-haired witch looked towards Harry and rolled her eyes.

"Yes, you said it correctly," she replied. "Harry is just trying to be funny."

"Oh," said Fleur innocently, showing that she knew perfectly well what she said and how it could have been taken. She smiled, and added, "Then I must say 'Ha Ha Ha', no?"

"No, don't...it will only encourage him," Hermione replied, reaching over the table to lightly tap her boyfriend's arm. She then said, "We need your help Harry, so be nice."

The-Boy-Who-Lived grinned. "Of course...what can I do?"

"We need you to be Fleur's conversation partner."

"Her what?" Molly asked from across the kitchen.

"Her conversation partner," Hermione repeated. "Someone who can help Fleur with her accent in

conversational settings."

"But I thought that's what you were supposed to be doing?" Ginny asked.

The Muggleborn witch nodded. "I am helping...but I can't help in this situation."

"Why is that?"

"Because I am nearly fluent in French," Hermione replied. "When Fleur and I are in our room talking to each other, half of the time it is half in French, and half in English. Sometimes we mix the two together without even recognizing what we're doing."

"Even...in...the...same sentence," the French witch added.

"It's not intentional," Hermione explained. "But it does mean that sometimes I don't notice when she slips in the odd French word or phrase."

"So she needs to talk with someone who doesn't understand that language, then, and corrects her when she does?" Molly asked.

"That's right," said Hermione. "Bill can't do it, since he speaks French...Harry would be perfect."

Molly frowned. "Ginny doesn't speak French."

"That's true," Hermione replied. "But I think it will be more helpful if it was a wizard. You know, because it was a wizard that complained about her accent in the bank?"

The Weasley Matriarch nodded, accepting the assertion without examining the underlying shaky wizard's logic (just as Hermione had assumed she would).

"Ron, then," she decided.

The red-haired wizard perked up at the suggestion, but Hermione and Fleur had also planned for this contingency.

"Yes, Ron is a wizard who doesn't speak French, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione agreed. "But...it's just that...well, sometimes some wizards get a little flustered when they talk with Fleur...they find it hard to concentrate on what she says."

"What do you mean?" asked Ron. "I can understand her good enough, and know proper English!"

Ginny rolled her eyes, knowing full well what Hermione was suggesting.

Molly was persistent. "Ronald is just as qualified as Harry, and Harry is in the middle of brewing some very important potions," she declared.

Hermione sighed as she pulled two self-inking quills and pieces of parchment from her robe

pocket. "Perhaps we can do a quick test?" she asked.

"What kind of test?" Ron asked.

"I'll have Fleur say a phrase using her French accent," Hermione explained. "Harry and Ron will then each write down what she should have said, pointing out any missteps. And then we'll compare."

Molly pursed her lips as she wiped her hands with a kitchen towel. "Alright, then," she decided.

Hermione nodded, then turned and whispered something into Fleur's ear. The French witch's eyes lit up in delight.

"Ready, then?" she asked.

When the two teen-aged wizards both nodded, Fleur leaned towards them and purred.

"Zese are not zee droids zat you are looking for!"

Harry stifled a snort, then picked up his quill and started to write.

Ron just stared blankly at the French witch.

Hermione sighed. "Would either of you like to hear the phrase again?"

"I'm good," Harry declared.

"Yes, please!" Ron asked.

Fleur smiled, and leaned closer to Ron. Staring directly into his eyes, she then repeated the statement.

Ron stared blankly at her for a moment, then looked down at his quill. He picked it up, started to write out a word, then let the quill slip from his fingers.

"Urm...sorry. Got to go," he stammered, pushing away from the table.

Hermione tried not to giggle too hard as Ron bolted up the stairs in search of some privacy.

Harry held up his piece of parchment for inspection.

"How did I do, then?"

The four witches were quick to confirm the accuracy of his corrective phrase.

"Oh, but that's so not fair!" Ginny whined. "Fleur cheated!"

"How could she have done that?" Hermione asked.



"Well, she's obviously befuddled Ron on purpose!"

"I wasn't befuddled, though," Harry noted.

"Yeah, well...she wasn't staring into your eyes," said Ginny, as she sat down at what had been Ron's spot on the bench next to Harry. "Or leaning towards you either, showing off her...charms."

Fleur glared across the table towards Ginny. "I would not dream of showing my fiance's brother any of my...charms."

"You don't have to dream about it...it just comes naturally," the younger witch snarked.

"Right then, how about another test?" Hermione asked. "Fleur will say something while leaning towards Harry, and looking directly into *his* eyes."

"Oh, zees ees a good idea!" Fleur declared.

"You should have said that *it is* a good idea, Fleur," Harry stated.

"Hey...I didn't see any eye contact!" Ginny protested. "And it wasn't the same kind of racy-sounding phrase."

"Droids are racy-sounding?" Harry asked.

Hermione sighed. "Okay, fine. Molly?"

"Yes, Dear?"

"Would you agree that it would be a fair test if Ginny comes up with the phrase, then writes it down and passes it to Fleur for her to read?"

"While she is looking into Harry's eyes and leaning towards him?" added the red-haired teen.

"Yes, just like that," Hermione agreed.

Molly took in a deep breath, then slowly let it out.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Right, then," said Ginny, as she grabbed the quill and parchment that Ron had been too befuddled to use. "Let's see...."

The red-haired witch nibbled on the end of the quill as she considered a suitably devious phrase. She smiled when it came to mind, then glanced towards her mother. She thought for a moment, then reached a decision and wrote the phrase down. Ginny then folded the paper, and pushed it down the table towards Fleur. When the French witch opened the fold and read the phrase she snorted in amusement.

Hermione leaned over to look at what the younger witch had written, and shook her head.

"That's not a fair test," she declared.

"Why not?" Ginny challenged.

"Because zere are no problems een asking, '*Do you want to come back to my place, bouncy bouncy!*'"

"Bill might have a problem with it," Hermione noted.

"Ginny!" Molly scolded.

"It wasn't supposed to be real question," she protested. "It was just a test phrase."

"It was also a practice phrase that didn't contain any of the problem sounds," Hermione stated. "Want to try again?"

Ginny let out a huge huff of air, and violently snatched the parchment back. She crossed her first sentence with a thick black line, then paused to angrily conjure a better sentence.

"Let's try this one, then," she snapped, as she wrote a sentence with violent strokes of the quill. An evil grin formed on her lips as she tossed the refolded piece of paper down onto the table.

"I'll have that!" Molly demanded, swooping down and snatching up the parchment.

Ginny gasped, her anger and desire for victory having caused her to momentarily forget that her mother was in the room.

"I only wrote that for the test," said, as her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "Doesn't mean that I would ever say...."

"I don't want to hear it!" Molly snapped, her own cheeks reddening as she reread the test question. "Ginevra Weasley, you and I are going to have a long talk once we're through here!"

"Yes, Mum," the girl said glumly. "Should I try again, then?"

Molly glared at her daughter, then glared at the note in her hand. She took three or four deep breaths as she considered her options. Then she took one last full breath and folded the parchment in half.

"I don't ever want to hear this sort of question being asked in my house...whether it's by my daughter or by a houseguest!" she hissed. Molly then walked over to Fleur, and handed her the note. "However...so long as it is just a test...I'll allow it...just this once, mind you."

Fleur's eyes widened when she read the new phrase. She silently passed the note to Hermione, who snorted out loud when she read it.

"Really, Ginny?" the Muggleborn whined.

"It has words she trips over all the time," the younger witch said defiantly.

"It also has words that..."

"Hey, don't give Harry any clues!"

Hermione sighed as she cast an inquisitive glance towards Molly. She wondered what sort of game the matriarch thought she was playing, then shrugged and handed the folded parchment back to Fleur.

"We should switch places, so that you're directly across from Harry when you ask."

"Are you certain?"

"Yeah...If Ginny wants to make it that *hard* for him...then make it hard."

"Vraiment?" Fleur asked.

"Yes, really," Hermione concluded, as she got up from the table

Fleur arched an eyebrow as she read her roommate's facial expression. Then she nodded, scooted down the bench to take the place that her roommate had just vacated, and began to unbutton the front of her robes.

"What are you doing?" Molly demanded.

"So zat zere ees no doubt," the part-Veela announced.

"Fleur?" Harry asked nervously.

"As Molly sez...zees ees only a test," she stated.

Once Fleur had unbuttoned the top four buttons on her robes she loosened the widened neckline and pushed the tops of her robes just off of her shoulders. This revealed a black lace bra, a wide expanse of tan skin, and a healthy amount of cleavage.

A slight gurgling sound escaped from Molly's clenched teeth as Fleur pushed the breakfast dishes to the side and rested her arms on the kitchen table. She then leaned towards Harry, bending far enough to rest her weight (and her bra-covered breasts) on her forearms.

Hermione's boyfriend kept eye contact with her roommate...until her roommate broke eye contact to address the red-haired witch that was sitting next to him.

"Ees zees ze way you want eet, Ginny?" Fleur purred, in a very sexy tone of voice. The French witch then re-established eye-contact with Harry and added, "Am I leaning towards 'im and

looking at 'im een zee eyes?"

"Yeah, yeah...get on with it."

Fleur nodded, then asked what had been written.

"Do you zeenk zat I 'ave beeg teets, 'Arry?"

Harry held the part-Veela's gaze for five silent seconds...then began to laugh. Fleur started to laugh as well, which made her jiggle and offer up even more of a view...which he neglected to take.

A wide smile formed on Hermione's lips as her nagging fears were proven unwarranted. It was a rather triumphal smile.

Ginny frowned, and grasped for straws. She nudged the wizard sitting next to her with an elbow, then asked, "Something wrong? You aren't writing anything down!"

The teen-aged wizard turned his head towards the red-haired witch and snorted.

"Nope, everything is fine."

"I bet you think so," Ginny snarked. She glanced across the table and said, "Hey, Fleur, I think he needs to hear that phrase again!"

The French witch nodded as she reached out, touched Harry's cheek, and guided his gaze back towards her face.

"Do you need to hear it again, Harry?" she asked, carefully enunciating each word.

"No, thanks," he replied, as his eyes darted down to his quill and parchment. While he began to write out the question, everyone else's attention was diverted towards the stairs, and to the sound of barreling steps.

Ron burst into the kitchen and asked. "So what did I miss?"

His eyes were quickly drawn towards Fleur's chest. He let out a loud moan and said, "Sweet Morgana's..."

"Ronald!" Molly shouted.

The admonishment shook the red-haired teen out of his visual ensnarement. When he looked towards his mother and saw the anger in her eyes, he winced, turned tail, and fled back upstairs.

Harry set the quill down on the table. He reread what he had just written, then decided he should fold his parchment in half.

"Erm...right. I'm not going to get into trouble for writing that down, am I?"

Molly looked towards him and sighed.

"Give it to me," she said, holding out her hand. The Weasley Matriarch then glanced towards Fleur and shouted, "And button yourself up!"

"Yes, Ma'am," Fleur said very seriously, quickly complying with the demand.

When Harry placed the folded parchment in Molly's hand, quickly opened it, silently read it, then not-so-silently vanished it.

"Fine," she hissed. "Harry, go be Fleur's...partner. I suppose you want to monitor their work, Hermione?"

"If that's alright, Mrs. Weasley?"

Molly nodded tersely. "Just do it in the sitting room, where I can listen in on these...lessons."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"There's not going to be any more of these scandalous questions?"

"No, Ma'am...of course not, Ma'am," Harry said, as he dashed towards the other room.

Hermione and Fleur followed at a more sedate pace, while Molly began shouting at Ginny about her behavior. By the time they caught up to him, the red-haired witch had been sent outside to muck out the chicken coop.

Harry stopped when he got to the couch, but didn't sit down, and he didn't turn to face the two witches.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered. "Something wrong?"

"Erm...just a second!" he whispered back, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Hermione took a step towards her boyfriend, only to be held back by her roommate.

"**Arrete !**" Fleur whispered, glancing back towards the entrance to the kitchen.

Hermione stopped, then looked back at the French witch and asked an unvoiced question with her eyes.

"Ronald?" Molly bellowed. "What are you doing up there?"

Fleur smiled as she heard the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs.

"So, Harry...why the reaction now?" she asked.

"What?" he asked.

"Oh, 'Arry...eet ees just us, n'est-ce pas?" Fleur asked.

"It should be '*Oh, Harry it is just us* ', and you don't need that last part," he replied.

"Can somebody start explaining what's going?" Hermione hissed.

Fleur nodded as she pulled Hermione towards the couch, spun Harry around, and pointed.

He let out a groan of frustration, deciding there was no point in covering his tent with his hands.

"It wasn't anything that you said, Fleur," he insisted. "It was Molly."

Hermione snorted. "Did you just hear what you just said?"

