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By right of conquest

Chapter the First

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Part 1 - Prologue

August 1997 – a public garden near Perth

Lucius Malfoy thought himself a patient man, except for instances like the present when he was sitting alone, waiting. The Lord's instructions were quite clear: arrive early, come alone, appear to be unarmed (his hidden wand in the sophisticated walking stick not counting) and wait at the parley point. He was sitting in a public garden; there were benches arranged in a semi-circle surrounding a formal arrangement of what he believed to be Lisianthus. At the center of the flowers stood a weathered brass sundial, which might or might not be accurate, as the mildly inclement weather did not allow the late day's sunlight to cast sufficient shadows to tell if it were functional. He steeled himself; he would not fidget, he would not pace, he would not repeatedly scan the horizon like a nervous soldier waiting for his first engagement with the enemy. He took a deep breath, holding it for a counted period, and then exhaled through his nose.

The emissary appeared on the opposite bench. No crack of apparition, no Portkey, no fading disillusion; one moment he was not there, and then he was.

"Malfoy," the emissary stated.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," Lucius replied.

The emissary pulled back the hood that was obscuring his face. Lucius smiled, he did not expect to be dealing directly with the Patriarch; perhaps the negotiations would not take forever.

"What is your reply?"

"The grimoire exists, in fact there are several copies, but it will not do him any good," the emissary stated.

"Shouldn't he be the one to determine that?" Lucius asked.

"Suit yourself," he countered, with a negligible flick of his hand.

An old leather bound book appeared on Lucius' lap. He could feel a thrum of magic as he touched the cover.

"A wizard who is extremely powerful *could* open the book," the emissary began "but unless that wizard is of the blood of my family, the book cannot be read."

“You could dictate it,” Lucius suggested.

The Patriarch stared at him patiently.

“I could not,” he said, followed by a period of silence.

“You could threaten me with dismemberment, you could torture and then murder those I hold dear before my eyes, it would not change the fact that I cannot reveal what is in the grimoire to someone who is not of the blood. Cannot, not will not; there is a difference,” the Patriarch explained patiently.

Lucius nodded slowly. While he was not the master Legilimens the Lord was, he was able to discern that the Patriarch was telling the truth.

“Your children?”

“My children are similarly bound.”

Another period of silence.

“It appears that we are at an impasse, but not one of my own making. If you wish, you may take that copy back with you as an earnest of my good faith. I suspect that he is powerful enough to open the cover.”

Lucius inhaled again, moving his hands to the top of the walking stick. There was yet another long silence; it seemed to be the mark of this meeting. He racked his brain for an answer; the Lord rewarded success and did not tolerate failure.

“Your daughter,” he began, “your oldest daughter.”

“Yes?”

“She is of marriageable age?”

“Are we negotiating something different now?”

“Perhaps; hear me out,” Lucius said, trying to keep the tension from his voice. “If one of our nobles were to marry into the family, would that suffice to become one of the blood?”

A longer silence.

“Perhaps – it would have to be a real marriage, and there would be conditions imposed in the terms of the betrothal contract. That is academic; however, as I am fairly certain that none of your eligible, unmarried nobles have sufficient power.”

“What of the Lord?”

“Are you authorized to negotiate on his behalf?” the Patriarch said with a wry smile.

“Perhaps.”

“I don’t see him as the marrying type.”

“We shall see,” Lucius said, standing quickly, moving the grimoire under one arm as he moved the walking stick to his dominant hand. “Three days?”

“We can meet again in three days.”

“Good day to you, sir,” Lucius said, giving the emissary a nod before stepping smartly away from the garden.

Several minutes passed, and then another cloaked figure appeared on the bench.

“Father, are you out of your mind?”

“Patience, lovely girl, Lucius is even now spinning a tale in which he came up with this masterly stratagem. Traps are so much more vicious when they are built by the victim.”

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Part 2 - Handfast

Queenie’s diary – August 1997 – enciphered entry

I cannot believe this is happening. The Dark Lord somehow learned of the family grimoire and began to “negotiate” for its purchase this week. Some rough thugs waylaid Father before the negotiations began as he was visiting some of our tenants. He quickly took their measure and sent them away with a reminder why it is good to not annoy our family. I’m not entirely certain as to why it’s important to the Dark Lord, but Father assures me that it contains centuries of magic accumulated, developed, and perfected by generations of our family.

End enciphered entry – checksum 887

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“Why does he want it?” Queenie asked her father, Malcom. She’d found him outside splitting wood. The elves could have easily done it, but Malcolm insisted on doing some of the chores himself, the old fashioned way.

He sighed as he picked up a piece of firewood, placing it on end for splitting.

“The self-styled Dark Lord cares nothing for the purebloods. Pius Thicknesse is an idiot if he thinks that he is on his side. The Dark Lord wants power. Our grimoire contains a wealth of magic that has been kept in our family for centuries. What does he gain if he truly has the grimoire?”

“He gains magics that no one else knows,” Queenie answered.

“Exactly,” Malcom said as he deftly swung the ax into the standing piece of wood. “Magic is power – Grindelwald was quite clear on that, and the Dark Lord learned a lot from him before the last Great War.”

Reaching for another unsplit log, Malcom asked, “What happens if he doesn’t gain the grimoire?”

“We have power that he does not have,” Queenie answered.

“Which makes us what?” Malcom queried.

“Which makes us a threat,” Queenie said.

He brought the ax down again.

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Queenie’s Diary – September 1997 – enciphered entry

I would have thought that without Malfoy, life at Hogwarts would be bliss. It appears that I was wrong. On the plus side, Snape is no longer our head of house, so the other houses no longer have quite as much reason to hate us. Slughorn is a suck-up, but he’s not petty. Snape does not make a bad Headmaster, but the Carrows are just plain crazy. They apparently buy into the lie that the Dark Lord is the champion of the pureblood world.

On the home front, Mum writes that progress is being made on the betrothal terms.

If I wasn’t the cow being sold, I’d find this quite interesting.

Father is most clever, but there are days that I worry that he will be too clever.

The basic terms:

- I become betrothed to the Dark Lord.*
- Once betrothed, neither the Dark Lord nor his vassals nor his hirelings can do anything by omission or commission to harm me or my family, including any use of potions or mind magic. The Dark Lord and his vassals must do all within their power to keep me and my family safe.*
- This offer of protection extends to any of Father’s tenants or trading partners, provided that they do not take up arms against the Dark Lord.*
- Once married, the Dark Lord will be “of the blood,” and thus able to read the family grimoire. (I am dreading this...)*
- The Dark Lord is not bound by the usual restrictions of the grimoire, and will be able to share*

the magics therein with others beyond the blood.

- The penalty of breaking the betrothal is loss of magic.*
- Once betrothed, the betrothal contract must be executed by the Summer solstice.*

The last two points took two weeks to negotiate. The original penalty for breaking the betrothal was loss of life and magic, so I guess that's a step in the right direction. The last point about the solstice was added at the last moment at the Dark Lord's request. I suppose that was so we didn't go ahead with the handfasting and then disappear into the shadows, which would have the benefit of protecting my family without making me the Dark Lord's bride.

I swear there are days that I loathe the old ways.

End enciphered entry – checksum 991

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Queenie's diary – Autumnal Equinox – 1997 – enciphered entry

Well, I guess it is official now. We met by the standing stones on the moor. It's not as famous as Stonehenge, but it's also a lot easier to get to. There are three tall stones forming a triangle which points more or less east if you were to map the area. In the middle of the triangle marked by the standing stones is a lesser, rocking stone. Father says that the rocking stone wasn't used as an altar by the Druids, but I have my own opinion on that.

We arrived in the shadows before making ourselves visible. The Dark Lord was within the triangle; another person was outside the triangle. Given the height and shape of the other, I think it was a woman, but her face was obscured by the shadows of her hood. Making our entrance, I walked into the triangle and then put my hand on the lesser stone. The stone had a prickly feel, notwithstanding that the top was rubbed smooth by time. The Dark Lord pulled back his hood and then placed his hand on mine. Father opened the ceremony with the negotiated words, followed by the woman, reciting the preamble terms to the betrothal.

Then we each spoke our part.

With each promise I could feel magic, from the stone, from the Dark Lord's cold, waxy hand, from my own being, buzzing through my hand.

In the early rounds of the negotiations, the Dark Lord insisted that his name was Lord Voldemort, as if his mother had named him "Lord" and he were born into the Voldemort family. Father insisted that if the magic were to work, it had to be done under our given names. So, as I recited my promises in my own name, the Dark Lord gave his name as Tom Marvolo Riddle, just as written in the Quibbler article.

When we finished the promises Riddle (I'm not going to refer to him any more as "the Dark Lord") moved to pull his hand away from the stone, but was stuck fast by the magic that we'd just

invoked. A brief smile crossed his pale nose-less face and he bent down to kiss my cheek, whispering, "Well, it wouldn't do to not honor the customs," into my ear before pulling his now freed hand away from the lesser stone.

My hand, however, was still stuck to the blasted stone. I curtsied to him and spoke my last promise.

"I am yours – we will wed by the Solstice."

Mustering the last shreds of dignity I pulled my hand from the stone, and then walked out of the triangle with what I thought was a serene grace, which meant that I didn't trip over anything or step on the hem of my robes.

Riddle pulled his hood back up and walked to the woman. They dissolved into oily black smoke and then disappeared.

Closing out this entry, I'm very glad that the family is now protected from Riddle and his band, but I'm not particularly enthused about being the sacrificial lamb.

End enciphered entry – checksum 991

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Part 3 – Conquest

(adapted from Deathly Hallows – Chapter 36 – Flaw in the Plan)

May 2, 1998 – Great Hall - Hogwarts

"It's your one last chance," said Harry, "it's all you've got left. . . . I've seen what you'll be otherwise. . . . Be a man. . . try. . . Try for some remorse. . . ."

"You dare --- ?" said Voldemort again.

"Yes, I dare," said Harry, "because Dumbledore's last plan hasn't backfired on me at all. It's backfired on you, Riddle."

Voldemort's hand was trembling on the Elder Wand, and Harry gripped Draco's very tightly. The moment, he knew, was seconds away.

"That wand still isn't working properly for you because you murdered the wrong person. Severus Snape was never the true master of the Elder Wand. He never defeated Dumbledore."

"He killed --- "

"Aren't you listening? *Snape never beat Dumbledore!* Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore intended to die, undefeated, the wand's last true master! If all had gone as

planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"

"But then, Potter, Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand!" Voldemort's voice shook with malicious pleasure. "I stole the wand from its last master's tomb! I removed it against the last master's wishes! Its power is mine!"

"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you? Possessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using it, doesn't make it really yours. Didn't you listen to Ollivander? *The wand chooses the wizard* . . . The Elder Wand recognized a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. The new master removed the wand from Dumbledore against his will, never realizing exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance . . ."

Voldemort's chest rose and fell rapidly, and Harry could feel the curse coming, feel it building inside the wand pointed at his face.

"The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Malfoy."

Blank shock showed in Voldemort's face for a moment, but then it was gone.

"But what does it matter?" he said softly. "Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You no longer have the phoenix wand: We duel on skill alone . . . and after I have killed you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy . . ."

"But you're too late," said Harry. "You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took his wand from him."

Harry twitched the hawthorn wand, and he felt the eyes of everyone in the Hall upon it.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" whispered Harry. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does . . . I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

A red-glow burst suddenly across the enchanted sky above them as an edge of dazzling sun appeared over the sill of the nearest window. The light hit both of their faces at the same time, so that Voldemort's was suddenly a flaming blur. Harry heard the high voice shriek as he too yelled his best hope to the heavens, pointing Draco's wand:

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

The bang was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between them, at the dead center of the circle they had been treading, marked the point where the spells collided. Harry saw Voldemort's green jet meet his own spell and then rebound. He saw the Elder Wand fly high, dark against the sunrise, spinning across the enchanted ceiling like the head of Nagini, spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last. And Harry, with the unerring skill of the Seeker, caught the wand in his free hand as

Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, the slit pupils of the scarlet eyes rolling upward. Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy's shell.

There was pandemonium after that, but Harry didn't hear it. He walked towards the husk that had contained Tom Riddle's soul. A quick cutting curse separated the head from the lifeless body. Harry then picked the yew and phoenix feather wand from Riddle's waistband.

"It's mine now," he said to no one in particular, before falling into the scrum of wizards and witches that pressed forward.

Riddle's body burst into flames.

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When Harry woke up he was staring into protuberant blue eyes.

"Hello, Harry Potter," Luna intoned gravely.

"Hello, Luna Lovegood."

"You collapsed as you came out of the Headmaster's office. Madam Pomfrey said you were merely exhausted, but I thought that your soul was fuzzy around the edges and not quite sticking to your body. You've been sleeping here for 20 hours," she reported.

"Where is everybody?"

"I'm not quite sure where *everybody* is," Luna replied with a smile. "The morgue has been moved from the Great Hall to the antechamber. Families have been coming to claim the dead. Ronald and Hermione have been transfiguring the bodies that haven't been claimed into little bricks."