Harry replayed his statement in his head, then rolled his eyes.

"Thanks, Hermione," he whined. He fell back onto the couch, gestured towards his waist, and said, "You just took care of that problem."

"Erm...okay?"

"What I said was true...it's just not as bad as it sounds," he explained, rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Molly told us to go do it in the sitting room."

"So..."

"So that got me thinking about how *you* 'did it' in the sitting room on my first night here."

Hermione started to blush, then decided she really had no reason to do so. Instead, she smiled.

"So that's what got you hard, Harry?" she whispered. "Nothing to do with Fleur's question?"

"Zat ees exactly what my nose sez, 'Ermione."

"You mean that is exactly what your nose says," said Harry.

"Sorry...eet ees hard for me to concentrate on zee words when..."

The sounds of Molly's bellowing drifted into the room, as she demanded that her son open up the bathroom door.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Harry quipped, shaking his head in amazement at what had all just happened. "Why do you think that she let that question be asked?"

Fleur shrugged. "I do not presume to know what goes on eenside 'er 'ead."

Hermione looked at Harry, then at her roommate, then back towards the kitchen.

"Can we worry about that later?" she whispered. "And Fleur...would you mind watching that door for a minute?"

"Bien sur!" the French witch said with a wink.

The Muggleborn witch shot Harry a predatory smile as Fleur walked across the room to stand guard.

Harry arched an eyebrow.

"I think you should be rewarded for passing that boyfriend test...don't you?" she asked.

Harry chuckled and shrugged. "If it was a matter of skin...saw far more of Fleur on the beach than I just did in the kitchen, didn't I?"

Hermione shook her head in disbelief.

"Are you saying that you don't want your reward?"

"Oh, erm, no...rewards are good!" Harry whispered.

"Good," said Hermione, as dropped her knees onto the couch cushions and straddled his hips.

Harry gasped while she squirmed and ground against his lap. Looking nervously over Hermione's shoulder, he said, "Maybe that's not a.... Fleur's not there?"

Hermione looked over her shoulder...then let out a sigh...then slipped off Harry's lap.

"I suppose," she whined, as she sat down next to her boyfriend and scooted to create some distance.

A few moments later Fleur re-entered the sitting room with a satisfied smile on her face.

"Now you two should have *more* than a few minutes," she said, leaning back against the threshold.

"Now?" Hermione asked. "What did you just...?"

"Please don't ask her that," Harry begged, mentally cringing at the possibilities.

Hermione thought for a moment, then decided that was a reasonable request. Then she stopped all of Harry's mental cringing in its tracks by swinging her leg back over his lap and settling down.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Erm...yes," she replied, squirming against his thighs just to be sure. The Muggleborn witch then smiled as she reached out and tussled Harry's hair.

"You never actually answered the question, did you?"

"What questi...oh, right," he replied. "Didn't think I needed to."

"Why's that?"

"Are you serious?"

Hermione snorted. "Humor me, Harry."

"Fine...I've delegated the task of answering that question to my liegeman."

"Good answer," Hermione whispered, as she leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on his lips.

After a short while, she pulled back, and asked, "So, will Bill answer that question for whenever any girl asks if her tits are too big...or just when Fleur asks?"

Harry smiled, and replied, "Just Fleur."

"Another good answer!" Hermione whispered. She then leaned back, and ripped open the front of *her* robes.

The distinctive sound created when strips of Muggle Velcro are separated was heard by Harry's ears, but not recognized for what it was until much, much later. His eyes (and most of his higher brain functions) had zeroed in on the lace-trimmed bra that Hermione had just exposed underneath her robes.

She shimmied, then coyly asked, "So, Harry...do you think that *my* tits are too big?"

Her boyfriend chuckled, showing no caution at all as he leaned forward to examine the evidence.

"They look just the right size to me," he replied. "Although...."

"Yes, Harry?"

"You've always encouraged me to review my assignments and revise as necessary, right?"

Hermione giggled, and risked a glance back over her shoulder. Fleur was still was giving the couple a "thumbs up" sign.

"Would you like to gather more evidence to test that hypothesis?" she asked, running fingers through her boyfriend's hair.

"Huh?"

Hermione chuckled as she pushed Harry's head back, then pulled Harry's hands forward, towards her chest.



"Why don't you *feel* if my tits are too big?" she asked.

Harry snorted. "Language, sweetheart."

"Really?"

"No...it's just that...what happened to the clinical language?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Do you want to debate me, Harry...or fondle me?"

That was a silly question.

For forty-five glorious seconds, they snogged, he groped, and she ground down on his lap.

"Fais gaffe!"

Hermione gasped when she heard Fleur's warning, and immediately bounced off of the couch. After quickly tucking herself back in, she Velcro'ed herself back up. Harry, meanwhile, was desperately trying to readjust his robes. By the time he decided that he'd done the best he could do, he looked up and noticed that Hermione had moved to the far corner of the room, and was now sitting on a high-backed chair.

She smiled, leaned forward, and cleared her throat.

"So, Harry...your job is to engage Fleur in conversation that will force her into using some of those words that she has problems with in a natural setting."

The-Boy-Who-Lived nodded as he watched Fleur pull out her wand, cross the room towards Hermione, and cast a whispered charm towards her.

"*Praetego!*"

"Do you see what I'm thinking, Harry?" Hermione then asked.

The teen-aged wizard snorted at the double entendre...Fleur's spell work had smoothed out the perky points in the front of Hermione's robes.

"Yes, I do," he replied, even while his head was shaking "No."

Harry glanced towards the empty doorway, then gestured towards his crotch.

Fleur giggled as she quietly padded across the room, cast a second *Praetego* charm, then plopped down onto the couch next to him.

Molly entered room a few moments later and frowned as she looked around.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," the three droned.

The matriarch turned towards Hermione and asked, "What are you doing over there?"

The Muggleborn witch smiled as she ran her fingers down the length of one of the chair arms.

"I didn't want to be a distraction," she explained. Hermione then turned her attention to Fleur and asked, "Ready for some more warm-up exercises?"

"Oui!"

"You mean 'yes'," Harry corrected.

"Ah...yes. Thank you...*H*arry."

"Repeat after me, then," said Hermione. "It is hot today, Harry...isn't it?"

Fleur smiled, and repeated the phrase. She then recited generic statements about happy housewives, big wigs, and thorny thickets.

Molly watched the back and forth for a few moments, then grew bored and retreated into the kitchen. Hermione gave the other two teens a big "thumbs-up" gesture once she was out of the matriarch's field of view.

"Alright, let's do one last exercise that combines the different sounds," the Muggleborn instructed.

"Okay," said Fleur.

Hermione smiled seductively as she lifted one of her legs over the arm of her chair and leaned back against the cushion. "Listen carefully," she said, slowly dragging the heel of one hand from her shoulder, across her chest, then down into her lap.

"Harry, do you think that this is where Hermione was sitting that night?"

Harry sucked in a sharp breath when he heard his girlfriend ask the question-slash-confession. At that same moment, Fleur was holding in a deep breath, so that she didn't give up the game to Molly by laughing out loud.

"'Arry?" the French witch asked.

"It's Harry," he mumbled.

"Sorry...so, Harry...do you think that this is where 'Ermione was sitting zat night?"

"Erm, no," he replied, watching Hermione nod her head vigorously.

"No?"

"No, erm...Fleur...that is where *Hermione* was sitting *that* night."

"That's right, Harry," teased Hermione. "*This . Is. Where.*"

The sound of pots and pans clanking against each other in the kitchen caught the Muggleborn's attention. She quickly pulled her leg back, sat up straight, and schooled her facial expression.

Harry sat up as well. Then he readjusted the position of the tent pole that no one else could see, so that he might relieve some of the uncomfortable pressure that no one else could feel.

*canoncansodoff*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 7: Innocents Abroad?

It was a dangerous thing for a Gringotts employee to let his mind wander while he was sitting in a Senior Manager's office...especially when that Senior Manager had a wall-mounted steel-spiked mace that was within reach of his desk. But it was almost impossible for Bill to maintain a sharp mental focus when the possibilities just seemed to leap off the ledger page...

“Does one of the client's properties catch your knife-edge, Mr. Weasley?”

Bill quickly glanced up at Chokebar and nodded.

“Yes, Senior Account Manager,” he replied in Gobbledegook (as was customary during their meetings). “There are at least three properties that appear...at least on parchment...to have the type of magical protections required given the client's security needs. But without actually visiting these properties myself...”

“That could be arranged, you know.”

Bill's eyebrows arched upwards. “My apologies, Senior Account Manager,” he said. “I was under the impression that it was only after the client assumed his rank and made me his liegeman that I could act in that capacity.”

Chokebar's eyes danced with either danger or delight (Bill still couldn't tell, which was both exasperating and unnerving).

The goblin asked, “Are you or are you not employed by the same institution that has provided property management services to this client's House for all these years?” He nodded towards the ledger book that was opened in front of Bill and added, “Pick three and we'll have the portkeys crafted in time for you to make your inspections this afternoon.”

The red-haired curse breaker, knowing that time was money, quickly called out his selections. He then asked, “Are there any differences in the amount of time that it would take to have these properties ready for client occupancy?”

The Potter Account Manager shook his head.

“Each property has been maintained by house-elf caretaker,” he stated. “They are all in a condition suitable for human habitation. Of course, with a day or two advanced notice a full staff could be mustered that would make the conditions even more suitable.”

Bill nodded in understanding. That the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter still owned house elves had been a revelation. It had also become a concern, given his knowledge of Hermione's crusade.

“There is time, then,” he stated. “Still nine days until the client's birthday. And even then, there is

a possibility that he might decide to stay put for the balance of his holiday.”

Chokebar twisted his ear hairs as he considered this response.

“Have you discussed this with the client?” he asked.

“Not in any great detail,” Bill replied. “He has mentioned his belief that there are positives and negatives to both staying and going once he is positioned to make that decision.”

“Elaborate.”

Bill was nonplussed by the terse command.

“My mother is acting as Dumbledore’s surrogate,” he observed. “The Headmaster’s confidence in her ability to keep the client on a very short leash allows the old man to turn his attentions elsewhere. The client is worried that Dumbledore will try to reassert direct control just as soon as he assumes his title, and when that happens...”

Chokebar snorted, and declared, “Better the demoness that you know, then? Was this cogent analysis arrived at independently?”

Bill smiled and shook his head. “I believe he has gotten some input on the matter from his other close advisor.”

“Ah, yes...our newest vault owner,” Chokebar agreed. “I suppose that the client can’t just throw the girl into his cart and call it a honeymoon?”

Bill chuckled. “Yes, Senior Account Manager.”

“Well, then...I ask that you keep their minds at least open to the possibility of the client assuming his duties on the thirty-first. The earlier the title is taken, the greater the profit...for both Gringotts and the client.”

“Yes, Senior Account Manager.”

Chokebar leaned back on his desk chair and idly polished one of his vest buttons.

“These meetings have been satisfactory,” he stated. “I will miss them once you return to The House of Greed in September.”

Bill bowed his head in response to this complement. “I am honored, Senior Account Manager.”

The Potter Account Manager pulled out a charmed timepiece and nodded.

“In thirty minutes time you are to reward Curse Breaker Johnson’s apprentice by bringing him to the canteen for lunch,” he stated.

Bill reined in his shock at this request.

Chokebar didn't have to explain his orders, but was in a good enough mood to do so any way.

“The apprentice kept Johnson from joining your Hall of Fame this morning.”

“Aaaaah...yes, Senior Account Manager. I understand. You said the curse-breaker's canteen, Senior Account Manager?”

The goblin bared his teeth. “They won't give you any trouble...if they know what's good for them.”

Bill Weasley wasn't too certain about this statement. But he was certain what the correct response was in this situation.

“Yes, Senior Account Manager. I'd be happy to complete the assigned task, Senior Account Manager...”

### **oo00O00oo An Expository Interlude oo00O00oo**

The first wizard employees at Gringotts were Thirteenth-Century curse breakers, hired to be the public face of tomb-raiding expeditions within or on the fringe of the Muggle world, and to deal with those wards and traps that could only be handled with a wizard's magic. This was long before there even was a “GringottsWizards Bank” set up to handle the wizarding world's finances. The curse breakers worked for a goblin-run bank run exclusively for goblin customers...a bank whose name (when faithfully translated from the original Gobbleygook) was “Gringotts House of Greed.” This small group of wizards (and their successors over the years) were a rough and rugged lot who worked and played by Goblin rules. They were all fluent in Gobbledegook, and formed friendships within their group and with their Goblin co-workers...close relationships forged with blood and trust out in the field.