"How's the DA?"

A blank mask fell over Luna's features.

"Fred Weasley is dead; so is Ginny," Luna answered in a monotone.

"What?"

"Fred died before you got to the Great Hall, Hermione, Ginny and I were fighting Bellatrix," she started.

"Yeah, I saw that part," Harry interjected.

"When Molly took over our fight, Bellatrix shot something past Molly," Luna explained. "I think she was aiming at Hermione, but Ginny pushed her out of the way before we were all knocked off

our feet with some sort of explosion. We never knew that Ginny had been cut in the leg and bled out; we didn't even know she was wounded. Madam Pomfrey has most of the Weasleys on calming potions. Without them, well, let's just say that they're not very functional without potion support."

Harry closed his eyes. He wouldn't cry now, not in front of Luna, but he knew the tears would come.

"Tonks and Lupin are dead," she began, still in a monotone.

"I know, I saw them," Harry said, eyes still closed.

"Do you want to be alone, Harry Potter?"

"I don't know," Harry said, looking up to see tears flowing down Luna's face.

Harry heard a rustling beside him.

"Master Harry," Kreacher croaked.

"Kreacher," Harry acknowledged.

Luna wiped her face on the back of her sleeve.

"Master Harry's friends, who Kreacher will not call 'blood traitor' or 'Mudblood', are coming back with some food."

"Okay," Harry said, trying to hold in a snort at Kreacher's attempt at manners.

"Former Mistress has invited you to stay at her home. Kreacher is sad to report that Death Eaters have made the Black home not fit to live in."

"Former Mistress?"

"The former Mistress Andromeda who was cast out of the Black family when she married someone Kreacher is carefully not calling a Mudblood."

"Thank you, Kreacher."

Kreacher sniffed, wiped his nose on the back of his hand, and disappeared.

There was a click as the door was pushed open. Ron was carrying a paper sack with two hands. Hermione's hands were pulling a cloak close to her as if she were cold. Both of them looked as if they'd been crying.

"We got you some food," Ron said blandly. "Hello Luna, there's enough for you too."

“Thank you, Ronald, Hermione,” Luna said as she opened the bag enough to peek in.

Ron passed out sandwiches wrapped in brown paper and bags of crisps. From the bottom of the bag he pulled four bottles of butterbeer. Ron’s motions were sluggish, possibly a side effect of the calming potion.

“I guess I’ve been out of it for a while,” Harry said, hoping to break the awkward silence. “Anyone seen Malfoy?”

“What do you want with that git?” Ron asked.

“I thought he’d want his wand back,” Harry replied.

“Oh,” Ron said, biting the last of his sandwich. He then reached into the bag for another.

“I think the Malfoys left last night. They took several bodies back to their families,” Hermione said.

“I wonder if Malfoy Manor is as messed up as Grimmauld Place?” Harry said.

“Why’s that?” Hermione asked.

“Kreacher said that it wasn’t habitable, which coming from him means something,” Harry answered.

“Dunno,” Ron said. “Check if the Floo is back up later today. It’s been out for a while, but Kingsley said it’s one of the first things to get fixed. It seems that he’s the Acting Minister of Magic right now. The new crew that came in with Pius Thickenesse seems to be pretty scarce – probably all rehearsing their ‘I was under Imperius’ speeches.”

“Kingsley said that they were going to have a Truth Commission, just like in South Africa,” Hermione said.

“What happened in South Africa?” Ron asked between bites of his second sandwich.

“Oh, Ron, honestly, don’t you follow anything happening in the Muggle world?” Hermione asked.

“Daddy wrote an article about it in The Quibbler,” Luna said. “He found it fascinating.”

“South Africa had a government that treated black people the way the blood purists treated Muggles and Muggleborn,” Harry explained. “Old government fell, new government tried to do better.”

“That’s pretty concise,” Hermione said. “At least *you’ve* been paying attention.”

“What are we going to do now?” Harry asked.

“I need to go find Daddy,” Luna said promptly. “Kingsley said he was probably at Azkaban. Wherever he is, he’s not at home.”

“I need to go back to Australia,” Hermione said. “I don’t know if Mum and Dad will forgive me.”

“I’m sure they will,” Ron said.

“But what if I can’t reverse the Obliviation?” Hermione whinged.

“Nonsense, I’m sure you’ll do it right the first time,” Ron encouraged. “Want some company going to Australia?”

“Oh, Ron, would you?” Hermione said, reaching out for his hand.

“Sure.”

“What about you, Harry?” Luna asked.

“Dunno,” Harry said. “I thought I’d go to Grimmauld Place, but Kreacher says it’s not fit to live in. The Burrow’s gone; the house on Privet Drive has been sold, so I haven’t a clue. I might visit Mrs. Tonks; start to get to know Teddy. I’m his godfather. I haven’t a clue what godfathers are supposed to do beyond breaking out of Azkaban. Speaking of which, how’s your mum and dad?” Harry asked Ron.

“Mum kind of fell apart when she found out both Fred and Ginny died,” Ron replied. “Madam Pomfrey sedated her for a couple of hours. Dad was holding her all the time. A couple of big holes in the family, but Percy’s back again.”

“Hey, change of subject,” Harry said. “How does someone get reinstated back into a Magical family?”

“It would be done by the Head of the family,” Ron answered, “but I don’t know the particulars.”

Ron and Harry then looked at Hermione.

“Why are you looking at me? I’m the Muggleborn here!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Well, don’t you have a book on it?” Ron asked.

“I didn’t have room for *everything*, Ron,” Hermione huffed.

“The Head of the family has to say that they are reinstated in the presence of another member of the family – it could be anyone, really,” Luna said.

Harry stood up, slowly, and then gathered up the debris, putting the empty crisp bags and bottles back into the paper sack which he then dropped into the bin next to the door.

“I could do with a shower,” Harry said.

Ron and Hermione took that as their cue to leave, walking out of the room hand in hand. Luna unfolded herself from where she’d sat at the foot of the bed next to Harry’s.

“I have something for you, Harry Potter,” she said gravely. “Hold out your hand.”

Harry did so and Luna dropped a cold, black stone into his palm; he knew without looking that it was the Resurrection Stone.

“You really shouldn’t leave your belongings out in the Forbidden Forest, Harry, you never know who might pick it up,” she said with a small smile, before walking out of the room.

For some reason the sight of her walking slowly with her head down broke his heart. Two emotions battled inside him – anger and pain. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. It didn’t help.

He took another breath and concentrated on what he needed to do, and not what had happened.

#@#

Harry’s stomach was cramping as he approached the gate leading to the Tonks’ house. It was a handsome Georgian style home made of red brick, larger than a townhouse unit but much smaller than the manors some of the old magical families called home. The neighborhood was definitely Muggle; automobiles were parked in the street or in off-street parking in the mews between houses. Opening the gate he walked past the pond where he’d crashed less than a year ago. There was no evidence that it had ever been the impromptu landing site of a flying motorcycle.

He walked up the brick pathway to the front door and lifted the large iron knocker, a whimsical rendition of a wyvern, the only hint that this might be a magical residence. With three brisk knocks, Harry stepped back from the door, waiting. He heard a rustle within and then the door opened quickly.

“Quiet,” she hissed. “I’ve just got him down.”

She then stepped back, looked at him and then lunged forward, wrapping him in a hug.

“Oh, Harry, thank goodness you ended it,” she exclaimed. “Let me look at you. I’m not going to lie to you, Harry, you look terrible.”

“Hello, Mrs. Tonks,” he began.

“Andi, please. Would you like to come in? I’ll make some tea.”

“That would be nice, Andi, thanks.”

#@#

“You’re going to live here until 12 Grimmauld Place is habitable. I’m not going to take no for an answer.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, finishing the last of the biscuits on the plate.

“So, why are you here, Harry?”

“I wanted to see Teddy. I don’t know what all a godfather is supposed to do, but I thought I ought to get to know him if I’m going to do my job,” Harry explained.

“You’re not taking Teddy,” Andi said tersely. Her tone indicated that the point was not negotiable.

“I think that Teddy’s in the best place possible for him – what do I know about kids?” Harry said.

Andi relaxed.

#@#

The balance of May fell into a predictable rhythm.

Harry would rise and make breakfast for whoever was in attendance at Andi Tonks’ house and then Kreacher would clean up. Harry and Andi would take Teddy outside and then once Teddy went down for his morning nap, Harry would return to Grimmauld Place, working with Kreacher to make it habitable again.

At first the work was mainly cleanup, but after hauling what Harry estimated would be several truckloads of trash from the ground floor into the rear garden, the work of repair began in earnest. While “Reparo” had its use, the earnest work of carpentry and painting remained, which meant purchasing materials, which meant visiting Gringotts.

Worrying about the goblins had always been somewhere at the back of Harry’s mind, ever since Bill Weasley had cautioned him to honor his agreements with the goblins to the letter. They hadn’t yet tracked him down and slit his throat while he was sleeping, but he knew that as a race, they were rather patient and had long memories.

A quick Floo call to Bill Weasley at Shell Cottage that night let him know that at least there wasn’t a public warrant for Harry’s arrest at Gringotts, so after making arrangements for Teddy’s care, Andi planned a morning visit to Gringotts for the following day.

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The trip from Andi’s house to Diagon Alley was mostly muggle – the plan was walking to the tube, then walking from the station to the Leaky Cauldron and then into the public gate that Harry had visited when he was reintroduced to the Wizarding world. As he was leaving the Underground he felt a small weathered hand brushing against his palm. Harry curled his fingers around the note he knew he’d find there.

Master Harry, you are being followed by a man wearing a red banded black hat. K

Leaning over to Andromeda, Harry said quietly, “Andi, I don’t mean to startle you, but do you see a man with a red banded hat following us?”

Andromeda kept walking as if she’d heard nothing; adjusting the straps to the oversized purse she carried everywhere when she was outside the house.

“Yeah, looks like it,” Andromeda said. “Tall man, muggle suit, black fedora with a red hat band. I saw him when we were on the tube.”

“Okay,” Harry replied. “If he follows us into the Alley we may have to hustle.”

The pair ducked into The Leaky Cauldron without incident and then through the public access gate into the Alley. Harry smiled as he looked about; the Alley was buzzing with activity, storefronts showing fresh coats of paint, windows full of items for sale.

“We seem to have lost our friend with the hat,” Andromeda said quietly as they turned the corner and walked towards Gringotts. Harry wasn’t sure what he’d expected, but the building looked just as it had before Harry had ridden a dragon out the building. Evidently the repair process included depositing a new layer of grime on the façade.

The entry to the bank was dark, quiet and cool, in contrast to the bustling street outside. The counting tables were empty and there was but one teller window open with a short queue. Harry and Andromeda stepped into the queue and after two other customers concluded their business, stepped up to the teller. “I, uh, would like to make a withdrawal from my vault,” Harry said as the teller stared at him keenly.

“Name?” the teller barked.

“Uh, Harry Potter,” he answered.

“Huh,” the teller grunted, shuffling through tabbed cards in a drawer.

“It says here that you need to see a manager,” the teller said, after staring at the card for almost a minute.

“Mr. Rufus,” the teller called.

The bank lobby was now silent and empty of customers. A smartly dressed human appeared, wearing a black fedora with a bright red hatband. He looked at Harry and Andromeda.

“Mister Potter, we’ve been expecting you. I’ll take you to the Director,” the man who might have been Mr. Rufus said. When he smiled, his mouth looked slightly wider than a human mouth ought to look.

As he led them down the hallway he seemed to shrink until he was half of his former size. He

appeared to be goblin now, but the tallest goblin that Harry had ever seen. He stopped at an unmarked door, listened for something, and then opened the door.

The office was tasteful, but cluttered with a side table, a conference table and a desk.

The large wooden desk sat next to a window. Behind the desk was a chair that resembled the throne of some up and coming monarchy, upon which sat a goblin in suit and waistcoat.

“Ah, Mr. Potter and Mrs. Tonks,” the goblin said in a friendly manner. “We’ve been running wagers as to when you’d come visit us. It appears that I am not going to win that pool. Mr. Rufus, if you could be so kind as to ensure that we are not disturbed? Thank you.”

The goblin in the fedora nodded his head politely and withdrew from the office. As he closed the door Harry listened for the sound of a lock, but heard nothing.

“I am Ragnok, the director of Gringotts in this country.”

Andromeda dropped a polite curtsey. “It is an honor to meet you, Director Ragnok,” she said, placing a slight emphasis on “Director.”

“I am puzzled, Director Ragnok,” Harry began “that you would be concerned about a withdrawal from my vault.”

“Oh, your vaults are fine,” the director said. “We do have other business today. Please, sit down by the table, I will join you shortly.”

Andromeda and Harry took seats at the table, being careful to leave empty the higher chair that was obviously meant for a goblin.

“I am so pleased to finally be able to meet you, Mr. Potter,” Ragnok said, effortlessly mounting into the chair. “I knew your father, and his father before him, but before I could meet you, two bloody wars erupted, excuse my language please. Although everything has opportunity, war at home is generally bad business. My condolences for your losses, both of you.”