When the Ministry of Magic ceded control of its monetary policy to the Goblins under The Treaty of 1865, a separate arm of the institution was established and called “GringottsWizards Bank.” The Goblins built a gleaming white-marble above-ground building in Diagon Alley to service their human customers, and staffed that office with both goblins and new human employees. These were distasteful, but necessary, hires...there weren't enough English-speaking Goblins (or those willing to learn), and even fewer who were willing to spend the majority of their work day aboveground. And certain jobs, like those that required face-to-face meetings with Muggles, could only be done by a witch or wizard.

The curse-breaking wizards who were still employed by the “House of Greed” division of Gringotts held just as much disdain for their new human colleagues as did their goblin colleagues. They considered the newbies that worked for the Wizards Bank to be soft...incompetents who couldn't be bothered to learn Gobbledegook, or to do anything more adventurous than asking their

goblin managers to approve a new loan application. And while there were ward crafters and curse breakers employed by the Wizarding side of Gringotts, the range of services that they offered were just as boring and routine as their clients...little old witches who had magically locked themselves out of their homes, or businesses that needed their warding schemes tweaked.

Not that there was that much interaction between the two groups of human employees...tomb-raiding expeditions kept the “House of Greed” curse breakers out of country for weeks and months at a time. When they were back in Britain, and in between jobs, they kept to themselves, and rarely inter-acted with the human “wiz-bang” (i.e. Wizarding Bank) employees. They had their own clubhouse/canteen off in one corner of a near-surface floor of the bank, and while there weren’t any admissions restrictions, it was perfectly clear just who was and who wasn’t welcomed. And if the admissions policies weren’t clear enough, well...the canteen’s patrons weren’t at all afraid of doing a bit of educating.

Bill Weasley had accepted a temporary reassignment from the House of Greed into the Wizarding Bank at the start of the summer. This job transfer kept him in Britain, and gave him the opportunity to learn the kind of financial management and client management skills that the bank’s liaison with one of their most profitable accounts should have. His curse breaking colleagues at the House of Greed considered it a shameful demotion, and the need for discretion kept Bill from being able to explain why the temporary transfer had been necessary. Not wanting to invite trouble, he had steered clear of the curse breaker’s canteen since the reassignment...right up to the moment when he was ordered not to steer clear.

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“Right, so...just as a heads up?” Bill said, as he approached the canteen’s entrance. “This is where the House of Greed curse breakers hang out...they spend most of their time roughing it out on expeditions, so they can be a little...rough around the edges, and rather coarse in their comments.”

“I understand, Mr. Weasley,” the younger wizard replied. “So, speak only when spoken to?”

“That will do just fine,” said Bill. “And stop with the Mr. Weasley business...makes me sound like my old man!”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And stop with calling me...oh, right. Having me on, then?”

The younger wizard chuckled. “You don’t have to do this, you know,” he said. “I’ve heard the stories, and know well enough that my hiring has more to do with who I am than what I can do...”

“No worries,” Bill replied. “Sounds like you did good today... you deserve a chance to broaden your job horizons a bit.”

“If you say so, Sir.”



Bill rolled his eyes as he ushered the apprentice inside the canteen.

It was a dimly-lit, low-ceilinged room that stank of pipe smoke and sarcophagi. A vintage Muggle jukebox was playing a harsh-sounding goblin-sung tune that a Muggleborn might have mistaken for Klingon opera. Dangerous-looking men sat at square wooden tables that were scattered around the space, carrying on boisterous and bawdy conversations as they ate dangerous-looking food. Most of these conversations died-off when Bill and the apprentice entered the room. No ill words were spoken, or challenges made to their presence, but there were one or two dangerous-sounding growls, and if looks could kill then the two would have been ducking killing curses.

“Come on, then,” Bill muttered, as he steered the younger wizard towards a dark wood bar that ran the length of one wall. The apprentice was quick to comply, and kept his eyes focused on a rough-hewn wood plank floor that was covered with empty peanut shells and blood-stained sawdust. They were greeted by a gruff-looking one-armed bartender who could have been mistaken for Mad Eye Moody’s twin brother (in appearance, if not by attitude).

“Well, Bill-o...good to see you, son!” the bartender said.

“Good to see you too, Nick,” the red-haired wizard replied. “Still serving lunch?”

“You bet...pull up a bar stool!”

“Thanks,” said Bill, as he took a seat and patted the stool next to him. The apprentice curse breaker followed this nonverbal instruction, while the three wizards who had been sitting at the bar picked up their drinks and plates and moved towards a distant table.

“Don’t mind them, lad...they’re too long gone from their finishing school,” the bartender quipped. He reached his one hand across the bar top and said, “My name’s Nick...and you are?”

“This is Reggie Smith,” Bill interjected. A sheepish grin grew on his face as he added, “Guess the same could be said about my manners...Nick is a wiz-bang summer apprentice.”

“Well, welcome aboard, son,” said Nick. “Which menu you be wanting?”

“We’ll stick to human pub grub,” Bill replied with a grin. He turned towards the young wizard and said, “Unless some of the goblin delicacies have caught your eye?”

The younger wizard looked at the slimy and (in some instances) still quivering contents on the other patron’s plates and shook his head.

“Human food sounds brilliant,” he stated.

“Washed down with a couple of ales?” Bill added.

“You got it, Bill-o,” the bartender replied.

When Nick disappeared into the kitchen to place the food order, the young wizard risked another

glance around the room. It resembled the inside of the Hogshead Tavern, done up with the detritus of tomb-raiding expeditions on all seven continents. There was a strong Egyptian-style theme to the décor, given Gringott's focus on plundering that part of the world. But you could also spot bits and pieces of Etruscan art, the odd Chinese terra cotta warrior, and Incan pottery. The only consistent theme to the decorating was a locker-room appreciation for the female form, in all of its naked (and often pornographic) glory.

“Not exactly Madam Puddifoot's, is it?” Bill joked.

“All the better,” Reggie replied. He nodded towards the far wall and said, “Just glad to see that at least those blokes have their bits covered.”

Bill looked over his shoulder and snorted.

The younger wizard had gestured towards a group of magical photographs, stacked three rows high across one wall. They were mostly head-shot portraits, with a few full-body images sprinkled in between. One had a smiling wizard sitting on a barstool, while another showed a curse breaker casually leaning against the side of a sarcophagus. The frames for these magical photographs were all decorated the same slightly odd way...with a carved pair of human arms that had upraised hands and elbows that were bent at right angles in the lower corners (forming a “U” shape on the picture frame's lower half).

“So who were they, then?” Reggie asked.

Bill chuckled.

“They're all members of the Curse Breaker's Hall of Fame.”

“Really?” asked Reggie. “Well, then, I'm going to have my picture on that wall some day!”

Barking laughter turned the young wizard's attention away from the photographs.

Nick shook his head as he levitated plates and tankards down onto the bar and quipped, “So you think you have what it takes, son?”

“Well...something to aspire too, isn't it?” Reggie asked. “What do you have to do to get your picture up on that wall?”

The one-armed bartender smirked. “Not much, kid...you just have to be a dumb-arse.”

“Not just any dumb-arse,” Bill added with a smile. “You got to be a dumb-arse Gringotts curse-breaker who is dumb enough to be killed on a job.”

“Oh.”

“Still anxious to have your picture hanging, kid?” Nick asked with a smile.

The embarrassed curse breaker looked down at his plate of food and shook his head.

“Not really,” he muttered with embarrassment.

Bill laughed as he slapped the younger wizard on the back. “You’re not the first newbie to make that mistake, Reggie.”

The apprentice curse breaker nodded, then looked back up towards the wall and squinted.

“What’s with the arm frames, then?” he asked.

“That’s the hieroglyph ‘ka’,” Bill replied. “Didn’t you get a NEWT in Runes?”

The apprentice curse-breaker squinted at the nearest decorated frame.

“Ah, okay,” he said. “Answer is yes, by the way...just never seen a three-dimensional version of that rune before.” The young wizard took a sip of his drink and asked, “It means ‘life-force,’ right?”

Bill nodded.

“So they’re part of a memorial, or something?”

“Exactly,” Nick said approvingly. “They help frame up a permanent resting place for the spirits of those poor bastards.”

The young wizard looked around the somewhat dodgy-looking canteen and asked, “So instead of passing on to the next world, the spirits of these dead curse breakers are stuck here...in this place?”

“Better here than in the different circles in Hell that most of these bastards were bound for!” Nick declared. He then leaned over the bar and asked, “So, Bill-o they’ve got you a new apprentice, then?”

Bill shook his head. “No, just taking out for lunch” he replied. “Reggie here is Johnson’s apprentice.”

“So where is he, then?”

“Still getting patched up, I imagine,” replied the red-haired wizard. “They were out on a simple repo job this morning, and the idiot tripped over a flesh-melting ward.”

“Is that so?”

Bill slapped the young wizard on the back and said, “Yup, you would have been hanging another picture frame on that wall if Reggie, here, hadn’t been smart enough to levitate Johnson back out of harm’s way and portkey his arse to the infirmary.”

“Good on you, then, kid,” Nick said, giving an approving nod.

The young wizard was modest enough to blush at the complement, which Nick took as a good sign. His opinion of the boy grew even more favorable when the apprentice asked Bill if it was safe for him to use the loo without an escort. The red-haired curse breaker nodded, and pointed the younger wizard in the right direction.

Once Reggie was out of earshot, the bartender leaned across the bar and quietly asked, “So how have you been, Bill?”

The red-haired wizard smiled.

“Doing okay,” he said. “Thanks for asking...didn’t know what kind of reception I’d get here.”

Nick scoffed. “So is that why we haven’t seen you around all Summer?”

“You know how it is,” said Bill, nodding towards the other curse-breakers. “The way that the wiz-bang curse breakers get treated around here.”

“Yeah, but you’re not really one of them wiz-bangers, are you?” Nick asked.

A short breath caught in Bill throat, and he gave the bartender a wary glance.

“I am, at the moment, an employee of Gringott’s Wizarding Bank.”

Nick snorted. “Yeah, right. There’s a few of us that know the real reason why your broom twigs have been clipped. No shame in minding one of the company’s biggest accounts over his school holidays.”

The red-haired wizard squinted, then gave a glance towards the canteen’s other patrons.

“So does everyone know, then?” he asked.

“Why would you think that?”

“Cause nobody’s made a run at me, telling me that I don’t belong here?”

The bartender chuckled. “Ah, that...no, I suspect that’s something different.”

“What’s that?”

“The rumor that a couple of goblin wiz-bangers got served up to the dragons over the weekend,” said Nick.

Bill rolled his eyes.

“It was only one...and I had nothing to do with that decision!”

“Yeah, that just makes you all the more toxic,” Nick said with a grin. “To have goblin managers offing their own just ‘cause your girl was mistreated...only a fool would fail to take heed.”

A booming voice called out from the entrance to the canteen.

“Aww, for Cris’s sake, you leave country for a few weeks...hey, Nick when did you start serving fuckin’ wiz-bangers?”

The one-armed bartender glanced towards the doorway and shook his head.

“Speaking of fools,” he muttered.

Bill glanced over his shoulder and released an audible sigh as the other curse breaker walked up to the bar.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve showing your face around here, Weasley,” barked the new arrival. “Why don’t you go back to where you belong, and eat with the insurance salesmen?”

“Hello, Neumann...back from a job?” Bill asked.

“Just this morning,” Neumann stated. “Going to really enjoy this payout.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Rescue any kneazles from trees lately?”

“No, actually.”

The sarcastic wizard broke off the taunts long enough down half of the pint glass that Nick had just set in front of him. When Reggie returned from the loo, Bill reluctantly introduced the apprentice to the arrogant curse breaker who had been in the same Gringott’s hiring class. The younger wizard was quick to realize that there was some history between the two curse breakers, and that the new wizard was relishing the opportunity to get under Bill’s skin.

“So, Weasley...just how bad did you fuck up your last *real* job?” Neumann asked. “Must have been colossal for them to clip your twigs. Or did you lose your nerve and *ask* to be transferred to the wiz-bangers?”

“Can’t talk about it,” Bill said.

“Oh, right...hiding behind terms of a contract,” the other curse breaker said with snort. “At least you’re not hiding behind your mummy’s skirt.”

One of the curse breakers who had been listening in on the conversation from a nearby table snorted, which led Neumann to add, “That’s right...you’re doing that now as well!”

“Give it a rest,” Nick warned.

The curse breaker shook his head, turned towards Bill and asked, “So what’s it like, moving back home with your mummy and daddy? Comforting? *Soothing*?”

“Back off, Neumann,” Nick cautioned.

“Enjoying mummy’s cooking, Weasley? Is she tucking you in at night, and reading you bedtime stories?”

Bill growled, “Sod off, Neumann.”

The curse breaker sighed dramatically.

“Used to be fun, going head-to-head against you, Weasley...fighting for the best jobs. Now you’re just...fucking pathetic.”

Reggie Smith, feeling bad for being the reason why Bill was being taunted, pushed his plate away, thanked Bill for showing him the canteen, and quietly asked if it was time to return to work. The red-haired curse breaker shook his head, and whispered into the apprentice’s ear.

“Not about to turn tail from this arsehole,” he stated.

Neumann, sensing a potentially new avenue for abuse, implied that Bill was whispering “sweet nothings” into the young wizard’s ear, and asked if his girlfriend had dumped him. This insult had Bill reaching for his wand, at the same time that one of the other curse breakers made his way up to the bar and whispered a warning into Neumann’s ear about the risks of getting too aggressive in his taunts. The arrogant wizard was just cautious enough to back down a bit, and muttered a half-hearted apology.

Nick the bartender didn’t think that half-hearted was good enough, so he pumped a fresh glass of ale, set it down on the bar next to the one that the curse breaker was nursing, then addressed the teen-aged apprentice.

“You might want to spend a few minutes getting to know Mr. Neumann here, kid,” he stated. “Never know...you might just find yourself on his team some day.”

“Boy, I’d love the chance to go on a real expedition!” Reggie declared.

Neumann smiled. “Not a bad plan, kid. Sooner you get yourself transferred out of that loser customer service department and get yourself in where the *real* curse breakers work, the better.”

Nick smiled. “Yes, there is something special about a curse breaker’s first expedition.” He turned towards Bill and asked, “Did you know that I was on the same team as Neumann the first time he went tomb raiding?”

The red-haired wizard shook his head as he brought his beer glass to his lips.

“No, I didn’t,” he replied, with a grin. “Don’t imagine there’s a story or two worth telling about

that trip?”

“Oh, there may be...there maybe, indeed!”

Neumann frowned. “No need to bore the kid with tall tales,” he muttered.

“Oh, I disagree, Mr. Neumann,” Nick quipped. He raised his voice and loudly asked, “Anyone else want to hear how Andy, here, distinguished himself on his first trip to Egypt?”

“Hell, yes!” someone called back from a distant table. Within seconds nearly every canteen patron was gathered around the one-armed storyteller...and the one person who really didn’t want to be there at that moment wasn’t given a choice, thanks to a well-placed sticking charm that fixed Neumann’s trousers to his bar stool. He could have whipped out his wand and cancelled the spell, of course, but then he would have had to push his way through the gathering, and lost even more face than he stood to lose if he just sat there and took it.

Or so he thought.

“It was an Egyptian black job,” Nick began. “We was contracted by somebody who didn’t exactly have all of the permits lined up with the locals. So we went in disguised as Muggle nomads...walked out as Muggle nomads...didn’t use any magic above ground...”

“You actually walked into the desert?” asked Reggie.

“No, we rode camels into the site,” Nick explained. “Once the job was done we had to walk home ‘cause the camels were carrying the goods.”

Bill nodded. “When it’s a black job, you can’t do magic above ground...can’t portkey, or apparate...that would have lit up the local Ministry’s sensors. He turned towards the one-armed wizard and asked, “Assume you were inside the Zone?”

“Aye, that we were.”

Reggie asked, “So no brooms or carpets either?”

“Nope,” Bill replied. “The Egyptian wizards really monitor the skies closely inside the area most likely to be....”

“Plundered?” the new curse-breaker asked.

“Erm... *visited* is what we prefer to call it.”

The others nodded in agreement.

The one-armed bartender said, “So we were camping out in Bedouin tents right on top of the site...and it was a bit more than fifteen miles to the nearest town. Neumann, here...he was getting rather frustrated by the fact that the team was one big fucking sausagefest, you know?”

Reggie asked, “What’s a sausage fest?”

“An all-male team,” Bill explained.

“That’s right,” said Nick. “So one day...must have been two or three weeks into the job...our project manager Stonefire walks by our campfire and hears Neumann bitching about needing to get laid. So Stonefire walks up to Neumann and tells him that if he really needed to empty his balls that bad that he could use the camel that was tied out behind the mess tent.”

Everyone who was listening in on story laughed. Except for Neumann, of course.

“Yeah, we all laughed at that too,” Nick said with a grin. “But what do you know...later that night Neumann actually *did* sneak behind the mess tent. It was just as Stonefire said...there was this female camel tied to a palm tree. So Neumann stands there, behind this female camel, and thinks for a minute. Decides that he isn’t that desperate, and heads back to his tent for a wank.”

The young wizard asked, “How did you know he did that?”

“Well...just guessing, I guess,” Nick explained.

“Shut up and listen, kid,” one of the other listeners barked.

Nick acknowledged these instructions with a respectful head nod towards the curse breaker who had issued them. He then continued on with his story.

“A week later, we’re still up to our arses in deadfalls and other nasties, so no chance for a break. This time Neumann goes to the boss directly and complains. And again, Stonefire says that if Neumann needs to shag that badly that, well, there’s still that camel out behind the mess tent.”

“What he’d do?”

“Well, he looked Stonefire straight in the eye and asks how in the hell was he supposed to mount a beast like that? And Stonefire tells him that’s what the ladder was for.”

“Oh, shite, he didn’t!” somebody chuckled.

“Well, not quite yet,” Nick said with a leer. “Old Neumann, here...after hearing about this ladder he goes around back of the tent, and sure enough...there it is, lying on the ground a few feet away from the camel.”

“So did he actually use the ladder?” Bill asked.

“Well, he thought about it, boyo...he definitely thought about it,” said Nick. “Still, he decides that he’s not that desperate.”

“What happened, then?”



“One more week goes by. We’d been banging our heads against this tomb for a month straight, now, and Neumann not only got blue balls...he’s got a blue willie, and a blue bum. Hell his knees were starting to look a little blue. He just couldn’t take it anymore, so in the dead of night...after everyone else had turned in...he slipped around the back side of the tent, picked up that ladder and he leaned it up against the camel’s arse. Then he climbed half-way up that ladder, so that his bits were lined up with the camel’s bits. One hand lifts up the front of his robes, other hand lifts up the camel’s tail, and then once he carefully balances himself he pokes his John Thomas in between the rungs and thrusts himself home.”

“No! You gotta be pulling our leg, Nick!”

“I kid you not!” the retired curse-breaker claimed.

“How do you know it went down like that?”

“Okay, fine...we pieced that last string of events together afterwards.”

“After when?”

“After the bloody camel woke up the whole bloody camp with her bloody hissing!”

The retired curse breaker waited for the roar of laughter to quiet down a bit before continuing on with his tale.

“So everybody piles out their sleeping bags and runs behind the mess tent to see just what in Merlin’s name was going in. And there was Neumann, standing bare-arsed half-way up the ladder, pumping his hips back and forth, and banging that camel for all she was worth.”

“What did you do then?”

“We laughed our arses off, of course,” Nick replied. “Everyone but Stonefire, that is. Goblin didn’t even have a smile on his face as he walked towards the camel, looked up towards Neumann. And then he asked...”

“What...c’mon Mate...what’d he ask?”

“He asked Neumann why he didn’t just ride the camel into town to visit the Muggle whorehouse like the rest of us did!”

The story’s punch line produced a boisterous roar of laughter that was sprinkled liberally with derisive taunts. Whoever had stuck Neumann’s bum to his bar stool was kind enough to cancel the spell, which allowed the highly-embarrassed curse breaker to slip away before his cheeks could turn redder than they already were.

Bill leaned across the bar thanked Nick as the noise volume dropped and the other curse-breakers returned to their tables. The one-armed bartender said that it was Neumann who should be thanking him...for delaying the idiot’s own inductance into the Curse Breaker’s Hall of Fame.

And Reggie Smith once again proved that he actually deserved to be a Gringotts employee by realizing the likely truth behind that statement.

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The Burrow provided a far more subdued lunchtime environment than the canteen, even after that morning's provocative question-and-answer sessions involving breast sizes and seat selections. The *Praetego* spells that Fleur had cast on Hermione and Harry were still active, but unnecessary, once Ron emerged from the stairwell and sat down at the table. His arrival reminded the couple what he had been doing up in his bedroom, which forced them to consider what Fleur had likely done to distract Molly while they snogged and groped in the sitting room. The thought of the Weasley matriarch dashing off to her own bedroom to relieve some allure-induced stress more than just an erection-killer...Harry figured that just being able to keep his lunch down was an accomplishment.

An afternoon rain shower kept anyone from asking if a visit could be made to *Le Cote d'Weasley*. With the chicken coops now cleaned, Ginny was sent to her room as punishment for her saucy test question about Fleur's breasts. Molly paired Hermione with Ron for some stove-top brewing, and Molly strongly suggested that Fleur take a rest, since she was scheduled for second shift guard duty from four until midnight. Fleur politely suggested that she really didn't need an afternoon nap, and instead proposed that she repay the favor and spend the afternoon teaching Harry some useful French phrases.

Harry liked the idea of learning French, but Molly wouldn't allow it, noting that his ignorance of the language was supposed to be a critical requirement for his role as Fleur's English-language conversation partner. Instead, the Weasley Matriarch changed her mind and put Harry on potions duty alongside Hermione. She then instructed Ron to sit across from Fleur at the kitchen table, so that he could build up his tolerance to her presence to the point where *he* could serve as her conversation partner. Fleur had little interest in having Ron's help, but rather than outright refuse to comply with Molly's orders she went along with the scheme.

The red-haired teen didn't stand a chance.

The first time that Fleur released a burst of her male-focused allure, Ron's eyes immediately glazed over, and he bolted from the kitchen in search of a private place to rub. Molly chased after her son and dragged him by his ear back to the kitchen table. A sticking charm was then used to keep Ron's bum fixed to the bench.

The second time that Fleur casually released a burst of her male-focused allure, Ron wiggled and squirmed until he could no longer resist the temptation and reached down and grabbed himself through his robes. Molly chastised her son for his lack of willpower, and dragged his hands back into view. A sticking charm was then used to keep those hands fixed to the table top.

The third time that Fleur released a burst of her male-focused allure, Ron wiggled and squirmed and whined and whimpered. Molly chastised her son again, and used a silencing spell to keep Ron from using inappropriate words or from making inappropriate noises.

The fourth and final time that Fleur released a burst of her male-focused allure, she didn't stop. Ron desperately tried to avoid an embarrassing release of his own. Hermione was unnerved by the surreal scene and lost her focus on her potions work. Harry was unnerved by the surreal way that Molly kept staring at his crotch (as she wondered why he wasn't being affected by Fleur the same way that her Ronnie was), and lost his focus on his potions work. The result was more than one sticky mess, as Ron and the stove-heated cauldron boiled over at roughly the same time.

Molly gave up on building her son's tolerance to Fleur's allure and sent the teen-aged wizard off to his room, leaving the other three to deal with the spoiled potion. Once this task was completed, Hermione, Fleur and Harry were allowed to return to the living room for another English language lesson.

With Molly still within ear shot, they had no chance to deconstruct the last few hours. So they decided to play it straight...at least at the beginning...

"Ready, then?" Hermione asked, as she took the same seat that she had used that morning.

"Absolutely," Harry replied brightly. He was sitting on one end of the living room couch, while Fleur sat on the other (with as much empty air between them as they could manage, given that Molly had already popped her head into the living room).

The part-Veela said, "Alors..."

"Fleur?"

"Oh, sorry, Hermione...Right, then."

"There you go...let's start with the 'h' sounds."

The French witch nodded, then turned towards Harry and asked, "Hello, Harry. How are you?"

The teen-aged wizard smiled, and replied, "I'm fine, Fleur...how are you?"

"I am very happy, Harry," she replied. "Was that Hedwig flying high in the air?"

"Erm...no, she's upstairs having a rest, I think."

"Oh, that ees...that *is* nice to 'ear."

Hermione shook her head. "Fleur, it's...that *is* nice to *hear*."

The French witch nodded. "It is nice to hear that Hedwig is having a rest in Harry's room."

"Great...keep going!" Hermione encouraged.

Fleur smiled. "Okay, 'Ermione...I think that Harry would also like to sleep in his room."

“It’s Hermione.”

“Oh, sorry...so, I should have said that I think that Hermione would also like to sleep in his room?”

The Muggleborn rolled her eyes.

“No, it’s Hedwig that shares Harry’s room. I have another roommate.”

“Yes, it is Hermione that sleeps wiz me.”

“No, I sleep *with* you, Fleur.”

“Really?” Harry whispered. “In *her* bed, or yours?”

“Will you stop it?” Hermione asked. “We’re trying to have a serious lesson here.”

“Sorry...go on, then.”

“Zanks...I mean, Thanks, Harry.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So, Harry...did you hear the howls in Hermione’s room last night?”

“Erm, no...I didn’t....were you *helping her* , Fleur?”

“Nobody was helping or howling, Harry,” Hermione muttered.

“Oh, right...Fleur is just making up these sentences using words that start with the letter *h* .”