“Thank you, Director,” Andromeda said formally.

“Your actions in the war have made things difficult – I believe the human idiom is ‘placing me in a pickle’ although that idiom never made any sense. Gringotts is a bank, and I am the director. Mister Potter, the goblin nation however is not nearly as organized and there are competing factions and clans, some of whom wish to laud you, and others would like to slit your throat. I’ve had Mr. Rufus keeping an eye on you for the last month. Prior to today his instructions were to not be seen.”

“And today?” Andromeda asked archly.

“Today, he was to be obviously seen. Mr. Rufus works for me, and is allied with my clan.”

“I’d be honored, if only I could figure out why anyone was interested,” Harry said.

“Ah, Mr. Potter, modest as always. Tell me, Mr. Potter, how many wands are you carrying today?”

“I’m carrying my wand,” Harry said firmly.

“And?”

“And I’m carrying the brother to my wand, which I took from Tom Riddle,” Harry said in a slightly softer tone.

“And the Death Stick?” Ragnok asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry said glibly.

“Of course not,” Ragnok stated in a matter-of-fact manner. “Let me try to explain some of the competing interests.”

“Please do,” Andromeda said.

“There are factions in the goblin nation that call you ‘Potter the thief’ and wish to see your head on a pike outside the bank’s doors. There are other factions that want to seize your money and property to pay for damage to the bank facilities, including one very irate dragon keeper who has been struggling to replace the magnificent dragon you rode off on at the beginning of the month.”

“Yeah, if it’s any help, I didn’t plan on stealing a dragon,” Harry said.

“Of course not,” Ragnok said convincingly.

“Where do you stand, Director?” Harry asked.

“We will get to that. What do you know of the legal principles behind ‘right of conquest?’” Ragnok asked.

“Um,” Harry began.

“To the victor goes the spoils,” Andromeda quoted.

“Exactly,” Ragnok replied. “By example, if France invades Britain and Britain repulses the invasion, France may well lose territory. The victor would keep the captured land by right of conquest. As a historical aside, they call that stretch of land ‘Brittany’ for a reason. What, pray tell, did you do with Mr. Malfoy’s wand, Mr. Potter?”

“I, uh, returned it to him,” Harry began.

“Why?” Ragnok asked.

“Because it was his, he needed it,” Harry answered.

“So you defeated him in battle, but you did not keep what you’d captured?” Ragnok suggested.

“Yeah, something like that,” Harry said.

“So, why do you still have Tom Riddle’s wand?” Ragnok asked.

“I figured he didn’t need it any more. At the time I didn’t know if my own wand could be repaired and I figured that I could always use the brother wand,” Harry explained.

“As was your right,” Ragnok said, “you were the victor, he was the vanquished. Your act in taking Riddle’s wand was magically significant, Mr. Potter.

“Let us now talk about property. Gringotts is banker to the Wizarding world – we also deal with matters of inheritance. When your parents died, Harry, their wills were simple, each parent bequeathed everything to the other, and if they both died, except for a handful of specific bequests, you inherited everything. You, however, were a minor and Dumbledore spirited you away shortly after your parents’ demise, so at Gringotts we bided our time until you reached your majority, at which time, unfortunately, you were a fugitive from your own government. Not exactly a propitious time to settle the Potter estate, or the Black estate, for that matter.

“Now we fast forward to this month. There were many, many deaths, which meant many, many inheritances. One wizard by the name of Rabastan Lestrage died, leaving everything to his brother Rodolphus, who died an hour later. Rodolphus left everything to his wife Bellatrix, who was a member of the Black family. Bellatrix Black, as you know, is also dead, without issue and without a will, which means that everything she owned was inherited by the head of the Black family, who happens to be seated in front of me. At this point, Mr. Potter, you should be very thankful for this turn of events, as the head of a family cannot be charged with breaking into a Gringotts vault that he now owns. In the eyes of Gringotts, you may be a burglar, but you are not a thief. I’ll have you know that ‘burglar’ in Gobbleygook is an honored title.”

“So that’s good?” Harry asked.

“For you, that is exceptionally good.” Ragnok replied, taking the moment to pull a scarlet handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and dab his very sweaty eyebrows. “As you leave today, I will present you with a statement as to your current holdings. You have inherited the Black estate, including the rest, residue and remainder of the Lestrage holdings, the Potter estate of course, and the Gaunt estate.”

“Gaunt?” Andromeda asked.

“Tom Riddle, the self-styled ‘Lord Voldemort’ was the last member of the Gaunt family, through his mother. The Gaunt family in turn was all that remains of the Slytherin line. By right of conquest you own everything that Tom Riddle owned at the time of his death; which means at the end of the day that you are indeed, now, the heir of Slytherin.”

“Okay, I think I follow you, but what’s that mean?” Harry asked.

“The Black coffers have been enriched by the Lestrangle inheritance. From the Gaunt line, a trifling amount of money – the Gaunts had no vault at Gringotts, but there were various tools and books owned by the late Mr. Riddle, including an impressive collection of grimoires,” Ragnok explained.

“The man had a passion for collecting knowledge at any price. In most instances the original family owning the grimoire no longer exists and the family usually died by his hand. The one salient exception is the Bones grimoire. You may be contacted by Miss Susan Bones concerning the return of the grimoire.”

“Anything else?” Harry asked.

“We’re getting to that,” Ragnok said. “The property at Spinner’s End formerly owned by Severus Snape, the last of the Prince line, is now yours along with a meager amount of money. His library was held in a trust for Hogwarts, which will certainly accept the bequest.”

“Wait, how did I end up inheriting from Snape?”

“Again, by right of conquest – Snape died at Riddle’s hand. As a quibbling legal matter there’s also the question of whether or not the lord/vassal relationship among the former Death Eaters could be recognized either by Gringotts or by the Ministry of Magic, but we do not have to settle that question as it’s easier to deal the property by regarding it as spoils,” Ragnok said. “The expenses incurred for damages to Gringotts when you rode a Gringotts dragon out of the bank have been already been deducted from the Lestrangle vault. If you will execute a draft to purchase a suitable dragon from the Romanian reserve, I think the Gringotts dragon keeper will be mollified. I believe he has been negotiating for a dragon named ‘Norbert.’”

“Small world,” Harry said. “Assuming that I can afford it, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“It is indeed a small world,” Ragnok said. “I smiled when I remembered the report of how you spirited the young dragon out of Hogwarts, but that is for another time. The expense for purchasing ‘Norbert’ or a comparable dragon is quite reasonable.

“You asked about my position. As Director of Gringotts, it is my duty to safeguard the interests of the bank. The bank declared that it was neutral in both wars. As head of my clan however, it is my duty to protect the interests of the clan. In the first war, Tom Riddle and his vassals murdered a family of goblins in Nottingham. The matriarch of that family was my granddaughter, who happens to have been the mother of Mr. Rufus. Had your assets not been sufficient to cover the property damage to the bank, I would have made good the difference from my own vaults, as I am indebted to you as head of clan. And so, Mr. Potter, I will now shake your hand and thank you for the service that you have rendered to my clan.”

Ragnok then stood and with great dignity extended his hand to Harry. After the solemn handshake, Ragnok sat down again at the table. He dabbed at his forehead again and took a deep breath. “This leaves us with one remaining issue.”

“Which is?” Harry asked.

“At the time of Tom Riddle’s death, he was betrothed to one of your classmates. By right of conquest, she is yours,” Ragnok said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Harry exclaimed.

“I assure you that I am not kidding,” Ragnok said gravely.

“I don’t *want* his bride,” Harry objected. “Who are we talking about anyway?”

“You are not required to take her, Mr. Potter; that is purely up to you as victor, but the woman in question has asked that you entertain the notion,” Ragnok said gravely. “As to who, I will allow the young lady to introduce herself.”

Ragnok slid his chair back and reached for a trinket on his desk. “Mr. Rufus, could you please bring the young lady into my office now? Thank you.”

A different door opened and a veiled woman, dressed from head to toe in black entered the room. Mr. Rufus stood next to the now closed the door.

“Hello Mr. Potter,” the woman said, lifting the veil from her face. “I’m Daphne Greengrass, but my friends call me Queenie.”

Kokopelli
FanficAuthors.net

By right of conquest

Chapter the Second

By right of conquest

Chapter the Second

Part 1 – Veils and Tales

Queenie's diary – May 1998 – enciphered entry

Some days just stink. In my case, the week has been wretched.

According to the old ways, the betrothal is a bigger deal than the wedding. After the betrothal all that was really necessary to finish the transaction was to bed the bride. That didn't mean that there weren't wedding ceremonies, but all the hoopla that goes on today was certainly not the norm. Suffice it to say, after the hand fasting, I lived in dread that each day would bring a summons from Tom Riddle or one of his mouth-breathing morons. The summons, of course, would be to his bed.

Riddle was not known to keep mistresses, so the best case scenario would be a quick bonk and then he'd probably send me away as an inconvenient bride that couldn't be divorced or executed. Needless to say, the notion that this was the best case scenario wasn't filling me with a lot of joyful anticipation.

On the plus side, Astoria and I were safe at Hogwarts as neither Snape nor the Carrows, being vassals of Riddle, could lift a hand against us.

October led to November and then December, and still no summons. The drop dead date, of course, was the Solstice, but that was months away yet. The Wizarding world, in Britain at least, was going to hell in a hand basket, but the family was safe. That was what was important – I told myself that several times a day – every day.

In the new year there was the insane hope that came with the whispering about Potter being the Chosen One and that somehow he'd vanquish Riddle, but having come face to face with Riddle, I didn't put a lot of stock in any of that.

When the rumors began to fly that Potter was back at Hogwarts, a glimmer of hope appeared, no matter how much I tried to convince myself that the hope was delusional. I didn't expect the battle at the castle. Given the nature of my promises, I was unable to take up arms against Riddle's vassals, but that didn't stop me from darting out of the shadows to pull aside the wounded and rendering aid when I could. I was in the Great Hall when it happened. I can't say that I saw it up close and personal, but I did see the spells crash and watched as Riddle's spell rebounded against him.

With Riddle dead, I didn't think much about my betrothal – I figured with him dead, the deal was off.

I couldn't marry a dead man, could I?

It was Monday this week when we got summoned to Gringotts. It was worded as an invitation, of course, but I don't think Mother or Father gave any serious thought to declining the call. A fairly good looking human spoke to Mother and Father (I was sitting meekly in the back row, practicing being a good little witch daughter) and announced that I was now an asset of Riddle's estate, and my promise to wed had somehow transferred to Potter.

*The words ' **I belong to you, we will wed by the solstice** ' came to mind.*

I don't remember much of the meeting after that particular bit, as I was doing my best to not hyperventilate. We were free to back out of the deal, of course, at the price of losing my magic.

I reckoned I could live without magic – Father always insisted that I had to be able to navigate the mundane world, and in fact my plan after Hogwarts was further schooling at Aberdeen, after I'd sharpened my maths and chemistry.

When we got home Father was trying to plot out my course as a witch without magic, when Mother pulled us both up short.

"She should go through with it with Potter," Mother announced.

"What?" I shrieked.

"He's not a bad match, Queenie. By reputation he is kind and polite; he's obviously magically powerful. He's not a Pureblood idiot, and the girl he was rumored to be sweet on is now out of the picture," Mother said.

Did I ever mention that Mother was a Slytherin? Dad was a Ravenclaw and most of the rest of the family alternated between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, but Mother was a Slytherin through and through.

"Right, Mum, I have to walk up to a boy I haven't said twelve words to in seven years of school and convince him that he needs to marry me. How hard could that be?"

"Oh, Daphne," Mother cooed. "You're selling yourself short again."

"Mum, I'm just being realistic. I'm taller than he is, my bum's too big and I'm just plain - I'm the girl most likely to get lost in the back row of any group photos. We're talking Summer Solstice here, Mum, and I don't even know if he's the marrying kind."

"Mister Rufus from Gringotts says that he's going to be coming into the bank this week. You can talk to him when he does."

"Right, Mother , " I said, calling her by the title I only used when I was put out with her. "I can

see it now: 'Hello Harry, dear, you don't know me, but we really should get married by the Solstice. I've got good teeth, I'm not insane, I am a woman, I'm not too repulsive, and I'm told I don't snore at night.' Is that what I'm supposed to say when I talk to him?"

"Of course not, Daphne. We'll think of something better."

That Wednesday Mr. Rufus told us that Potter would be at Gringotts in the morning. Today is Thursday – since breakfast I've thrown up three times.

On the bright side, my control for the 'Scourgify' charm is now nothing short of amazing. I'm going to put this biro down now and take the Floo to the Alley.

No pressure, no pressure at all.

#@#

"Mr. Rufus, could you please take our guests to the conference room across the hall?" Ragnok asked. "Mr. Potter, on the conference table you'll find a summary of your combined holdings as well as the Bones grimoire. I took the liberty of assuming that you would want to return the book to your classmate. Ladies and gentlemen, I bid you good day."