The French witch nodded. “Exactly...I want to keep Hermione happy, Harry.”

“I like keeping Hermione happy as well,” Harry said with a rakish grin.

“That’s great, Fleur!” her tutor praised. “You just correctly pronounced another string of three consecutive “h” words! How about another one?”

Fleur rested her chin in her hand and thought for a moment.

“Ah...I have one. Harry, can I help Hermione holster your wand?”

Her conversation partner laughed. “Good one, Fleur.”

Fleur looked at him, a bit impatiently.

“Something wrong?” Harry asked.

“This ees a practice conversation,” she replied. “I was waiting for the answer to my question.”

Harry stifled a snort of amusement, then asked, “Sorry Fleur...shall we try it again?”

The part-Veela nodded. “Harry, can I help Hermione holster your wand?”

“Might better ask her,” Harry quipped.

“Of course,” Fleur replied. She turned towards her tutor and asked, “Hermione, can I help you the next time that you holster Harry’s wand?”

The Muggleborn sighed. “What makes you think that I have already done that??”

Fleur shrugged. “Eef zee shoe feets...”

“*If* the shoe fits?” Harry asked.

“That is a good place to use that phrase, no?”

“Erm, yes...I guess it is,” Hermione blustered.

Fleur smiled, and asked, “So, Hermione...does Harry’s shoe fit? Or do you need to use a horn shoe?”

The Muggleborn blushed. “It’s called a shoe horn in English.”

“Thank you for correcting me.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

Fleur waited patiently.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“I am now making conversation with you, Hermione,” Fleur explained.

“So...oh,” said Hermione. “Right....I don’t know if Harry would need a shoe horn.”

“You will know soon, though?”

Hermione sighed. She then tried to turn the tables by asking, “Do Bill’s shoes fit, Fleur?”

The French witch giggled. Lowering her voice, she replied, “We are not *zat* kinky, Hermione.”

Harry snorted. “You mean that you two are not *that* kinky.”

Fleur giggled. “So has my Bill been telling you stories, zen?”

“It’s *then* , Fleur,” Hermione whined. “Maybe we should move on to the ‘th’ sound.”

“Certainly,” the French witch replied. She quickly turned towards The-Boy-Who-Lived and asked, “Harry, did you know that Hermione’s thinks that your thicket should be thinner?”

He laughed out loud.

“So?”

“Ah, right...erm, no, Fleur. I didn’t know that she thinks that I should thin out my thicket.”

“Do you know how to thin your thicket?”

“Erm...maybe,” he replied. “Can’t say *that* I’ve ever *thought* to do *that* sort of *thing* .”

“Really?”

“Sorry, it’s...let’s just say that you don’t see that kind of horticulture in the dormitory...or at least not in the boys’s dormitory.”

“Harry, that does not matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

“It does not matter if the other boys do not care if they tickle their girlfriend’s noses.”

“Fleur!” Hermione hissed, throwing a pointed glance towards the kitchen door. “Remember the hovercraft!”

The French witch smiled and nodded. “Yes, I must remember to pronounce that word correctly. Hovercraft.”

“Very good,” Harry offered.

“So, how else can I explain?” asked Fleur. “Ah! I know!” she declared.

“What?”

The part-Veela reached out and touched the wizard’s knee.

“So let us eemagine...”

“It’s imagine.”

“Imagine that there is a very large snake zat lives een zee thicket?”

“Fleur?” asked a wary Hermione.

“Oh, sorry. I meant to say that there is a very large snake living in the thicket.”

“Really?”

“Yes, perhaps it is even dragon-sized?”

“Fleur!” Hermione whispered.

Her roommate paid no mind.

“Do you understand, Harry?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he replied, enjoying the blush of embarrassment growing on Hermione’s face. “I’ve got a dragon-sized snake living in my thicket.”

“And so, there is someone who is very hungry. She wishes to eat the snake...to swallow it up.”

“Really? That’s very interesting,” Harry quipped.

“It is,” Fleur agreed. “But this person has...she has never swallowed a snake before.”

Hermione dropped her face into her hands and shook her head in embarrassment.

Her roommate ignored this response and pushed forward.

“And I think that it will be easier for her to swallow the snake if the thicket is thinner.”

“Oh, shoot me now and get it over with, Fleur!” Hermione whispered.

“Is something wrong, ma cherie?” the French witch asked. “Did I make a mispronouncement?”

The Muggleborn witch shook her head even as her face was still buried in her hands.

“I don’t think that ‘mispronouncement’ is a word...at least not in English,” she said through her fingers.

Harry laughed.

“I don’t suppose either of you could offer some advice on thinning your thicket?”

Fleur chuckled loudly. “Oh, Harry...you make me laugh so hard! Don’t you already know?”

“Obviously not.”

“So is this a horticulture lesson, then?” asked a playful voice from the kitchen entrance.

“Bill!” shouted Fleur. She jumped off the couch and dashed across the room to give her intended a hug.

“Hey, there,” he replied with a smile.

Fleur pulled back from her hug so that she could look into his eyes.

“You are home early, no?”

The curse breaker nodded at the same time that he yawned.

“Time off to recover from a bit of portkey lag, and I wanted the chance to say hello before you did second shift guard duty.”

“You are tired from making portkey trips?” asked Fleur.

“Just a bit,” he replied. Bill glanced over his shoulder towards the kitchen, then turned back to Fleur and whispered, “*Plus tard, ma cherie.*”

Hermione cleared her throat.

“Fleur was in the middle of an *English* language conversation,” she stated.

“So I *heard*,” Bill chuckled.

“Busy day, then?” asked Harry.

Bill glanced over his shoulder towards the kitchen before he replied with a furtive head shake.

“Later,” he mouthed.

When Harry nodded, Bill vocalized, “It certainly was an interesting day.”

“Really?” asked Hermione.

“Yeah, I visited Fred and George’s on the way back,” said Bill, as he slipped a rucksack off of his shoulder. “They had a few things that they wanted us to test...”

“Oh, and what would that be?” asked Molly, as she entered the room.

Her son smiled as he opened the rucksack’s flap and pulled out a Quaffle-sized ball.

“Just some alternative ammunition for the gnome launcher,” he quipped.

Molly scowled.

“If you think that I am going to allow any of you to waste your time on such frivolities...”

“Yes, Mum,” Bill muttered, as he handed the rucksack over.

Fleur, Harry and Hermione wouldn’t have said anything about Bill’s quick capitulation so long as



Molly was in the room. Their unspoken thoughts were quelled, however, by the wink that Bill gave them while his mother was rummaging through the rucksack.

“Your father and I are going to talk about this when he comes home...now, go wash up, Bill. And Fleur...your shift starts in ten minutes. I hope for our sakes that you’re as well-rested as you claim.”

“Yes, Mrs. Weasley,” Fleur said, with a singsong tone of voice that was dripping with passive aggressiveness.

**oo00O00oo**

The animated after-dinner conversation between Molly and Arthur regarding the potential value of the gnome launcher within an integrated home security system lasted long enough for Bill slip outside with Harry and Hermione without anyone else noticing. The three walked briskly towards the orchard, stopping once they were just out of sight of the Burrow’s back door.

“First things first,” said Bill, as he cast a quick security ward, then reached into a pocket and retrieved four buttons.

“Damn, can’t tell which is which, now,” he muttered.

“Our own storage buttons?” Hermione whispered with excitement.

“Yeah,” said Bill, as he conjured a small table and dropped the buttons onto the surface.

He tapped one of the buttons with the tip of his wand and said, “Password.”

“Not a very secure password, is it?” Hermione asked.

“Just temporary,” Bill replied, as the button expanded in size. “You can change it later.”

As the curse breaker lifted off the button top, he caught Harry and Hermione both leaning forward to get a glimpse of the button’s contents once.

“Ah, ah, ah...no peeking,” he joked, as he lifted the secret storage device off the table and turned away from the young couple.

“Oh, Bill...”

“It’s better this way,” he explained, as he took a quick peek inside. Bill then re-secured the button top and turned back towards Harry and Hermione.

“How so?” she asked.

“Your mail-order packages arrived,” said Bill with a wide grin. He held out the enlarged button and asked, “Would you rather Harry see your new unmentionables now, or later, when you two

have a little more privacy?”

“Oh...!” Hermione said with exasperation, as she grabbed the button out of Bill’s hand. “It’s not like either of you haven’t seen a pair of knickers before!”

“It’s not knickers that I saw at the top of the shipping list,” Bill quipped.

Harry chuckled. “So what was on top, then?”

Hermione’s cheeks began to flush as she considered the possibilities.

“Never you mind,” she stated, as she pulled out her own wand. “Switching passwords should be a low-enough powered spell for me to use safely, right?”

“If you’re just changing the password, then sure,” Bill replied. “Better let me do the switching spell for the buttons, though...just to be safe.”

Once the secret storage button was safely swapped out and secured to the outside of Hermione’s robe, Bill took a look inside the second button.

“Okay, this one is Hermione’s as well,” he stated.

“More unmentionables?” asked Harry.

Bill smiled and shook his head.

“You’ll want to keep track of which button is which,” he stated, as he switched it for a different button on Hermione’s robes. “This one is a charmed miniature washing machine...wouldn’t do to send a book through a spin cycle, would it?”

“The button does laundry?” asked Harry.

“Yeah, it’s dead useful when you’re out in the desert on a job,” Bill quipped. “Also comes in handy when you don’t want your mum checking out your drawers.”

“Ah...that will be useful,” said Hermione. “How does it work?”

“Fleur can show you later,” said Bill, as he took the remaining two buttons and used a switching spell that fixed them to Harry’s robes. “I’ll swing by your room tonight and do the same, Milord.”

“Oh, lay off on the milord, will you?” Harry asked.

Bill shrugged. “Seems all the more appropriate after I visited some of your estates today.”

“The portkey travel you were talking about earlier?” Hermione asked.

“That’s right,” the curse breaker said. “You’ll lord over a dozen different properties, Harry...at

least once you take on the titles.”

“A dozen?” Harry asked skeptically.

“You travelled a dozen different places by portkey this afternoon?” Hermione asked skeptically.

“Yes, on the dozen, and no on all the visiting...only toured the three safest and most secure properties,” Bill replied.

“A dozen different properties?” asked Harry.

“Where did you go?” asked Hermione.

Bill glanced back over his shoulder towards the Burrow. Once he visually confirmed that they still had some privacy, he turned back towards the other two.

“First stop was the Inner Hebrides,” he stated. “A lovely thatched-roof four-bedroom cottage and acreage on the Isle of Skye, up in the Cuillin Hills...unplottable location with heavy-duty wards. Lots of privacy, some great hiking trails...”

“But it’s still in Scotland, and well-within Dumbledore’s reach if he really put his mind to it,” Hermione declared.

Bill nodded. “Ideal choice if you couldn’t or didn’t want to cross international borders...and it’s the only one of the three you could apparate to, once you got your licenses.”

“Could Gringotts help us cross international borders, if we wanted to?” Hermione asked.

“Absolutely,” said Bill. “Only took a couple of hours to secure international portkeys. You’d be able to do the same, and besides...you both want the chance to show off your new swim costumes, right?”

Harry chuckled. “So, where else, then?”

“You own a 640-acre coffee plantation in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica,” Bill replied. “There’s just a small river on the property, but I could also see the sea shore from the veranda of the manor house. Nice beaches, I hear.”

“I’ve heard that as well,” Hermione replied, as her eyes lit up at the thought of the possibilities.

“I took some pictures at each of the locations...put them in the same button as Harry’s new banana hammocks,” Bill quipped. “By the way, you’d fit right in wearing one of those down there...or so I hear.”

“So what’s the downside?” Harry asked, trying not to blush in response to the teasing.

“Besides the bloody heat and the bloody humidity that had me sweating like a pig within a minute

of my arrival?”

“Yeah, besides all that.”

“August is the middle of the Atlantic hurricane season.”

“What’s a hurricane?” Harry asked.

Bill and Hermione’s both snapped their heads towards Harry’s, before they remembered his limited ranges of education and experience.

“Massive tropical storm with torrential rains and hundred-mile an hour winds,” Bill finally replied.

“Right, doesn’t sound like much of a holiday,” said Harry.

“Perfect place for Christmas hols, though,” Hermione noted with a smile.

“It’s a date, then,” her boyfriend replied. This earned him a well-deserved kiss, and a whispered description of the special swim costume that she would save for the occasion.

Bill gave the young couple a moment, before he cleared his throat and stated, “Which brings us to the place that I’d recommend you consider, milord...fancy a trip to North America?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Care to be a little more specific?”

“It’s a hidden island within a river that divides part of the Muggle United States from Muggle Canada,” said Bill.

“What’s it called?” asked Harry.