Ragnok returned to the chair behind his desk.

Mr. Rufus held the door open with one hand while gesturing to an open doorway across the hallway. Harry was fairly certain that the door was not there when he'd first come to Ragnok's office, but the notion of rooms that appeared and disappeared was not unfamiliar to him.

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The conference room was simple, with an understated elegance. A long, perfectly polished table occupied most of the room with a small buffet close to the door. The buffet held a coffee service and an array of pastries.

"I can't say anything good about the coffee," Mr. Rufus stated, "but the doughnuts are acceptable."

He smiled at each of them in turn and then sat back in a corner, looking blandly disinterested.

Daphne tried to pour a glass of water, but her hands were shaking. Andromeda swept in and took the glass from her hand, filling it from the carafe on the table.

"Let's sit down and talk," Andromeda announced. Looking at Mr. Rufus she asked, "Do you need to be here?"

"I'm on duty, Mistress Tonks," he said, as if that were a complete explanation.

"Surely you don't think that Miss Greengrass is going to attack us, do you?" Andromeda asked.

Mr. Rufus said nothing in reply, spreading his hand in a “what can I do?” gesture. “My opinion on that topic is moot.”

Daphne moved to the side of the table opposite Andromeda and Harry.

“Does anyone mind if I take off this ridiculous veil?” she asked.

Andromeda and Harry both murmured assent and Daphne took off the veil, folding it carefully before setting it on the back of a chair. She then took off the black robe she’d been wearing as well, revealing a grey belted skirt and a dark blue blouse. She sat down and placed her hands together.

“You have no idea how nervous I am right now,” she said, looking from Andromeda to Harry.

“Take a big breath,” Andromeda commanded. “Now let it out. Now tell us the story of why you’re here today.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Tonks,” Daphne said.

“It’s all about magic,” she said, reaching for the Bones grimoire, holding her hand over the cover of the book before picking it up. She then began to tell the tale of the Greengrass grimoire and how she’d ended up handfasted to Tom Riddle. It was an involved, detailed story and once she got into the rhythm of storytelling she visibly relaxed and told a captivating tale. Harry ate two doughnuts during the story, but skipped the coffee.

“So, in summary, your family has this old book of magic,” Harry asked.

“Uh-huh,” Daphne answered.

“But none of you can speak about what’s in it to anyone outside of the family,” Harry continued.

Daphne nodded.

“And your parents negotiated your betrothal, binding Riddle and his minions to do no harm to your family, throwing in the grimoire as some sort of dowry.”

“That’s it in a nutshell,” Daphne said, flashing a nervous smile.

“I think you’re insane,” Harry said calmly. “I also think that you must love your family a lot and that you’re a very brave girl.”

“That’s all good, right? Insane, loving, brave?” Daphne asked rhetorically.

“Before all of this, what were your plans after Hogwarts?” Andromeda asked.

“Our family owns a lot of farmland, worked by tenant farmers. I was going to study privately and then enroll at the University of Aberdeen. It has a very good programme in soil science,” Daphne

answered.

“What would you do if you lost your magic?” Harry asked.

“Until recently I hadn’t given that a lot of thought. I think I would probably do pretty much the same thing, except I’d look at Apiary Science,” Daphne said.

“Apiary?”

“Bees, beekeeping; honeybees are very important in agriculture,” Daphne explained.

“Wasn’t your family worried about what Riddle would do with the magic in your grimoire?” Harry asked.

“For reasons that I can’t explain,” Daphne began.

“Because you can’t talk about it,” Harry interrupted.

“Exactly; for reasons I can’t explain, we thought that Riddle wouldn’t be able to use most of the magic. Sure, we thought that he was powerful enough, but the magics in the grimoire are not exactly the sort of things that Dark Lords would use on their path towards domination,” Daphne said with a smirk.

“How very Slytherin of your family,” Harry said.

“Why thank you,” Daphne replied with a smile.

Harry sat up and looked straight into Daphne’s eyes.

“So, apart from saving you from losing your magic, why should I marry you?” Harry asked.

“I was rehearsing an answer to that question all last night,” Daphne began.

She took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out.

“So, here it goes; the ‘ten-reasons-why-you-should-marry-Daphne’ speech.

“You would get the grimoire, and more importantly, you’d get me.

“Magically, I’m very powerful, and I would teach you about the old ways, not the pureblood idiocy that infests the Ministry but the foundations of our magic that aren’t really taught at Hogwarts.

“I will be a good wife; I will be loyal to you and I will never leave you. I will be the mother to your children and our children will be raised in a house filled with love and they will be able to navigate both the mundane and magical world.

“If I didn’t forget anything, I think that’s ten reasons.”

“What about money?” Harry asked.

“I’m a Greengrass, I *don’t* need your money, and I suspect that you don’t need mine either,” Daphne said.

“What about love?”

“I’ll be the first to admit that we are not in love today, Harry – I think we barely know each other. But I don’t think that’s a problem.

“That sounds terrible, but let me explain. Growing up, I attended many weddings of our tenants’ children. The minister was fond of saying that it was not love that sustained marriage, but marriage that sustained enduring love. I believe that’s true, it certainly was true with my own parents.

“Today I only admire you; it’s a brave man who walks to his death knowing that only his death will protect the people he loves. That’s something I think I understand,” Daphne said, placing her palms flat on the table.

The room was silent.

“I think you do,” Harry said finally. He stood and gathered up the grimoire and the leather portfolio from the table.

“I came to Gringotts today to withdraw enough from my vault that I could finish fixing up my godfather’s house. I didn’t expect that I’d be discussing marrying someone I don’t really know. When’s the solstice?”

“It’s June 21st,” Daphne answered.

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said.

Daphne let out a breath and leaned back in her chair, eyes closed.

“Thank you Harry, you don’t know how much that means to me.”

“How do I get in touch with you?” Harry asked.

“Do you have a phone?” Daphne asked.

“Andromeda has one,” Harry replied.

Daphne reached into the folds of her robe and pulled out a card. “Here’s my number.”

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Due Diligence

Harry sprinkled Floo powder on the small fire burning in Andromeda's hearth and repeated the sequence of numbers he'd found on a note tucked into the Bones' grimoire. "Four oh, six oh, five oh, one, one, one," he enunciated as clearly as possible.

"Please state your name and the name of the person you are calling," a thin tinny voice called out from the flames.

"Harry Potter calling for Miss Susan Bones," Harry said.

"Please stand by."

"Hey, Harry!" Susan Bones said as her face appeared in the flames.

"May I come through?" Harry asked.

"If you don't mind that I look like a charwoman, c'mon over," Susan said cheerily.

Harry stepped into one hearth and out another, entering a large empty room strewn with drop cloths and ladders. Susan was dressed in an old men's shirt and jeans with a bandana covering her hair, except for the strawberry blonde plait that hung down the back.

"Welcome to Aunty's house, minus Aunty, of course," Susan said with bravado.

"You going to live here?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I might rent it out after I get it habitable again."

"I'm doing the same thing with my godfather's house. I'm pretty certain that I don't want to live there, but it needs a lot of work before it's fit for humans. Death Eaters trashed the place."

"Yeah, same here. Bastards, the lot of them. After a very fair trial, in which the truth is painfully forced out of them, I want them to rot in Azkaban." Susan hissed.

"I couldn't agree more, Susan," Harry said.

"Yeah, you'd know, wouldn't you," she said, wrapping her paint brush in parchment paper. "Let's go to the kitchen."

"You lose some weight?" Harry asked as he followed her into the kitchen.

"You're not supposed to comment on a lady's weight or age, Harry," Susan said, wagging her finger at him.

“You look good,” he explained.

“Thanks,” she replied. “I’ve lost about a stone. I’ve been doing most of the work here at the house by myself. It’s very satisfying – at the end of the day I can see progress. So, what brings you here, and how did you get that Floo number?”

Harry unwrapped the paper covering the Bones grimoire and handed the book to her. “Returning something to you; Gringotts gave me the number.”

“Where did you get this?” Susan asked in amazement. “After Aunty was gone I searched the house and her office and never found it.”

“It seems that I ended up inheriting Tom Riddle’s property. I’m returning what I can to its rightful owners.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Susan said, as she put the book on the counter. “Can I give you a hug?”

“Sure,” Harry said as she wrapped her arms around him.

“You have no idea what this means to me – wait, you probably do know what this means to me, don’t you?”

“Yeah, Susan, I do. I was eleven before I ever saw a picture of my parents,” he explained.

“Tea, biscuits?” Susan asked opening and shutting cupboard doors.

“Uh, tea, no biscuits,” Harry replied. “Let me change the subject.”

“Okay, shoot,” Susan said as she filled a tea kettle with water.

“What do you know about Daphne Greengrass?”

“Ooooh! Very interesting that you should ask that, Harry Potter,” Susan said with a smile.

“How’s that?”

“She called here just last week asking the same thing about you,” Susan said, a sly smile on her face. “If you were a pureblood from one of the really old families, I’d think that someone was negotiating betrothal.”

Susan’s expression went serious when she saw the stricken look on Harry’s face. “That’s it, isn’t it? How is this happening?”

“It’s a long story, Susan, and I’m not really comfortable talking about it, and I’d appreciate it if you kept this under your kerchief. I’m used to people talking about me, but I don’t want people talking about her; she doesn’t deserve that.”

“Like you do?”

“Point taken.”

“Well, I told Daphne that you were shy, totally clueless about women, and essentially Muggleborn because of how you were raised. I also told her that you were kind, honorable, magically very powerful, and certifiably insane. Tell me, Harry, did you *really* ride a dragon out of Gringotts?” Susan asked.

“Yeah, I *really* rode a dragon out of Gringotts – and I *really* just authorized Gringotts to withdraw a healthy sum of galleons from my vault to replace that dragon, too,” Harry admitted.

“See, proves my point. From anyone else I wouldn’t believe a story like that, but for you, it’s consistent with all the other wild stories about you that just happen to be true,” Susan said. She then turned to pull the kettle off the heat and poured boiling water into the teapot she’d prepared earlier. “How do you take your tea?”

“Sugar, no cream. What’s this ‘magically very powerful’ business?”

“Harry, you were capable of making a corporeal Patronus when you were thirteen, and then you held off a herd of Dementors later that year. That’s real power.”

“Why is that important?”

“Magical families with strong children want to find matches that are equally strong,” Susan explained.

“So that’s the magical equivalent of having a lot of sex appeal?” Harry asked.

“Something like that – if you’re magically powerful, a lot of other shortcomings are overlooked,” Susan answered. “So, what do you want to know about Daphne?”

“I have no idea,” Harry said with a small laugh. “Everything?”

“Well, she’s a girl,” Susan drawled.

“Yeah, I figured that out on my own,” Harry said. “I think it was the skirt and how she looked in the blouse that gave it away.”

“She’s quiet – shy, kind of like you. She’s very bright, but not obnoxious about it. She was in a study group with a bunch of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs for Arithmancy, Runes and Potions for years. That’s where I first met her in second year. She tutored some kids a few years behind her. She hates Malfoy with a passion,” Susan explained.

“Who were her friends?”

“I don’t think she had any friends in Slytherin, not in her year at least. Malfoy made sure of that.

“I remember fifth year when Umbridge formed her little inquisitor death squads, Malfoy was tormenting a bunch of second year Hufflepuffs. Daphne came out of nowhere and blasted the inquisitors down the hall and then stuck them to the ceiling. I thought Umbridge would have her hide for that, but nothing happened. I don’t think the inquisitors wanted Umbridge to know that a little geeky-looking girl blasted her little darlings without using a wand. Maybe she Obliviated them. I don’t know for sure. I was busy getting the ‘puffs back to their dorm. If I’d had any doubts before, after that I figured she was all right in my book. She has a few friends in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, nobody really close, but she is easy to get along with, if you could get her to talk.”

“What do you know about her family?”

“Dad’s some sort of Scottish noble, owns a bunch of farms and orchards. He has a lot of business dealings with Muggles. Most of his tenants are Muggles. Her dad lost his wife and his sons during the first war, so he’s not inclined to sympathize with the pureblood idiots or the Death Eaters. Growing up I’d see her at some of the social gatherings when Aunty would drag me to them over the years,” Susan said, pouring tea into two cups.

“Did her dad remarry? She mentioned something about her mum, speaking in the present tense,” Harry said.

“So, you *have* been speaking with the lovely Miss Greengrass,” Susan said coyly.

Harry raised his eyebrows at her.

“I’m sorry, Harry, I couldn’t resist teasing you a bit. Yeah, her dad remarried after the war. The current Madam Greengrass is her step-mum, and Astoria is her half-sister. Are you gonna tell me what this is all about?”

“Uh, I’d really rather not,” Harry said.

“For you, Harry, I will zip my lips. Why aren’t you asking Hermione these questions?”

“That’s easy – she’s still in Australia.”

“Well, I’m glad you came by. What are you doing these days? Are you going to go back to Hogwarts for the seventh year you missed?” Susan asked.

“Not very likely; I can’t think of any reason why I’d need to take my NEWT exams,” Harry said. “Shacklebolt wants me to work for the Ministry, but I’m done with being anybody’s poster boy. I’m doing the same thing you’re doing – fixing the damage done to a house I’m not sure I’m going to live in – it keeps my hands and my mind busy.”

“Is that the only thing keeping you busy these days, Harry?” Susan asked

“Pretty much – when I’m not playing construction worker with a kinda strange old house elf, I’m playing godfather to my year-old godson. It’s really exciting; you’ll probably see it all in an article in the next Witch Weekly,” Harry said, before gulping down the rest of his tea. “Thanks for the information. I’ve got to get back to work. We’re having some plumbers in and I need to make

sure that Kreachter doesn't lock them in the cellar."

"Harry?"

"Yeah, Susan?"

"If there's a ceremony, will you invite me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about Susan, but if there are invitations, I'll make sure you're at the top of the list."

"Thanks, Harry."

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Part Three

A walk in the park

Grace Greengrass put down her book, slipping a bookmark between the pages before closing it.

"Queenie dear, making faces at the phone isn't going to make it ring," she said.

"What? Oh. I wasn't growling at the phone, Mum, I was thinking," Daphne said.

"Oh?"

"Susan Bones sent me a note; it said Harry came by to talk."

"So, it's 'Harry' now, is it?" Grace asked.

"Mum, whether I like it or not, I'm still betrothed, the only thing that's different is that instead of being bound to a monster, I'm bound to a young man who I think is about as frightened as I am," Daphne said quietly.

"What were Harry and Susan talking about?"

"Apparently they were talking about me."

"That's good, right?"

"How would I know, Mum? I've never done this before," Daphne growled with exasperation.

"I'm going riding. With any luck I'll get thrown by the horse and break my neck."

"Don't be morbid dear, and wear your helmet."

"Yes, Mum."

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Harry finished writing out a long list of supplies that were needed to finish the last of the carpentry work at Grimmauld Place. The plumbing was done, new carpets were scheduled for late June and he was waiting for bids on the electrical work, bringing Grimmauld Place into the 20th century. He posted the list on a bulletin board next to the refrigerator. It would be gone before evening; Kreacher might be more than a little odd, but he was growing in efficiency.

“So, Harry, what are you thinking about all of this?” Andromeda asked.

“The renovation’s going just fine, Andi,” Harry said.

“I’m not talking about that project; I’m talking about the enigma with hazel eyes,” Andi said with a smirk.

“Stop smirking at me, Andi, and I don’t think she’s an enigma, she’s being pretty up front about what she wants,” Harry grumbled.

“I’m not smirking, Harry, although I’d be lying if I said this wasn’t amusing.”

“I don’t know what to do.” Harry stated.

“You don’t have to do anything. Just because the damsel’s in distress, it doesn’t mean you have to play the gallant knight.

“What do you think of her?” Andi asked.

“I don’t know – she’s a girl, she has nice teeth. I think she’s interesting.”

“We’ll table any discussion of teeth. Why do you think she’s interesting?”

“She’s a Slytherin, but she’s not like Malfoy. She’s a traditionalist, but she’s not a pureblood whacko. She’s got guts.” Harry paused. “What do you think of her?”

“She’s not asking me to marry her,” Andi countered.

“More’s the pity. It would be nice to watch someone else have this sort of issue once in a while. No, really, what do you think of her?”

“I think she thought through everything she said and did yesterday. She showed up in very traditional widow’s weeds, but then took them off to show you that she’s a girl who wears flattering muggle style clothing. She was obviously very nervous, but she’d also given what she had to say a lot of thought. She’s not a fan-girl and she’s not a gold-digger,” Andi observed.

“So what do I do, Andi?”

“I think you need to get to know her better,” Andi replied. “I also think that it’s time that Teddy

gets a bath, a story and then to bed.”

“Can I do that?” Harry asked.

“Sure, the bathroom gets pretty wet when the two of you go at it, but I could use a break,” Andi replied.

Andromeda sat back in her chair, pondering how much more exhausting it was to raise a toddler as a witch in her fifties than as a witch in her twenties. Then, listening carefully for the sound coming from upstairs, she went into Ted’s old home office, fingered through some files until she found one particular file and jotted down a phone number. Picking up the cordless phone she rang the number.

“Hello, Grace?”

“This is Andromeda.

“Andromeda Tonks. I’m fine, thanks.

“I have a bewildered young man at my house.

“Yeah, I wish he was my son.

“Uh huh, exactly.

“Harry and I are taking Teddy to the Zoo tomorrow – yeah, Regent’s Park. Yes, it’s frightfully expensive, but if I’m going to spoil my only grandchild it’s not a bad way to go.

“Uh huh.

“I think it might be a good idea if your daughter got out tomorrow, take her mind off things.

“Yeah, subtle like a Bludger.

“No, Harry doesn’t know.

“He thinks she has nice teeth. Yeah, that’s what I thought, but he also says that he thinks she’s intriguing.

“Okay, we’ll probably be there 10:30ish, it’s hard to be precise with a toddler.

“Good, I’ll see you there.”

Andromeda put the cordless back in its cradle and then went to make some more tea. She’d tell Harry about tomorrow’s plans before he went to bed tonight.

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The London Zoo at Regent's Park was new to Harry; his first and only zoo trip with the Dursleys had been at Marwell. Teddy was nestled in a sling resting on Harry's chest and burbling at the animals and people. It was a lovely day.

Harry thought Andromeda had been a bit 'off' this morning, but dismissed it out of hand. Then he'd been caught up in Teddy's excitement of a ride in the Tube and the sights, sounds and smells of the zoo. He saw a familiar shape at the corner of this vision and then turned to see Daphne walking with an older blonde woman, no doubt her mum, or step-mum, or whatever. It clicked then, the conversation he'd had with Andi the night before and this sudden urge to visit the zoo.

As Daphne rounded the she spotted Harry and after a moment, realization showed on her face. She covered her face with her hands and turned to the woman next to her.

"Mother, you didn't!" she wailed.

"Grace dear," Andi called. "Such a delightful surprise to see you here."

"Andi, you lie like a rug," Harry hissed quietly.

"You must be Madam Greengrass," Harry said as she held out her hand. He lowered his head and air-kissed her knuckles, just as he'd been tutored by Andi.

He then turned to embrace Daphne, kissing her cheek before whispering in her ear, "I didn't know she was planning this, and from the look on your face, you didn't either."

"Thank you," Daphne whispered against his ear, her arms tightening around him for the smallest amount of time.

"Harry, dear," Andi said with a smile, "let me take Teddy. I think you need to take Miss Greengrass for a walk."

Harry hoisted Teddy, sling and all, and deposited him in Andi's arms.

"Direct, isn't she?" Daphne observed. "Mister Potter, would you escort me, please?"

"It would be an honor, my lady," he said, holding an elbow out towards her.

"Years from now I'm probably going to think that this was sweet," Daphne said after they'd been walking for a few minutes.

"Are you okay? You seem, I dunno, pale," Harry inquired.

Daphne pressed her lips together and then said, "My period started yesterday. It's usually no big deal, except when I'm under a lot of stress, and then it hits me like freight train."

"Do you need to sit down?"

“I’m not an invalid, Harry, I’m just ... cramping.”

“What would help?”

“How’s your warming charm?” Daphne asked.

“Pretty good.”

“Right here,” Daphne whispered, pointing to a spot an inch below her navel.

Harry crossed his arms, touching the wand concealed in his left sleeve with his right thumb and invoked the warming charm.

“Oooh, ohhh,” she hissed. “That’s gooood, thanks.”

They resumed walking; threading their way through a few exhibits until they found the walkway along the towpath.

“My warming charm has two settings,” Daphne explained, breaking the silence. “It’s tepid or extra crispy. I can’t seem to get anything between the two.”

“That’s odd,” Harry said. “So, this is a date, then?”

“It looks like it,” Daphne said wryly.

“Pretend that I was raised by wolves and just learned how to speak the human tongue last week. What do people *do* on dates?” Harry asked.

Daphne gave him an odd look and then looked ahead as she kept walking.

“Well, it all depends,” Daphne began. “If you were a muggle boy in college, you’d take me out for drinks and try to get me to sleep with you once I got sufficiently drunk.”

“Not going to happen today, sorry,” Harry said.

“I don’t know if I should be offended or not,” Daphne said. “If you were an older Slytherin you’d try to take me out of sight and snog me while getting inside my blouse.”

“Nah,” Harry said. “You look better in the blouse than I ever would. What would a decent human being do on a date?”

“Well, that’s pretty rare,” Daphne said. “A decent human being would walk and talk and get to know the woman. He might offer to buy her a snack at a cafe, say vanilla ice cream with lots of hot chocolate topping. After a while they would hold hands and then at the end of the date he’d give the lady a kiss – or not. Sometimes the chemistry isn’t there.”

“Okay, thanks – I think I can work with that,” Harry said.

“Do you really not know?” Daphne asked incredulously.

“Daphne, I was a toddler when my parents were murdered. By Dumbledore’s orders I was whisked off to my Aunt and literally left in a basket on her doorstep. That family hated magic, and hated me too, so long story made short, I don’t have a lot of good examples of what real people do.”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know,” Daphne said. “You seem so normal.”

“Yeah, well, appearances are deceiving. I identify with Pinocchio a lot, always wondering what it’s like to be a real boy.”

And so they walked, trading stories back and forth about their lives before Hogwarts. They stopped at a café for ice cream, including lots of hot chocolate topping.

After the café, Harry, as casually as he could, brushed his fingers against hers as they walked, and when she didn’t pull away, he took her hand.

The feeling of warmth that shot through him when she briefly squeezed was very comforting.

“I like touch, but I’m not very good at it,” Harry explained. “Hermione and Mrs. Weasley were big on hugs; it freaked me out at first, but I decided I liked it.”

“What about Miss Weasley?” Daphne asked.

“I’m told that gentlemen don’t talk about that,” Harry said.

“Oh, of course,” Daphne said, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Ginny was...delightful. She was very demonstrative; I liked it a lot.”

“Why’d you break up with her?”

“I thought it would protect her,” Harry said.

“It didn’t,” Daphne replied. “The Carrows made her life hell, until she disappeared at Easter. I never knew if she’d managed to escape from the castle, or if she’d been taken to one of the camps.”

“It was one of my many mistakes,” Harry said sadly. “She was in hiding with her family until I came back to Hogwarts. If she’d stayed away she’d still be alive.”

“And if you hadn’t picked up Voldemort’s wand, I’d be a free woman,” Daphne said.

“Don’t apologize, Harry Potter, not for the wand, not for any of it! We can’t change the past; we can only try to make things better today.”

Harry stopped walking and turned to face her. “Thanks,” he said simply.

She reached to stroke his hair with her free hand and then leaned in to kiss his cheek. “You’re welcome,” she said, with a small smile. Turning away from him she tugged him back into motion. They’d long ago left Regent’s Park and now were on a walkway by the Thames.

“Hey, you said that the kiss came at the *end* of the date,” Harry objected.

“Does this date include lunch?”

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Astoria saw a brief flicker at the outer edge of the estate’s boundary. She smiled as she recognized her sister with what could only be Harry Potter, standing behind her, arms wrapped round her waist as they’d dual Apparated home.

“Sure beats ‘here, grab onto my arm,’” she said to herself.

She saw the pair turn to face one another and after a brief pause of an unheard conversation, Harry rose up and kissed her sister on the cheek. Astoria scrambled into the entryway of the house. Daphne was ambushed as she opened the door.

“Well, you seem to be making good progress. Did he get his hand up your jumper?”

“You loathsome midget!” Daphne shouted, loud enough so Mum could hear her, wherever she might be, before she shot a blob of color out of her wand at her sister’s departing backside.

“Mum! Queenie’s using magic in the house!” Astoria wailed.

Grace swept into the entry hall, holding her finger to her lips. “Queenie, stop blobbing your sister; you know how hard it is to get the color out of her clothes,” she yelled in faux anger, pulling her daughter into the sitting room. Several privacy spells later she invited Daphne to sit down.

“Well, Queenie, I’m waiting,” Grace said.

“Thank you, Mum, for interfering in my life in such a wonderful way,” Daphne said.

“You’re welcome, dear. Actually, you have Andromeda to thank for that, I was just a lowly accomplice.”

“What is she to him?” Daphne asked.

“Formally, he’s the head of the Black family and she is or was a Black; I’m not sure of the current status. Her late daughter was married to the late Remus Lupin, who was a close friend of Harry’s parents. Functionally, she’s his surrogate mother as he’s playing big brother to Teddy Lupin.”

“I meant to ask you, did you see Teddy’s hair change color at the zoo?”

“Yes, Metamorph runs in the Black family. Nymphadora was a full Metamorphmagus. It seems

Teddy will change his hair color to match whomever he's talking to if he's happy. When we took him to see the Great Horned Owl, his hair rose up in little tufts just like the owl's; it was darling."