“Erm...Hidden Island?” said Bill.

“Nice and simple,at least.”

“St. LawrenceRiver,then?” Hermione asked.

“That’s right.”

“Which side?” Hermione asked.

“Canadian side,” the curse breaker replied. “Not that it matters if you’re a witch or wizard...it’s all the same North American Confederation of Magical States.”

Harry was tempted to ask for a primer on wizard world geography, but knew that they were talking on borrowed time. So instead, he asked, “How big is this island, then?”

Bill searched for that answer on a slip of parchment that he pulled out of his robe pocket. “Not

that large...only three hundred and fifty-three acres.”

“Not that large?” Hermione said with an eye roll. “That’s what...150 hectares?”

“More or less.”

“How about how big it is in units of measurement that I understand?” Harry asked.

“We’ve got close to forty acres of land within the Burrow’s wards,” Bill replied.

“Okay, so it’s almost ten times bigger than big enough,” Harry observed. “And the wards are good there?”

“Yeah, the entire island is unplottable and hidden from Muggles and Magicals alike,” Bill replied. “As far as everyone else knows, there’s only 999 islands there.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“The entire area is called ‘The Thousand Islands’,” Bill explained. “It’s got a really nice private beach, and a small castle that the Potter family has apparently used as a vacation home for more than six hundred years.”

“*More* than six-hundred years?” Hermione asked skeptically.

“Wizards did their exploring and discovering before the Muggles did,” Bill replied.

“Oh.”

“Great location, actually,” the curse breaker noted. “Within apparition distance of Montreal, Salem and New York City.”

“Useful next year, then,” said Harry.

Bill shook his head. “They allow fourteen-year olds to learn over there. You both could get licenses, if you wanted.”

“Even with my injury?” asked Hermione.

“Okay, so maybe towards the end of the holiday,” Bill admitted.

“Thought it was too dangerous for kids younger than seventeen to learn how to apparate?” said Harry.

“That might have been the case two-hundred years ago,” said Bill. “Magical maturity is tied closely to physical maturity, and average age of puberty is what...twelve, thirteen these days?”

“Something like that,” said Hermione. “So if it’s safer for today’s teen-agers to learn at a younger

age, why do they make us wait?”

Harry snorted. “That’s easy...because most lawmakers are also parents.”

Bill agreed wholeheartedly. “Can you imagine kids having the ability to pop off someplace all on their own, without needing their parent’s help or approval?”

Harry chuckled. “Yes, well...that is sort of what we’re talking about now, isn’t it?”

“Not an issue for the emancipated head of two major houses,” Bill noted. “And if Hermione’s parents are worried...well, Fleur and I could be there acting as chaperones, right?”

“Not acting too hard, I hope,” Harry quipped.

“Hush, now!” Hermione hissed.

“Relax, Sweetheart,” said Harry, as he reached for his girlfriend’s hand. “Your parents have passports, don’t they? If we did this...might be nice if they went along, and you finally got the chance to show off what you’ve learned in school.”

“You actually want to spend time on a small island with your girlfriend’s father?” Bill teased.

“Oh, I don’t know...how many bedrooms in that castle?”

“Erm...twelve, I think.”

“Excellent...then it’s big enough to invite Fleur’s family as well.”

“Hey, now, let’s not get too ambitious...”

Hermione snorted. “Oh, it’s a wonderful idea...watching little Gabrielle trying to bait Harry’s hook...”

“Erm...good point. Don’t want to get too ambitious,” said Harry. “And we still haven’t decided whether this is a good idea, or fleshed out the potential counter-actions.”

“Fair enough,” Hermione admitted. She turned towards Bill and asked, “And you’re certain we only need to decide a day or two in advance?”

“That’s what Chokebar has said...could be ready to go the moment Harry becomes Lord Potter-Black.”

“What about Harry’s passport, then?” the Muggleborn witch asked.

“Ah...thanks, Hermione, I knew I was forgetting something,” said Bill. “Harry, I’m supposed to ask how many you want.”

“How many what?”

“Muggle passports.”

“He has a choice?” Hermione asked.

“Erm, yes, actually,” Bill admitted. “Turns out that Harry’s father was born there.”

“In North America?” asked Harry.

The curse breaker nodded his head. “From what I was told, Harry’s grandparents were on holiday when a nasty strain Dragon Pox broke out in Britain. His grandmum was seven months pregnant at the time, and they didn’t want to risk her catching the Pox after all of the years that they’d spent trying to produce an heir.”

“So she stayed in Canada until James was born?”

“That’s right.”

“So Dad was born in North America,” said Harry. “I was still born here in Britain, right?”

“Yes,” said Bill. “But because your father was born in Canada, you can hold dual citizenship...or quadruple, if you count the magical sides as well.”

Harry shook his head and sighed. “Should this bit of information be added to the long list of *‘Shite my headmaster should have told me’*?”

“Dunno,” said Bill. “Chokebar didn’t even know all of this until I told him this afternoon.”

“How’d you learn it, then?”

“Erm...well, each of the properties has a caretaker,” said Bill. “The one in Canada was a talkative little fellow who has served in that position for seventy some-odd years.”

“Served House Potter for all that time?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.”

“And he's a little fellow?" asked Harry.

"Erm...."

Harry muttered an expletive under his breath.

Hermione would have called him on his language, had the same thing not been resting on the tip of her tongue.

“How many?” Harry asked.

“How many years has the caretaker served there?” Bill asked.

“No...how many house elves will I own once I become Lord Potter-Black?”

Bill let out a deep sigh as he began to add up the numbers in his head.

“Depends,” he finally replied. “House elves aren’t treated as slaves in most places around the world...more like indentured servants.”

“How many would answer the call if I summoned them all at once?” asked Harry.

“Well...House Potter has twenty-four that have been loaned out on long-term contracts, but they’d still respond if it was an emergency, so...”

“Just give me a number, Bill.”

“Thirty-seven.”

“Bloody Hell!” Harry hissed.

“Bloody Hell is right, someone’s coming,” Hermione whispered, after catching some movement with the corner of her eye.

Bill quickly cancelled the security charm.

“What are you three doing out here?” Molly asked, as she strode towards them with her clock under one arm and a wrapped package under the other.

Her son turned back towards his mum and said, “Teaching these two a tripwire detection charm.”

“You know that they are not allowed to do under-aged magic.”

“No law against them watching as I do the charm, is there?” Bill asked.

“They will do well enough to worry about the spells on the official Hogwarts spell list,” Molly declared. She turned towards Harry and asked, “Would you mind if Hedwig made a quick trip to Romania, Dear?”

The-Boy-Who-Lived looked at the large package under her arm and cautiously replied. “Not at all, Mrs. Weasley...although it isn’t going to be very quick if that’s what you want to send.”

Molly looked down at the package under her arm and shook her head. “Oh, no...this just arrived here for us,” she explained. “It’s just a small letter that I need to send to Charlie.”

Hedwig startled Molly when she chose that moment to silently swoop out of nowhere and landed on Harry’s shoulder. He couldn’t help his lips curling up into a small grin as his familiar balanced her weight on one foot as she held the other out towards Bill’s mum.



“Aaah...I left the letter back inside the kitchen,” said Molly. “And as long as we’re there...Ginny needs your help in the kitchen, Harry. If you work together there’s still enough time to start on a new batch of pain relief potions before bedtime.”

Harry’s eyes darted towards Hermione’s and they shared a brief, wordless conversation. Then he looked back towards Molly and nodded.

“See you two back inside?” he asked Hermione and Bill.

Molly frowned. “Oh, yes, that’s right...I’ve...I mean, Bill’s father and I...have decided to allow some of your free time to be spent on that contraption,” she stated. “Arthur is already doing his tinkering on the other side of the house now.”

Hermione and Bill recognized this statement as both an order and an opportunity.

“We’ll head that way then, Mrs. Weasley,” the Muggleborn witch replied.

While Harry followed Molly back inside the house with Hedwig still perched on his shoulder, his future liegeman and current girlfriend took the long route around the house towards the gnome launcher. Bill used that time to tell Hermione that he’d anticipated her concerns about House Potter’s house elves, and placed a rare, out-of-print book inside of her storage button. It was written in the Nineteenth-Century by a jaded Muggleborn wizard who left the wizarding world after spending forty years at a dead-end job working for the “Beasts and Beings” section of the Ministry of Magic. The Ministry of Magic and Gringotts had worked together to buy up all of the first printing and prevent any subsequent editions of this expose from being made. Both institutions were highly motivated to keep certain truths about non-human sentients from escaping into the general magical populace...the Ministry was afraid that this knowledge would make them look bad, while the goblins were afraid that this knowledge would make them look too good (as there were profits to be made out of ignorance).

Bill highly recommended that Hermione read the chapter on house elves that night when she was alone in bed. She promised to do so, and they then spent the next ninety minutes happily experimenting with the magical artillery shells that Arthur had liberated from his wife’s impoundment.

Fleur still had two hours of guard duty to complete by the time that Hermione dressed for bed. Intent on keeping her promise to Bill, she sorted through her lingerie-filled storage button and selected a silk nightgown that was designed slightly more for her comfort than for her boyfriend’s enjoyment. As she settled into bed and opened the book to right chapter, she was overwhelmed by the feelings of sexual arousal that Harry was broadcasting through her familiar. Hermione was confused...with Hedwig making a mail run Harry couldn’t be getting any indication of her own emotional state, and she didn’t think Harry was narcissistic enough to get off on modeling his own mail-order unmentionables.

But then a more likely interpretation came to mind...her boyfriend wasn’t aroused by knowing what she was presently wearing or feeling...he was getting off just by imagining what she might

be wearing or might be doing at that moment.

Hermione liked this interpretation very much. So much so that she closed the book, turned down the covers and slipped out of bed (not that she would have been able to focus on the text if she hadn't). The Muggleborn expanded her storage button, shucked off the relatively modest slip, and pulled out one of the costumes that her boyfriend had selected from the mail-order catalog. She then jumped onto her bed, pulled the curtains, and set her book against the foot board. She then pretended the book was her boyfriend, and proceeded to give the kind of show that she imagined that Harry might be imagining...acting if she was earning the arousal that he was presently broadcasting in her direction.

She knew that he had no way of knowing what she was doing right then, but figured that it would be just as much fun to watch his face the next day when she told him what she was wearing...and what she was doing while she was wearing it.

*canoncansodoff*  
*FanficAuthors.net*

# A Boon for Bill

## Chapter 8: To the Barricades!

Fleur realized that she had forgotten to reapply the silencing charms when the reason for applying those charms woke her at an ungodly hour.

"What...really? Again?" Hermione moaned.

The French witch had the same thought in mind.

Fleur groped for her wand and quietly cast a *Tempus* charm. It was 3:30 in the morning.

"It's way too early, Harry...go back to sleep..."

Fleur's consciousness sharpened as her eyebrows jumped up towards her hairline. She turned onto her side, and peeked through the narrow gap in her bed curtains.

"No really, Sweetheart, give it a rest...give me a rest!"

The part-Veela stifled the giggle that was threatening to escape her lips. How in Merlin's name had they gotten around Molly's gender line?

"Please, Harry...Please? Oh, you are such a randy lad, aren't you...Oh, bugger it...I give up!"

Bill's fiancée licked her lips as she heard the ruffle of thrown-back blankets coming from behind her roommate's closed bed curtains.

"Okay, Fly Boy, plunge down into your slave girl's tight approach..."

Fleur's eyes flashed in surprise...had the young couple gone further than she'd thought?

"That feels so good, Luv! The way that you're targeting my.....that you're....yes-s-s-s-s-s-s! Yes! Yes! **Yes!...** "

A hastily cast silencing spell kept Fleur from hearing the exciting climax to the early-morning audio performance. She could only hope that she'd been quick enough to keep that performance from waking up the rest of the house.

The French witch pulled off her own blankets, swung her legs around, and slipped out of bed. She quickly crossed the room and placed her ear against the bedroom door. There was nothing to hear coming from the other side. Fleur stepped back, whispered a series of quick detection spells, then let out a deep breath...while she might have forgotten to reapply the silencing charms to Hermione's bed curtains after returning from her late-night guard duty, she hadn't been too tired (or too foolish) to forget applying the privacy charms to the bedroom door, walls, floor, or ceiling.

Fleur glanced back towards Hermione's bed and considered her options. There were so many ways

to have fun with the situation...but should she surprise the young lovers before, or after the apex of their latest coupling? Perhaps that high point already been reached behind the spell-silenced curtains?

The part-Veela sniffed the pheromone-enriched air, searching for an answer. There was a heavy, musky, whiff of Hermione...something that nicely complemented her own musky scent of excitement. But there was no male in the mix...nothing like the sharp scent of Harry's pre-release that she'd caught the day before, as Hermione ground against her boyfriend's excitement.