"Doesn't that violate the Statute of Secrecy?"

"I don't think anyone cares right now. So, was it a good day out?"

"Yes," Daphne said. "I asked him to put a warming charm on me; I told him I was cramping."

"You didn't," Grace protested.

"I did, it was wonderful. He was a perfect gentleman – we walked and talked and then fed me lunch and then we dual Apparated here so he'd know how to get back again."

"Any conclusions?"

"He seems to like me, but I don't think he's proposing any time soon," Daphne said. "Aside from having a newly dead girlfriend, I don't understand why he's not taken, he's so nice."

"No doubt tongues will start to wag that you had her eliminated,"

"Slytherins never get a break," Daphne said in agreement.

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"Well?" Andi drawled.

"Well," Harry drawled in reply. "I wish we didn't have this deadline looming over us. She's a nice girl but I'm not sure I want to wake up next to her for the rest of my life."

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Andi asked.

"I haven't a clue."

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The next day came and went, and after supper Daphne braced her mother.

"Mum, I need Andromeda's number," she said urgently.

"Proper witches don't call wizards on the phone," Grace chided.

"Get over it, Mum, proper witches don't get betrothed to Voldemort. Desperate times, desperate measures."

Grace went to a rolodex by the kitchen phone and copied down a telephone number. Daphne snatched it out of her hand and said, "Let the midget know that if she listens in on this call, I'm

going to shave her bald.” She then retreated into a small workroom, pushing the door shut with an audible click.

“Hello, Mrs. Tonks?”

“This is Daphne, I’m fine thanks.

“Ah, it’s kind of obvious why I’m calling, is Harry there?”

“Thanks, I’ll wait.

“Hello Harry.

“I just wanted to let you know that I really enjoyed spending time with you yesterday.

“I don’t know, what am I doing tomorrow?”

“I’d love to, thanks.

“I’ll see you then,” she said, placing the phone back on the hook. “Why does this have to be so hard?”

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Queenie’s Diary – Enciphered Entry – June 1, 1998

When I got up this morning I looked at the hand that touched the rocking stone as I pledged away my liberty to protect my family. I wonder if I really like Harry, or if it’s some odd compulsion of the magic.

Today was a nice day. I took the Floo in the morning to Mrs. Tonks’ house; she’s just recently been connected to the network. Now that I know where the place is, I suppose I’ll Apparate in the future.

I had breakfast with Harry, Andromeda and Teddy, then Harry and I took Teddy out for errands whilst Andromeda got the morning off. She loves Teddy to pieces, but I can tell she appreciated the break.

We went to Aldi’s for baking ingredients and then when Teddy was down for his nap, we made biscuits together. The oh-so-sophisticated might pooh-pooh such pedestrian activities, but it was fun.

Mrs. Tonks doesn’t have any elves in the house aside from Kreacher dropping in from time to time. I’m going to suggest to Harry that he do something to change that.

Teddy is such a cute baby. Before going to the store I mixed up the classic peek-a-boo game by palming my wand and hitting my face with a low power color blob. When I opened my hands Teddy

would shriek with delight at seeing my face bright yellow, or green, or red. He'd match the color with his own face and then I'd cover my face with my hands again. Again, not sophisticated, but I figure I need to have fun with magic while I still have it.

Teddy's not walking – Andromeda says that babies either decide to talk or walk first, and then the other catches up. Teddy is a talker. I'm "Daf" to Harry's "Hawa."

We got some looks in the store, I'm sure that more than one old woman looked at the poor young couple that had a child together too soon. I caught more than one of them looking at my hand for a ring.

Note to self – Harry bakes a great biscuit.

After lunch, Harry took me to Grimmauld Place for a tour. Andromeda gave me a disapproving glare, I suppose because we were out without a chaperone, but she had the good sense to say nothing.

Harry's told me what the place looked like, so I was pleasantly surprised to see how much progress has been made – at least to the interior.

The home at one time had an impressive garden, but it's been neglected for decades. The shrubbery in the front is either completely overgrown or dead. The back is choked with weeds and the soil is old, worn out. It's nothing that a half ton of composted muck wouldn't improve, but I don't think it's at the top of Harry's "to-do" list. Harry understands gardening, so I might raise the subject in the future – assuming that there is a future with him.

End of enciphered entry – checksum 876

QUEENIE LUVS HARRY!!!! - AJG

Queenie's Dairy – enciphered entry.

And that, dear diary, is why all of my entries are in cipher. I'm too tired to punish the midget (Astoria) for messing with my diary, but I will let my ire season for an opportune moment.

Kreacher was plain weird today – which given Kreacher's baseline of weirdness is saying something. When I entered Grimmauld Place he stopped me at the threshold and pulled my hands to his head. He started to shake and continued shaking for almost a minute. He then scurried away, talking to himself about "Mistress" and "must prepare."

Harry gave me a top to bottom tour. The whole house has been neglected for decades, but the foyer, dining room and kitchen were pretty much destroyed by Death Eaters last year. Harry told me that the topmost bedroom once housed a hippogriff, which I would have thought was a joke, until I caught a whiff of the unmistakable tang of horse muck and saw the scratches in the floor. Harry's life has been so weird that he doesn't have to make this stuff up.

Much to Astoria-the-midget's dismay, there were no bodice-ripping moments. He pointed to his

room as we toured through the second floor, but that was as close as “Harry” “Daphne” and “bedroom” came together in one sentence that day.

The plumbing's done and Harry says the house will have electricity soon. After the tour we went back to Mrs. Tonks' house.

I swear that there are some days that I wonder if I'm possessed. Before leaving from the Tonks' garden I heard my mouth say, “Would you like to come to dinner tomorrow?”

Harry was silent for a moment. I gave great thought to either Obliviating him on the spot or Disapparating before he could answer.

“Tomorrow's booked. How's the day after tomorrow?” he answered.

“That should be good, I'll let you know if it's not,” my traitorous mouth said before I could say something sensible.

“See you then?” I asked. I didn't stick around to hear his reply – I Disapparated, heading to the outer boundary of our home.

End of enciphered entry – checksum 287

Kokopelli
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By right of conquest

Chapter the Third

By Right of Conquest

Chapter the Third

Harry Potter was sitting on the front steps of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, sipping the perfect cup of coffee he'd received from Kreacher minutes ago. Putting the cup down on the step he said, "Mr. Rufus, I know you're here. May I talk to you?"

The breeze rustled the leaves of the nearest tree. A vertical ring of fire appeared to Harry's right.

"Nice try, Mr. Rufus – you're on the other side."

The ring of fire sputtered out. A tall man appeared to Harry's left, handsomely dressed in a suit with a severely black fedora accented with a blood red hat band.

"Mr. Potter?" the man said.

"Is Rufus your first or last name?"

"It's the name you may use. I'm amused when humans call me 'mister' so keep on calling me 'Mr. Rufus.'

"What are you? I mean, I know you're a goblin, but are you a shape shifter or are you just really, really good at illusions?" Harry asked.

"You called me out of cover to ask about what I am?" Rufus asked.

"No, that's secondary. I'm a curious guy some times. So, what is it, shape shifter or illusionist?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Mister Clarity," Harry said drolly.

"What do you need, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm wondering if I could hire you to do something." Harry asked.

"Possibly," Rufus began.

Harry pulled a small rectangular package from his shirt pocket. "I need this delivered to Hermione Granger, she's somewhere in Australia. Can you do it?"

"Australia is a rather large place Mr. Potter."

“Yes, I did look at a map, but I reckoned you, or someone else who works for Ragnok, in one capacity or another, might already know where she could be found,” Harry said.

“Hmmm,” Rufus said noncommittally, reaching for the package. Hefting it in his hand for a moment before it disappeared, presumably into one of his pockets. “Why not use an owl?”

“My owl is dead, I don’t trust the Postal Owls, and I would wager that you could get in and out without being seen,” Harry explained.

“Two pounds sterling – coin only, no bank notes,” Rufus said, “payable after delivery.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Rufus,” Harry said with a smile.

“I’ll also require your word that you won’t leave the house for thirty minutes or so,” Rufus insisted.

“I suppose that I could do that.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Potter,” Rufus said, tipping his hat before he faded from sight.

“I have gotta learn how to do that,” Harry said, knocking back the rest of the coffee before he went back into the house.

Walking up to his bedroom he fished through the bowl that held the loose change he emptied from his pockets, finding a two pound coin at the bottom. Slipping this into his pocket, he went downstairs and busied himself in the kitchen, taking care to leave the coin on the middle of the table. After half an hour he noticed that the coin was gone, although he hadn’t heard anyone enter the room.

“Thank you, Mr. Rufus,” he said to the empty room.

He then heard the sound of a chime coming from his pocket. He pulled a hand-sized mirror from his pocket and sat down.

“Harry?” a familiar voice called.

“Yes, Hermione, I’m here. Tap the mirror with your finger.”

“Oh! I can see you now!” she said with excitement.

“Sirius left a notebook – he’d been writing up notes on how the Marauder’s map was made – there was a long section buried in there that explained how to charm mirrors for communication,” Harry explained.

“You are going to give me a copy of that?” Hermione said expectantly.

“If you’re good,” he replied. “So, how are you, how are your parents, how’s Australia?”

“I’m exhausted, my parents are livid, and Australia’s really a wonderful place. I suppose you’ve heard it all from Ronald,” Hermione began.

“Isn’t he with you?”

“No, he took off two weeks ago. We had... we had a screaming row worse than any we’ve ever had. I don’t think we’re together anymore,” Hermione said.

“I’m sorry to hear that. What happened?”

“Well, we found Mum and Dad, and I was able to reverse the Obliviation,” she began.

“So far, so good,” he commented.

“Yeah, well, Dad’s still not talking to me and Mum screamed at me for more than a day.”

“That’s understandable.”

“Ronald suggested that we Obliviate them again and go back to England,” Hermione said with a chilly tone.

“I imagine that you didn’t take to that very well.”

“I think it was Ron saying ‘*well, they’re only Muggles*,’ that pushed me over the edge. After he left, I realized that I wasn’t much better. I did dangerous, potentially irreversible magic on my own parent’s minds, without their consent, because as a witch, I obviously knew better.”

“But it was for the greater good, Hermione,” Harry said, tongue-in-cheek.

“If I was there, I’d hit you right now for saying that,” she said calmly.

“Yeah, well, good thing you’re there and I’m here,” Harry said. “Look, I’m sorry that Ron’s being Ron. I don’t think he’s going to change; he is what he is and you’re not going to change him. Have things gotten any better with your mum and dad?”

“Kind of, Dad’s still not speaking to me, Mum, well, she said this morning that she understood why I did what I did, which is a breakthrough of sorts.”

“So, you coming back or are you there for the foreseeable future?”

“I think I’m going to be in Australia for a while. How are you doing?”

“Me? I’m good – Grimmauld Place, you wouldn’t recognize it now. Kreacher and I have been fixing it up.”

“Is Mrs. Black still there?”

“Kind of, she doesn’t speak any more. I think Death Eaters might have done something to her when they were busting things up here. We finally got the picture off the wall – we shrank it down and it’s now in Kreacher’s room,” Harry explained.

“Harry, who was the man who dropped off the mirror?”

“Tall, handsome bloke with a black hat, red hat band?”

“That’s him,” Hermione said.

“His name’s Mr. Rufus, he works for Ragnok, the Director of Gringotts. I think he’s a Red Cap.”

“He’s a goblin?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“I think he might be the goblin equivalent of a Metamorphmagus. Ragnok thinks that he needs to keep an eye on me,” Harry explained.

“Are you in trouble with the bank?” she asked.

“Not with the bank, no. I authorized a withdrawal to cover the cost of the dragon we liberated from the vaults and we seem to be square on everything else,” he said.

“Well that’s good, I guess,” she said, pondering something. “So, why are you calling, Harry?”

“About that,” he began.

“Spit it out,” she commanded.

“Are you alone?” he asked.

“I’m standing on an observation tower in a park, there’s no one for hundreds of yards in any direction – no one visible that is,” she said cautiously.

“Mr. Rufus probably has someone nearby,”

“Don’t try to creep me out, Harry; it’s not going to work. Why are you calling?”

“I miss you, I wanted to talk to you,” he said.

“About what?”

“I’m....I’m seeing someone,” he said.

“What?” she asked incredulously.

“Is it so hard to believe that I would be interested in a witch?”

“Interested? No. Taking the initiative to actually talk to a girl? Yes, I find that hard to believe. How did this happen?”

“Well, it’s complicated,” Harry began.

“I’m not doing anything more important right now, Harry. Who’s the girl?”

“Miss Greengrass.”

“Astoria or Daphne?”

“Daphne, her friends call her ‘Queenie.’”

“You’re dating Daphne Greengrass?”

“Well, we’re not exactly dating,” Harry began. “Well, I take that back, we did go on a date, but that kind of just happened.”

“Harry, start at the beginning.”

And so Harry explained the strange tale of the Greengrass grimoire and how he’d essentially inherited Tom Riddle’s betrothal to Daphne.

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“So, she has to marry you, or she loses her magic,” Hermione asked.

“That seems to be the case.”

“But you don’t have to marry her, and if you don’t, your magic’s not threatened.”

“That seems to be the case too,”

“This has really got to be provoking your people saving thing,”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too.”

“So, what are you going to do? You have until what, June 21st?”

“What am I going to do? I dunno. I’m not wild about the deadline.”

“Do you even *know* Daphne?”

“Not until this week. We’ve been spending some time together. I’m having dinner with her family tomorrow.”

“Ooohh, the dreaded meeting with the parents,” Hermione said.

“I’ve gone toe to toe with Dementors and Voldemort – I think I can handle dinner with her parents,” Harry said.

“You might think differently about that after tomorrow,” Hermione said cheerfully.

“Always the optimist, Hermione.”

“Only for you, Harry. What do you think of her?”

“She’s... she’s nice. She’s smart, she’s interesting; we get along okay. I’m really impressed that she was willing to marry Voldemort to protect her family. She understands sacrifice ; precious few people understand that.”

“You’re not telling me that you’re wowed by her beauty, Harry.”

“There’s more to being fanciable than looking like a model, Hermione. Models aren’t real.

“Listen, you’re the one who told me most really good looking girls look like everyone else first thing in the morning – the lookers look that way because of how much time they spend on their appearance, which says something about their values.

“Daphne’s real.

“Take Ginny, I...I really... liked her. She was good looking, but that wasn’t why I liked her. I knew that in thirty years or so, she’d look like her mum, and I assure you that Molly doesn’t turn my crank, but that didn’t matter.

“I’m a guy – any girl with the requisite girl parts will be somewhat interesting. I mean, under the right circumstances, I could probably fancy Millicent Bulstrode, but not Pansy Parkinson or Dolores Umbridge, if that makes any sense. I’m not so shallow to say that I’m only interested in busty blondes no taller than I am.

“I’m gagging here, but yeah, I’m following you,” Hermione said.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said plaintively.

“Then don’t do anything.”

“I don’t think I can let this go.”

“Okay, tell me more.”

“Andromeda Tonks put her finger on it, she’s not a fan-girl, and she’s not a gold-digger,” Harry said.

“And that qualifies her to be your wife?” Hermione asked archly.

“Well, when you put it that way it really sounds stupid.”

“Exactly, that’s my point.”

“I know her, Harry. She was what Slytherin was supposed to be, cunning and ambitious. She’s quiet, but I always felt that she had a plan and that she was working on making things happen rather than just waiting for things to happen,” Hermione said.

“Unfortunately I don’t know her well enough to say if she’d be a good match for you. Do you even want to get married? You’re only seventeen! What’s driving this, Harry?”

“I dunno. Being with her feels right. When I say it that way it sounds simple minded, but that’s all I can put together in words. I figured you’d tell me what I’m thinking.”

“I don’t tell you what to think, Harry,” Hermione objected.

“Yes, but most times you know me better than I know myself.”

“I think you’re lonely and you’re enjoying her company. I think most of your life you’ve thought that you wouldn’t live to see twenty, and now everything’s wide open. My only piece of advice is don’t rush things. I don’t know why I’m giving you advice, I’m not exactly a poster child for savvy relationships, I just broke up with my first boyfriend, and one of my parents isn’t talking to me.”

“Yeah, I can see that. But you know what? Talking to you has made me feel better,” Harry shared.

“Glad to be of service, Harry. Anything else we need to talk about?”

“Nah, I gotta go to Gringotts with Neville, we’re signing on some financing for rebuilding Longbottom Hall,” Harry said.

“I miss you, Harry,” Hermione said.

“I miss you too, but stay there until you work things out with your parents.”

“Thanks,” Hermione said, touching the surface of the mirror to break the connection.

#@#

Andromeda gave Harry’s clothing a careful look. “Okay, how are you dressing for dinner with Daphne’s family?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked. “I figured I’d go like this.”

“No,” Andromeda said firmly.

“What do you mean no?”

“You’re dining with the Patriarch of a very old family who also happens to be a noble of the realm. If you throw on a formal robe over that you will be adequately dressed, although wearing a family sigil wouldn’t be wrong either. You are the last representative of four old families – the Blacks, the Gaunts, the Potters, and through them the Peverells – you should dress the part, Harry,” Andromeda said solemnly.

She ducked upstairs, returning in a moment with a dark grey robe with black piping, opening it up for Harry to put his arms in the sleeves. Working quickly she lengthened the sleeves, took in the body, and then traced a pattern on each sleeve, leaving a scarlet threaded emblem on each sleeve – the bisected triangle and circle sigil of the Peverell family.

“Now you look like the young head of a family, ready to meet the Patriarch,” she said with certainty.

“I’m not the last Black,” Harry said.

“Oh really?”

“Could you fetch Teddy please?”

Andromeda raised an eyebrow, but went to pick a dozing toddler up from the playpen that Harry called the ‘Teddy containment field.’ Teddy woke and began to grunt.

“Andromeda Black Tonks, you are reinstated into the Black family along with your husband, daughter, son-in-law and grandson. Welcome back to the family,” Harry said with a smirk.

“That’s not how it’s supposed to be done!” Andromeda protested.

“Are you contradicting the head of your family, Andi?”

“Oh, you!” she fumed. “Take off those robes and change your godson, he just mutilated this nappy.”

#@#

Harry Apparated to the area just outside the gate leading to the Greengrass manor house. Looking about, he saw Daphne coming out of the shadows under a tree next to the fence. She was dressed in a chestnut brown gown with gold embroidery work on the sleeves, yoke and neckline.

“You clean up nicely,” she said as she touched the hem of his sleeve.

Dipping her head she brushed his cheek with a kiss. “I’ve missed you,” she whispered into his ear. “Ready for the show?”

“If I say no can I just take you out for pizza instead?” Harry said, smiling.

“That would be ‘no’ but I appreciate the thought,” she answered.

Harry turned towards the gate, which was opening before him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Daphne heading back to the shadows.

“It’s show time, boys and girls,” he muttered to himself as he walked the brick path to the front door.

The door was wood reinforced with hand worked steel bands and hinges. In the center of the door was the largest door knocker Harry had ever seen outside of the great doors at Hogwarts. He lifted the knocker and let it fall to the door plate three times, wincing at the noise it made.

“Who seeks entry to these halls?” a clear, feminine voice called out.

Drawing himself straight he lowered his voice and said loudly, “I am Harry James Potter, son of James. By blood I am Peverell of House Peverell, by blood and inheritance I am Black of House Black, and by right of conquest I am Gaunt of House Gaunt.”

“Come in peace, Harry, son of James,” the voice replied.

The door opened, showing a miniature version of Madam Greengrass, dressed in a gown similar to the one worn by Daphne, only deep blue with silver embroidery.

“Hi, I’m Astoria. Are you going to marry my sister?”

“Astoria!” Daphne hissed from the corner of the anteroom

“I just wanted to know, because if you do, I get her old bedroom,” Astoria said mischievously.

Harry considered bantering with Astoria, but reckoned that it wouldn’t make the best impression. “We’ll see,” he answered noncommittally.

#@#

Harry had been briefed by Daphne on the course of dinner. Malcolm, her father, would begin with a Gaelic blessing, and the meal would begin with a first course of bread, oil and salt, which presumably meant that Harry was now a guest of the house and couldn’t be killed by any member of the family for three days. Harry appreciated the background, but wondered at the logic, or lack thereof, behind the rituals.

“*Beannaigh sinn, a Thiarna, agusna bronnta naisseouait, a bhfuilimid le glacadh ó do rath. Amen*” Malcolm intoned.

Everyone at the table answered “Amen” before Grace lit the candles on the table.

“You are a guest of ours, Harry,” Malcom stated gravely, passing him a plate with an unsliced loaf of bread.

Harry tore a chunk off the end of the loaf, dipped it into the oil, and then sprinkled it with salt

before eating it.

“Do you have questions of us, Harry?” Grace asked cheerfully.

“I’ve not spent much time with the old families,” Harry began “although Andromeda Tonks has been trying to fill some of the gaps in my education. Was that a Christian prayer?”

“There’s a Christian prayer much like it,” Malcolm said hesitantly “but that prayer was rather more generic than Trinitarian. I take it you don’t speak Gaelic?”

“Not a word. Although I was born in Wales, I grew up near Aldershot, outside London,” Harry replied. “How long has your family been here?”

Malcolm chuckled. “We can prove that we’ve been here since the fourth century, but precious few records on land ownership in Scotland survived before the year 1000.”

“Wow, that’s a long time,” Harry said.

“The Highlands have been good to us,” Malcolm said.

“Harry, Queenie has told us next to nothing about you,” Grace began.

“Goodness knows I’ve tried,” Astoria said “but she won’t say anything about what you do or say when you’re together.”

Harry smiled and locked eyes with Daphne. “Thank you, Daphne.”

“To begin, I can categorically say that everything you read about me in The Daily Prophet is wrong, and none of the histories of ‘the-boy-who-lived’ have a shred of fact in them. I didn’t wrestle trolls as a five year old, I didn’t grow up in a magical palace hidden on an island in a lake, and I didn’t have any magical pets. My parents were murdered when I was a year and a half old, and no, I don’t know why I survived the killing curse. Albus too-many-names Dumbledore ordered that I be whisked away and I was literally left in a basket on my Muggle aunt’s doorstep with a note pinned to my blanket, explaining that my parents were dead and the Dursley family was supposed to raise me. I can say without hesitation that Dumbledore messed up when he sent me there.”

“Why’s that?” Malcolm asked.

“Vernon Dursley hated magic – he thought it was abnormal. He was convinced that if he was brutal enough, he could stamp the abnormality out of me,” Harry answered. “Quite obviously, it didn’t work. Although I had bouts of accidental magic, I didn’t know that I was a wizard until I received my Hogwarts letter when I was eleven.”

“What sort of accidental magic?” Astoria asked.

“Oh, lots of things. I Apparated to the roof of my school one day when I was being chased by my

cousin. Clothes that would change color, a bit of Metamorphsy when I grew my hair out overnight after a particularly wretched haircut performed by my Aunt, things like that.”

“Cool,” Astoria gushed.

The conversation picked up pace, alternating between quite thorough questions posed by Grace or Malcolm Greengrass and questions posed by Harry. Astoria’s comments and questions seasoned the conversation in the fashion of a thirteen year old witch. In the midst of this interrogation a fish course was served, followed by a main course, and dessert with tea and coffee.

Harry was about to start a new line of conversation when he heard a chime from the pocket of his gown. He pulled the mirror out of his pocket and touched the surface.

“Hello Harry,” Hermione said from the face of the mirror. “I hope that I’m not interrupting dinner. Can you pass this mirror to Daphne? I’d like to talk to her.”

Daphne took the mirror with an enigmatic smile and looked to her father, who nodded. She held the mirror to her chest as she stood, bowed to the table and said “Please excuse me.”

Grace then stood as well. “Astoria, we’re going to leave your father and Harry alone now.”

“But, Mum!” Astoria complained, managing to draw the word into seven syllables.

“None of that, young lady,” Grace said firmly.

Once the door closed Harry could feel a slight drop in air pressure, which usually indicated some sort of privacy charm.

“So, I guess we’re getting some privacy,” Harry said to Malcolm.

“That we are,” Malcolm said. “Harry, I’m not going to beat around the bush, I need to apologize for dragging you into our problems with Voldemort.”

“The rest of Wizarding Britain didn’t seem too bashful about doing that,” Harry said wryly.

“I don’t want you to marry Queenie out of any sense of obligation,” Malcolm said seriously.

“So, you don’t want me to marry her?” Harry asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Malcolm said with a chuckle. “I think that you would make a fine husband for my daughter, which is something said by very few fathers. I’m not going to discuss dowry or any of those other fussy issues. Any decision you make should be made because you want to marry my daughter, not for any other reason.”

“That doesn’t seem very traditional,” Harry said mockingly.

“A true understanding of tradition means that you deviate from tradition when necessary,”

Malcolm said. "Tradition is inherited wisdom, not random, arbitrary laws."

There was a long silence. Malcolm didn't seem in any hurry to break the silence.

"I want to know why," Harry began.

"Why I would betroth my daughter to scum like Riddle?"

"Yes, sir, something like that," Harry said.

"How old do you think I am?"

"I dunno, sixty, seventy?" Harry guessed.

"Next month, I will be one hundred and ten years of age. I married Fiona, my first wife, when I was not much older than you are now. We had a daughter, who emigrated to Canada, and two sons, who chose to remain in Britain. Then, rather late in life, we had Daphne, which was a delightful surprise. Then during Voldemort's first rising, I lost my sons to Death Eaters, and then I lost Fiona. After my sons died, she took ill suddenly, I suspect it was mainly grief, but she died none-the-less, leaving me as a widower in my nineties with an infant daughter. I remarried, in part so that Queenie would grow up with a mother."

"I don't understand," Harry said.