The French witch smiled, then shook her head. All was not what it seemed...it was only what she smelled.

Fleur tip-toed back into her own bed and slipped under the covers. There would be time to tease in the morning.

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Hermione winced and turned away from the unwelcomed invasion of light.

"Ten more minutes, Mum?"

The woman who had thrown open the Muggleborn's bedcurtains giggled.

"Zere ees no time, ma Chérie."

Hermione groaned.

"Mind the zees and Chéries, Luv."

Fleur giggled some more as she plopped down onto the side of the bed and slapped her roommate's blanket-covered thigh.

"Mais, eet ees too hard to focus when zee air ees so heavy wiz your sex, ma petite loutre!" she teased. The French witch nodded towards the book that lay unopened next to the pillow and asked, "It must have been a very sexy roman, no?"

Hermione turned her head towards the book with the chapter on house elves and groaned.

"It's not a romance novel," she stated.

"Eef you say so. Come, eet ees time for la magie médecine...unless your fingers are too tired from all zee rubbing to hold your wand?"

"Very funny," Hermione whined as she pulled the pillow from underneath her head and swung it towards her roommate. Fleur ducked.

"It is good that you still have some energy after all the wet dreaming and the little deaths," the

part-Veela teased.

"What make you think that I was asleep long enough to hit REM stage?" Hermione muttered. "Crookshanks is going to have to find someplace else to sleep at night."

"Ah, so you are complaining about the broadcasts? Of you feeling what your lover felt as you felt yourself?"

"Four bloody times last night!" Hermione hissed. "And it was how *he* felt that was forcing me to feel myself, not the other way around."

"It is a complaint?" Fleur asked. "Would you like me to ask Harry to reduce the number of times that he masturbates each day?"

"Don't you dare!" Hermione hissed, as she swung her pillow again.

Fleur ducked underneath the flight path, then playfully reached down and tweaked one of the nipples that had been exposed by the shifting blankets.

"What is zis? Do you need to put on clothes just so you can take them off during zee practice?"

Hermione huffed as she brushed off Fleur's fingers and slipped off the opposite side of the bed. The full frontal flash of flesh generated an "Ooh, la, la!" before the Muggleborn could slip on her bathrobe.

"As if you sleep wearing anything more than a smile," Hermione pouted, as she walked towards the door, wand in hand. "I'll be back in a minute," she added, before casting an unlocking charm, and slipping out into the hall.

As Fleur sat on her roommate's bed, waiting for to return from the loo, she spotted something metallic out of the corner of her eye. She looked down, and gasped when she discovered a single golden link of chain peeking out from underneath Hermione's bedcovers. The gasp turned into a giggle of delight when she reached down and began to pull more and more links into view. When a silk-lined metal collar appeared at the end of this chain, Fleur hissed, "Oh, ma sexy, kinky loutre!"

The bedroom door opened, then closed very quickly behind a very embarrassed witch.

"Put that away before someone else sees it!" Hermione hissed.

Fleur smiled as she started to swing the collar and chain in a circle. "You know, I must have a serious discussion wiz you about zis!"

Hermione reached out and grabbed the collar.

"Oh, please, Fleur."

"I am serious, 'ermione...eet ees dangerous to add a bondage toy such as zis to your sex life

wizout someone being there for your safety!"

Hermione's jaw dropped in disbelief. "It's not a sex toy...it's part of a costume!"

"C'est vraiment?" asked Fleur. "You are making ze tricks and treetts een July?"

"No, I was trying on one of the mail-order costumes that Harry picked out for me," Hermione whined, as she pulled her duvet off of her bed and revealed the other items that she had hidden down underneath the covers. "See? Slave-girl Leia costume, complete with metal bra and bottoms."

"Ah, La Guerre des Étoiles!" Fleur squealed. "You must show me!"

"No, I must put this away and get to my spell work," Hermione countered. "You do have to work at the bank today, right?"

"Yes, yes...but you must first tell me...why do you hide these things zere?"

"Well, I certainly wasn't going to wear that outfit while I slept," said Hermione.

"But you are usually so tidy, no?"

"Yes, well...I would have hidden them in the buttons that Bill gave me, but...I couldn't really store the costume in with the clean clothes, and I frankly didn't know if the costume was button washable."

"Button washa...Ah! I understand!" said Fleur. "But if you were just trying it on for size, why would you need for it to be cleaned?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"So I was wearing it while Harry was broadcasting last night...okay?"

Fleur giggled.

"The button is safe for drying the knickers that you get wet, ma petite loutre."

"Ha, ha...very funny."

"Oui...ha, ha, ha, ha...I practice the 'h' sound, no?"

"No," said Hermione. "You tell me if I can safely clean this outfit in the button washer."

"It is safe."

"Thank you," Hermione said, as she gathered all of the pieces of the costume and set them next to her robes.

"We will start with the paintball game, then?" Fleur asked.

Hermione worried her lower lip with her teeth as she dumped the pieces of her slave-Leia outfit into the enlarged button washer.

"It's the twenty-third, isn't it?" she asked. "I can start using second-year spells."

"Alors, what fun can we now have?"

Hermione closed and shrunk down the charmed button, then walked over to her desk.

"Most of this is from the Standard Book of Spells," she muttered, running a finger down a hand written list. "I can make invisible ink become visible, and do the feather-light and hair-thickening charms..."

"Oh, that is a good one...instead of changing the color of our little cats, we can make their fur grow thicker!"

"And you're calling *me* a kinky little otter?" Hermione asked with disbelief. "So how do you propose we sex up the *Expelliarmus* spell?"

"Eet is easy...you lose your wand, you lose an item of clothing! Although...it ees no longer as much fun now that you not embarrassed to be in your own skin..."

"Should I be apologetic?" Hermione asked, as she untied her bath robe and let it fall off her shoulders. Now naked, she touched her wand tip to her other charmed button and enlarged it.

"We should have enough time for a three-item game, don't you think?" she asked. "Let's see... looks like the reverse-cowgirl costume will work."

Fleur snorted when her roommate pulled a wide-brimmed felt cowboy hat out of her charmed storage button and set on her head.

"Perhaps that outfit is better saved for when you can make the bareback ride with your boyfriend, no?" she asked.

"Oh, please," Hermione sighed, slipping her feet into a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots. She then pulled out a large red bandana, stretched it out against her chest, then frowned.

"This was supposed to be adjustable," the Muggleborn muttered, as she checked the sales tag that was attached to one end.

"I think I know how that works, ma Chérie," Fleur offered. "It ees charmed to follow your intent."

"How?" Hermione asked, offering the cotton square to her roommate.

Fleur took hold of opposite corners of the bandana, and let the other ends drop to form a triangle.



She then pressed the bandana against Hermione's belly, and wrapped her hands around the Muggleborn's waist. The third corner of the bandana draped just low enough to cover Hermione's fanny.

"Press your wand against the fabric, and imagine as if it was a pair of knickers," Fleur instructed.

When Hermione followed these orders, the two held corners of the bandana stretched and knotted together over the small of her back. The other corners stretched downwards, dove in between Hermione's legs and snaked their way up between her cheeks. They twisted along the way, forming a thin strand that wrapped around the makeshift waistband to form a snugly fitting thong.

The fit was tight enough to cause Hermione to squirm, and bounce from one foot to the other. She reached down and grabbed the fabric before it could form a camel toe.

"Okay, so...is that the only option?"

Fleur shook her head and said the incantation that unknotted the fabric and returned the bandana to its original shape. She grabbed the cloth away from Hermione's hips, then folded it over a few times to form a three-inch wide strip of fabric. The French witch pressed the thin strip of fabric across Hermione's chest and said, "Imagine a top." When the Muggleborn witch did this, the two ends of the folded bandana stretched behind her back and formed another knot.

Hermione looked down at the ersatz tube top and frowned...the strip of fabric covered her breasts well enough for her to wear it as a top out in public (at least in the Muggle world).

Shaking her head in disappointment, Hermione twisted the bandana around so that she could easily reach and untie the knot.

"It's not going to choke me if all I want is a neck kerchief, is it?" she asked.

"Not unless you wish it to do so," Fleur smirked.

Hermione said, "Good," then loosely tied the triangular-shaped red-checked bandana around her neck (leaving her bits and everything else between hat and boots exposed).

"There's my three pieces," the bushy-haired witch told her roommate. She placed her hands on her hips and asked, "So are you going to gawk or get dressed?"

"I 'ave created une petite monster," Fleur muttered in wonder, as she walked over to her chest of drawers and pulled out a pair of knickers and a chemise to wear under her night robe.

She would have upped the "petite" adjective a few notches in size if she had recognized the classic Tom Jones song that Hermione had begun to sing as she did some pre-duel arm and leg stretches.

*"Baby, take off your coat...real slow. Baby take off your shoes...I'll help you take off your shoes..."*

**oo00O00oo**

Hermione smiled as she stood post-workout in front of the full-length mirror. She dragged a finger along the top edge of her new, black demi-cup bra, then turned around and looked back over her shoulder.

"Okay, these will do," she stated, as she checked how much bum was exposed by the high-cut lace knickers.

Fleur glanced over from her opened chest of drawers and snorted.

"They will do what, ma Chérie...drive your boyfriend insane with lust?"

"Who says that he'll get a chance to see them?"

The French witch smiled as she pulled the same-style undergarments out from her drawers and slipped them on.

"But he has not yet answered your question, no?"

"Which question?"

Fleur giggled as she walked over to the mirror and stood shoulder to shoulder with her roommate.

"Whezher 'e zinks zat your teets are too beeg," she said, exaggerating her accent.

A rueful grin grew on Hermione's lips as she compared demi-cup sizes.

"Certainly not by any comparison with yours."

Fleur expressed her disappointment with this lack of self-esteem with a playful swat on her roommate's bum.

"I think that I will remove the modesty spell from the front of your robes," she decided. "It will be proof that your boyfriend's shorts are too small for his snake."

Hermione's eyes darted towards her reflected image.

"Don't you dare!" she whispered, covering her breasts with her hands. "I'm worried enough as it is about Molly catching me wearing these underneath my robes."

Fleur shook her head as she pushed Hermione's hands free.

"No, you must be brave, ma Chérie! We must take our little victories over le tyrannie of Molly where we can! Aux barricades!"

Her Muggleborn roommate couldn't help but grin at the call to battle. She clicked her bare heels together, thrust out her chest, and pressed her hand across her forehead in salute.

"Oui, ma generale!"

A satisfied smile grew on Fleur's face. She returned the salute and then ordered, "Marchons!"

It took only a few moments for the two witches to throw their robes over their undergarments and tidy up the bedroom. It took quite a bit longer for anyone to figure out why Fleur and Hermione were whistling *La Marseillaise* as they marched into the kitchen for breakfast.

**oo00O00oo**

"Good morning, everyone," Fleur said brightly. She leaned over her fiance's shoulder and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Morning, Luv," Bill replied with a smile. "Ready to head back to work today?"

"Yes, I can't wait."

Molly shot a look of disapproval towards the engaged couple as she levitated a platter of scrambled eggs onto the kitchen table.

"Yet you waited until the last moment to show up for breakfast?" she asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Oh, sorry, Mrs. Weasley...that's my fault. Fleur was giving me some helpful hints on how to freshen up my wardrobe."

"Now there's a lost cause," Ginny muttered to herself.

"What's that, Gin-Gin?" asked Bill.

"Erm...nothing."

Hermione was too focused on Harry's reaction to catch this exchange.

"Well, I think you look very nice this morning," he offered.

"Thank you, Harry."

"I'm sure that my Ronald will think so too," said Molly.

Fleur smiled. "So where is your Ronald? I thought that breakfast was his favorite meal of the day?"

"Which meal isn't his favorite?" Ginny muttered.

The truth behind this catty remark kept the red-haired witch from being admonished.

"I'm allowing him to sleep in this morning," Molly announced. "No need to crowd the kitchen table all at once."

Hermione assumed that the Weasley matriarch was more interested in keeping her youngest son from embarrassing himself again with Fleur at the table, but kept that thought to herself. Ginny was thinking the same thing, and would have certainly said as much out loud had Harry's familiar not chosen that moment to swoop in through the window.

"Hey, Hedwig...back so soon?" the teen-aged wizard asked, as his familiar landed on his shoulder.

"Bark!"

Harry laughed, choosing not to translate this response as the snowy owl held her leg out towards Molly. She quickly untied the attached letter.

"Well, we're set then," she stated, slipping the short note into her apron pocket.

"Set for what, Mum?" Bill asked.

Molly glanced at the Weasley family clock that was propped up near the stove and replied, "We'll talk about it at dinner."

Everyone was frustrated to varying degrees by Molly's lack of specificity. Nobody was all that surprised, though.

Hermione watched with a bit of envy and wishful thinking as Harry pulled a rasher of bacon off of his breakfast plate and lovingly hand-fed his familiar. There had been Ancient Rome-inspired costumes in their mail-order deliveries, and she began to daydream about being stretched out on a couch...wearing nothing but a loose-fitting toga, as Harry dangled a bunch of grapes over her opened mouth.

"Do you want some bacon too, Hermione?" Harry asked playfully.

The Muggleborn blushed as the question brought her out of her daydream. She had forgotten that Hedwig was there, and broadcasting her emotional state to her boyfriend.

"Erm..no thanks."

"But he does have another shoulder to perch on," Bill teased.

"I'll keep that in mind," Hermione tersely replied. Thinking that she really needed to get on some even footing, she then asked, "So where's Crookshanks this morning?"

Harry frowned a little and tilted his head.

"Erm...isn't he your familiar?"

"Yes, but he's also your roommate."

Harry shrugged. "Not last night he wasn't."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"You mean...he wasn't in your room last night?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope. Last I saw him was last night in the orchard...looked like he was heading towards the farm next-door...maybe he spent the night there?"

"You're kidding me?"

"Erm...sorry. What makes you think that he was in my room last night?"

"Oh, my," said Fleur, as she did a poor job of hiding a smirk. She then leaned towards her roommate and whispered something in French that deepened the reddish blush on her cheeks. Hermione was just about to do a "Ron" and bolt from the kitchen table in embarrassment when she picked up a new emotional broadcast from Hedwig... poorly-restrained and poorly-concealed amusement.

Hermione's eyes darted towards Harry's.

"You were having me on, weren't you?" she hissed.

Harry held her gaze for a few moments, then broke down and released a belly laugh so intense that Hedwig had to dig her talons into his shoulder just to keep her perch. He laughed even harder when Hermione's familiar displayed a sense of comic timing and chose that moment to show up in the kitchen and curl around her legs.

Fleur caught the giggles as she figured out the prank, with Bill getting the joke a few more seconds after that. When Molly asked what was so funny, the engaged couple decided that it was the perfect time to head out to work.

Hermione glared at her retreating roommate's back and muttered, "Marchons, mon cul!"

Arthur cast a *Tempus* spell and decided that it was time for him to head off to the Ministry as well. The kiss that he placed on his wife's cheek distracted her away from insisting that someone else explain the joke. With Fleur leaving, Molly ordered Ginny to gather eggs and clean out the chicken coop, then ran upstairs to roust her youngest son from bed. Before disappearing up the stairwell, she informed Hermione that Ron and she would be paired up on potions duty that morning.

This left Harry and Hermione unchaperoned for a few moments. It would have been a perfect time for a surreptitious snog, had it not come so quick on the heels of Harry's perfectly-executed prank.

"I can't believe that you pretended that I was being turned on by Crooks' tomcatting last night!" she said in a sharp whisper.

"Oh, Hermione...if I wasn't laughing about the situation, I'd be crying," he replied. "How am I supposed to deal with knowing that my girlfriend knows every time I decide that I need to rub one

off?"

"But I'm in the same boat!" his girlfriend pointed out.

"You weren't last night, Sweetheart," Harry whispered.

Hermione huffed. "You make it sound like you were the victim...I was the one that was kept up all night by your pervy broadcasts."

"Sorry about that," Harry said, using a more serious tone of voice. "Just couldn't help it though... knowing that you got your outfits last night and imagining how fantastic you looked while you tried each of them on..."

"Harry...you're such a...lad!"

"Can't help it if I've got the sexiest witch of her generation as a girlfriend."

"Oh, stop it."

"So which ones did you try on last night, then?" Harry asked.

Hermione pursed her lips.

"Don't see why you need to know...given how effective your vivid imagination was working."

"Please?"

"No...I'm rather cross with you at the moment," Hermione stated with mock-primness. She glanced towards the stairs. Not hearing any one, she quickly expanded the storage button on her robe and pulled out the book that Bill had given her the night before.

"I barely managed to read the first ten pages," she complained.

"So why are you...?"

Hermione pushed the book across the table. "Well, I'm not going to be able to get any farther this morning if I'm brewing with Ron."

Harry nodded as he slipped the leather-bound book into his own secret button compartment.

"Well, then...let me make it up to you," he offered. "Tonight we'll have Hedwig perch on your bed stand, and you can interrupt my reading all you want by broadcasting your pervy emotions."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Lad, lad...pervy, unrepentant lad..." She paused as a weak smile formed on her lips. "I suppose that it's a good thing, actually."

"What's that?"

"You acting like a normal teen-aged male."

Harry gave his girlfriend a puppy-eyed look and asked, "So I'm forgiven, then?"

His Muggleborn girlfriend let out a dramatic sigh and said, "Oh, I suppose so."

Molly and her rumpled-looking youngest son emerged from the stairwell before Harry could thank Hermione for her forgiveness, or ask what she was wearing underneath her robes.

**oo00O00oo**

It was a lovely sunny morning, which only reinforced Ron and Ginny's shared belief that their mother had mastered weather modification magic...with Fleur spending the entire day at Gringotts, there could be no Côte-d'Weasley. Molly told Harry and Ginny to grab their school books and go out into the backyard for revisions while Hermione and Ron were brewing. That they could have just have easily done their summer homework at the kitchen table under Molly's direct supervision was lost on nobody but Ron.

Harry and Ginny headed out to the orchard and picked proximal trees to sit next to. When he opened his rucksack and actually pulled out a textbook, she huffed with disappointment. But instead of opening one of her own school texts, Ginny pulled her smuggled Pygmy Puffs out of her rucksack and began to play with them. Harry was encouraged by how quick the red-haired witch had given up on interacting with him, and took the opportunity to both swap his transfiguration textbook out for the book that Hermione had passed on to him, and to pull out the pictures that Bill had given him the day before...pictures that he'd been far too preoccupied to examine while in bed.

The book was large enough to shield the stack of magical photographs from Ginny's view. The images were pretty much what Harry expected from a Scottish cottages, a coffee plantation, and an island retreat.

The Canadian "castle" looked more like an easily-defended keep...a relatively small and squarish stone-walled structure with turrets, ramparts and an active moat. It sat on the highest part of the island, with the ramparts offering commanding 360 degree views of the river, both shorelines, and a handful of adjacent islands. In one of the more interesting river views, a Muggle motor boat dragged a water skier from one side of the image to the other. Harry hadn't considered the possibility that magical cameras worked even when there were Muggles within the field of focus. He shoved some related questions far down on the list of things to ask Bill about, along side of his realization that his future liegeman had taken multiple pictures of the master bedrooms and en suite lavatories on each property.

A breath caught in Harry's throat when he flipped through to the last picture in the stack. It was dog-eared and faded...obviously older than the others. But it was the photograph's subject that was so arresting to the teen-aged wizard. A young boy with messy black hair had his arm wrapped around the shoulder of a house elf of equal height. They were on a sandy beach, and there were large grins on both of their faces as they stood proudly behind a fabulously-detailed sand castle.

As the picture animated, the boy pointed towards a scale model catapult that sat on the sand castle's walls, and squealed in delight as the enchanted toy launched a round of gravel-sized ordinance into the river.

Harry watched the scene repeat a few times, before he turning the photograph over in search of a description. The hand-written note brought tears to his eyes.

*"James (6) and Welly, Hidden Island"*

This reaction did not go unnoticed.

"What's got you upset, Harry?"

The teen-aged wizard looked up towards Ginny and shook his head.

He could have said, "My lost childhood," or "My lost parents," or "My lost family history." And while each of these would have been the truth, they wouldn't have served a useful purpose.

So he lied.

"It's just a description of transfiguration spells that turn battlefield debris into hard shields," Harry told Ginny. "They would have been dead useful at the Ministry the night that..."

He closed the book, capturing the pictures in between the pages, and slipped it into his rucksack.

Thinking that she understood the tears, Ginny propped each of her pets on a shoulder, then held out her arms.

"Come here, you," she encouraged.

Harry couldn't decide whether the red-haired witch was actually trying to help, or was trying to take advantage of the perceived situation. Regardless of motive, he had no interest in the offered remedy.

"Thanks, Gin," he replied. "But if it's just the same I'd rather be alone right now."

The youngest Weasley considered this response, then shrugged.

"Well, we'll be right here for you if you change your mind," she stated, quickly shifting her attention back towards the shoulder-mounted bits of fluff.

"Erm...thanks, I'll keep that in mind," Harry replied, as he stood, shouldered his rucksack, and brushed off the back of his robes.

"Don't wander off too far," Ginny said, using a Molly-ish tone of voice.

Harry shook his head.



"I won't," he promised. "I'll probably end up by the pond, in case your Mum comes looking for me."

"Okay."

As Harry headed down the path that led to the green slime-covered over-sized puddle, he tried to decide whom Ginny had more effectively channeled just then...Ron and his teaspoon-sized empathy, or Molly and her lorry-sized bossiness.

**oo000000oo**

Rather than dwell on the photographs, Harry spent the balance of the morning with his back against the tree that Hermione had hidden behind on the day of the beach, reading a book with the slyly-subversive title "*Beings and Beings*."

The chapter devoted to house elves was enlightening. The chapters that accurately described Gringotts, the Goblins, and Goblin society, however, were damn-near explosive.

If what the book said was true, then Bill's employers were deviously cunning, terrifically powerful, and seriously underestimated by the wizarding world. It raised all sorts of questions about motivations, intentions, and the freely-offered assistance that could no longer be blindly accepted at face value. Bill had provided all kinds of help with the help of the Goblins, and there was far more help coming once he reached the age of sixteen. But was Harry just trading one set of puppeteers for another as he sought to cut Dumbledore's strings?

Ginny shouted out a lunchtime summons before Harry's blood pressure could jump to levels of concern. But he decided that this was a good thing. There was no need for worrisome speculation and jumped-to conclusions...at least not until after Hermione had been given the opportunity to read the same chapters and both of them had the chance to talk with Bill.

Worrying that there'd be little opportunity to pass the book back to his girlfriend under Molly's watchful eye, Harry hid the book under a small pile of gathered sticks and leaves. He then joined Ginny for the short walk back to the Burrow, where Harry ran face-first into a wall of barely-constrained fury. It took a few tense moments for the teen-ager to make sense of the situation.

That Hermione was angry with Ron was easy enough to see...Harry had witnessed dozens of similar instances over the years. The anger had never been so palpable, though...it was as if you could slice it with a knife. But then Harry spotted Crookshanks standing protectively at the feet of his mistress, and he understood...Hermione's familiar was broadcasting her emotions, and Harry's tuner was providing clear channel reception. Now this fact alone was worth a few hours of consideration, but the messy-haired wizard was far more interested in the cause of all this anger.

The confrontation was sussed out using nothing more than the cryptic lunchtime conversations completed within Molly's earshot. Not soon after Harry and Ginny had gone outside, Ron had begun to blather to Hermione about how relieved he was not to have Fleur around, and how glad he was that he could relax, knowing that he wouldn't have to worry about getting over-excited so

long as he was only standing next to Hermione. It was right up there with Ron's sudden realization that she was a girl, back in their Fourth Year when he was desperately seeking a date for the Yule Ball.

What was left unsaid at the table soothed Hermione's hurt feelings far more than what Harry allowed himself to say. As they engaged in idle chit-chat, he tried to bathe his girlfriend with broadcast waves of righteous anger, empathetic concern, and reassuring support. And when Hermione coyly made a seemingly meaningless comment about sitting on Jabba's lap, Harry topped off his broadcast with a blast of unrestrained lust that severely tested the ability of Fleur's *Praetego* spell to keep Hermione's suddenly perky points under wraps.

Molly announced early on during the noontime meal that it would be Harry's and Ginny's turn to brew that afternoon. Worried that he wouldn't be able to pull Hermione aside for a private chat, the black-haired teen tried to steer his secret girlfriend towards the location of the hidden book with a combination of obscure comments and a broadcast of emotions. He found ways to work the words "book," "beach," "hidden," and "tree" into the lunchtime conversation, and each time one of those words was spoken out loud Harry briefly imagined what Hermione might look like in her Slave-Leia outfit. When she figured out that these sharp bursts of lust were keyed to specific words, she tried to confirm this conclusion by imagining Harry wearing nothing more than a blaster pistol holstered on his bare thigh whenever the words "Bill," "chapter," and "house elf," were used in a sentence.

They knew they were onto something when Harry tagged the word "Yes" with a mental image of his girlfriend rubbing one off in the sitting room, and when Hermione replied by linking the phrase "I understand" to her sunglass-aided memory of Harry's bare bum.

And then they traded winks and laughed loudly at the first thing that was even remotely funny, having totally forgotten about Ron's stupidity and Molly's overbearing presence (at least until the next time that they each reared their ugly head).