"Yes, it seems that I've gotten lost in the story I'm trying to tell. Let me begin again. I have a duty to my family, of course, but I am the lord of this region. As the English reckon these things I'm an Earl of some sort or other. The Scots call me "Baron" but what it really means is that I'm responsible for the well being of the people of the Marr area. We don't call them vassals any more, but I still have a duty to protect them.

"When Voldemort came sniffing around for the grimoire, I had several choices, none of them good. I could take up arms against Voldemort. I doubted that I could prevail quickly, which would make my family and my tenants and the people of the area targets for reprisal; my next option was that I could go into hiding with my family, which would again subject my tenants and the people of the area to reprisal. Taking all of the people of this region away to some sanctuary was not feasible. I could give the grimoire to Voldemort, but once he realized that he couldn't read it, he would capture members of my family and attempt to torture them until he was granted access, which would not work, given the magic binding the grimoire. Or, finally, I could negotiate a bargain."

"Bargaining with your daughter," Harry said dismissively.

"In the end, she volunteered," Malcolm said. "She thought I was insane at first, but she calculated all the angles and agreed this was the best way out."

"I still don't like it," Harry said.

“I didn’t like it either, Harry. It was the least bad choice. Then you defeated Voldemort,” Malcolm sighed. “We thought we were in the clear.”

“Sorry about that,” Harry said contritely. “I didn’t know that all this would happen.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, young man, we were caught in our own web. We’d bound Riddle with the betrothal contract, and now it is time to pay the bill. Daphne wanted to take the consequences and move on with life as a Muggle.”

“So why am I here?” Harry asked.

“Because sometimes life has very strange turns that bring opportunity you never anticipated.”

“I’m an opportunity?” Harry objected.

Malcolm sighed. “I’m not illuminating things very well. I’m going to try to explain something to you; I know you were not raised with money, or position, or power. They each have a curse. If you have daughters, you will someday ask yourself the question, ‘are my daughter’s suitors interested in her, or in the money she will inherit, the title that may pass, or the power that comes with the family name?’ It’s a terrible thing to contemplate.”

“Okay, I can see that, I guess.”

“I know that through inheritance, you are fairly well-to-do. I suspect you wouldn’t know a Viscount from an Earl, and you don’t give a fig for having any more fame or notoriety,” Malcolm said. “I’m not going to blow smoke, Harry. If you marry Daphne, I will do what I can to persuade you to use our combined wealth and influence to bring Wizarding Britain out of the Pureblood morass it’s been in since the time of Queen Victoria; but that potential for change is not why Daphne came to see you at Gringotts.”

“So, why did she come?” Harry asked.

“In part, to save her magic if she could, but primarily because after she thought about it deeply, she concluded that you are everything she would want in a husband,” Malcolm explained.

“Okay, that’s different. I like Daphne,” Harry said calmly. “I don’t know if that’s a good enough reason to marry.”

“I understand,” Malcolm said with a sigh. “I think I’ve made enough of a mess trying to explain things tonight. I suspect the longer we two are alone, the more Astoria will be convinced that I’m torturing you, or vice versa. The child is gifted with a vivid imagination.”

“Yes, and apparently she has her eye on moving into Daphne’s bedroom,” Harry said.

“No doubt measuring for new drapes as we speak,” Malcolm said. “Let’s get some fresh air.”

#@#

Daphne tucked the mirror into the pocket of her gown until she was outside the house, safely ensconced under the gazebo in the garden, protected by multiple layers of privacy charms. Sitting down on the bench she pulled the mirror out and set it on her knee.

“I was expecting this call,” Daphne began, “but I thought you’d be using a telephone.”

“You have a telephone?” Hermione asked.

“My parents do.”

“Am I interrupting dinner?”

“No, we were just putting out coffee, and my father was about to dismiss us so he could speak privately with Harry,” Daphne explained. “Is this the phone call where you threaten me, saying that if I ever hurt Harry, you’ll chain me to a rock and have an eagle rip my liver out for breakfast every morning until the end of time?”

“Uh, not exactly,” Hermione said. “I wasn’t planning on using an eagle; although it’s good that you understand that I will make your life hell if you hurt Harry.”

“So, to what do I owe the honor of this call, Miss Hermione Granger?”

“How are things with Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Hah! I wish I knew!” Daphne exclaimed. “Did Harry tell you about our date?”

“He mentioned that there was one.”

“Andromeda Tonks called my mother and set up a day at the zoo, only neither Harry nor I knew that the other was coming. Harry thought he was going out for an adventure with Teddy and I thought Mum was trying to cheer me up. We met at the zoo; Andromeda took Teddy and more or less commanded that we spend the day together. It was nice, in an awkward sort of way. He kissed me at the end of the date, on the cheek.”

“That’s Harry,” Hermione said with a nod. “He’s fairly certain that he likes girls, but he doesn’t particularly know why.”

“He loves you, you know,” Daphne said. “It was Hermione said this, Hermione that – he’s really proud of you.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Hermione said.

“So, apparently you’re not involved in a sordid love triangle with Victor Krum and Harry?”

Hermione laughed. “No, unfortunately, once again, Rita Skeeter was spinning her stories without

being burdened by facts. I think Harry thinks of me as a favorite sister.”

“And you?”

“I love Harry, but not in the sweaty sense of the word,” Hermione explained.

“That’s an interesting way of putting it. So, to answer your question, we spent the day at the zoo, a couple of days later we spent a day taking care of Teddy, and today he’s having dinner with my family. I think he likes me, but I don’t think he likes me enough to marry me,” Daphne said.

“I don’t think he knows what he wants,” Hermione said.

“That doesn’t help, not one bit.”

“I wanted to tell you some things about Harry that might help,” Hermione explained.

“Like what?”

“He’s not exactly normal. His life growing up was awful. He doesn’t know what love looks like, he doesn’t know what healthy humans do, all he knows is that he wants a family, but he doesn’t want a family like the Dursleys.”

“Yeah, he said that I should pretend that he’d been raised by wolves.”

“Did he? That’s really significant. He’s letting you in to see the real Harry then,” Hermione said appreciatively.

“So, what would help with Harry?”

“Don’t push, but if he opens the door, by all means, walk on through. If you show up naked on his doorstep he’s going to slam the door on you, but if he kisses you, you *really need to kiss him back*. There’s a little boy inside of Harry that’s desperate for love and approval, but if he thinks you’re lying to him or manipulating him, he’s going to shut you out.

“I think Harry likes you. If he takes the step and marries you, he will spend the rest of his life trying to make you happy, but he doesn’t know how to do that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Girls play games with boys, punishing them when they don’t do what we want,” Hermione explained.

“Yes, of course,” Daphne agreed.

“Harry has no way of knowing what normal behavior is; he’s seen so few healthy relationships. If you play games with him, he’ll either think that he’s being rejected, or manipulated, both of which are bad things when it comes to Harry.”

“Oh,” Daphne said thoughtfully.

“The words ‘he should know what I want’ should never come out of your mouth.

“If you want flowers on your anniversary because that would make you happy, you’re going to have to tell him that. If you want him to listen to you at the end of the day, you’re going to have to tell him that. If you want to make love under the stars, or have him drizzle you with hot chocolate syrup because that would make you happy, you’re going to have to tell him that.

“Harry will be *extremely* accommodating, but he can’t fathom what you want – he doesn’t have any role models beyond the wretched Muggles who raised him..”

There was a lengthy pause. “Daphne?” Hermione asked.

“I’m sorry, I got distracted with the chocolate,” Daphne said.

“Oh, grow up! That was just the first example of marital weirdness that I could think of. I discovered chocolate stained sheets in the family laundry when I was ten; it wasn’t until I was sixteen that my mum finally told me the truth about those sheets.

“Harry’s a virgin as far as I know, and believe me, I spent a year on the run with him, there’s not much I don’t know about him. The sum total of his experience with girls is this: he took Parvati Patil to the Yule Ball as a friend, he had one date with Cho Chang that went down in flames (which was mostly my fault), he took Luna Lovegood to a Slug Club Christmas Party, again, as a friend, and he had an intense two and a half month *something* with Ginny Weasley that he broke off because he had the stupid noble idea that he needed to protect her.”

“Did he love her?”

“Probably, that was the happiest I’ve ever seen him, ever . Did he say ‘I love you’ to her? Probably not.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“One more thing,” Hermione said. “Harry has big issues with trust and abandonment. Trust is everything with Harry. If he feels that you’ve betrayed his trust, it’s over. If you walk away from him, he’s not going to come after you – he fully expects that *everyone* will leave him. If he marries you, you have to do everything you can to outlive him, because he would take your dying as abandonment.”

“You can’t be serious,” Daphne protested.

“Everyone who loves him has died, Daphne,” Hermione said firmly. “His parents, his godfather, his familiar, even Dumbledore.”

“But not you,” Daphne said.

“No, not me,” Hermione said. “I’m in Australia because I’ve got to work out some things with my mother and father, and Harry knows that has to take priority – for now, but I really feel conflicted.”

“Hermione, I’m so glad you called. This is very illuminating. I still have no idea what I should be doing, but I think I know more now than I did before.”

“Give Harry my love, and make sure you give the mirror back to him.”

“Thanks,” Daphne said, but the mirror was just a mirror again.

#@#

Daphne slipped the mirror back into the pocket hidden in the side seam of her gown, dismissed the privacy charms surrounding the gazebo and rose to walk back into the house. Poking her nose into the doorway of the kitchen she asked her mother “Any dessert left, or did the midget eat it all?”

“Daphne, I wish you’d stop needling your sister,” Grace said.

“Mimsy?” Grace called.

A dark green house elf popped into the kitchen.

“Yes Mistress?”

“Please prepare a slice of cake for Daphne and her gentleman friend, and serve it in the parlor when he returns from walking the grounds with my husband,” Grace instructed.

“Certainly Mistress,” Mimsy replied.

“Mum, I’m certainly capable of serving myself,” Daphne protested.

“I know, dear,” Grace replied, her voice then lowering to a whisper “but Mimsy so likes being useful.”

Daphne rolled her eyes.

“If Missy rolls her eyes at Mistress, Mimsy will give double portion to gentleman friend and half portion to Missy,” a disembodied voice announced.

“Mimsy!” Daphne growled in exasperation.

A barely audible tinkling laugh was all she heard in reply.

“So, how are the men faring?” Daphne asked, turning to Grace.

“No bloodshed yet, although I’m certain it’s not been pleasant for your father. He’s apologizing

for drawing Harry into our dealings with Riddle.”

Astoria walked into the kitchen, ostentatiously scraping the bottom of a parfait glass with her spoon.

“Sorry Queenie, it’s aaalllll gone,” she said with an ingratiating smile.

“Yeah, right,” Daphne said. “Well, what do you think?”

“If you don’t want him, I’ll take him,” Astoria volunteered.

“I think you’re a bit young yet,” Daphne said.

“I can wait.”

Grace turned to Astoria. “Astoria, dear, please go to the conservatory. You own me a half hour of Debussy.”

“Mum!” Astoria whined.

“I think Harry would like to hear live music filling the halls when he returns. It will be a treat,” Grace said.

“Okay,” Astoria agreed, immediately perking up, before dashing out of the kitchen and into the hall leading to the conservatory. The sound of ferocious scales came down the hallway as she warmed up, followed by the opening movement of ‘La Mer’ transcribed for piano.

“She’s really good,” Daphne said.

“You should tell her that someday,” Grace replied.

“Maybe I’ll just write it in plain text in my diary,” Daphne said dismissively.

“Daphne, part of why she’s being such a brat right now is that she’s worried about you,” Grace said.

“You’re kidding, right? The midget worried about me?”

“Daphne, she’s your sister.”

“Yes, Mother, and Cain was Abel’s brother,” Daphne replied.

“Yes, but that happened quite some time ago,” Grace said, trying to contain a smile.

“Thanks, Mum,” Daphne said, going to the window to look for her father.

#@#

Malcolm was returning from the tour he'd given Harry of the grounds, stopping briefly at the stables to retrieve a pipe and pouch of tobacco he'd stashed in the pocket of his barn coat. Harry watched with interest as he loaded the pipe and then took a long pull to set the fire in the tobacco.

"I'm over a hundred years old, and my wife wants me to stop smoking," he complained.

"I don't think it's because she wants you to be miserable, sir," Harry said.

They walked in silence to the top of the ridge that gave a brilliant view of the surrounding country as the sun set.

"It's all so green – much greener than the area around Hogwarts," Harry said.

"Hmm," Malcolm said, blowing a smoke ring. "One might say 'magically green.'"

"Hmm," Harry said in reply.

Walking back to the house they heard the sounds of a piano spilling out of an open window.

"I don't know much about music, but that's really nice," Harry commented.

"I'll let Astoria know that you approve," Malcolm said.

"Do both girls play?"

"No. More's the pity. The two are extremely competitive. Let me give you an example, if Daphne takes up knitting, Astoria will knit her fingers raw until she can outperform her sister. They both realize it, so if one sister takes up an activity, the other usually gives it a wide berth," Malcolm explained. "On occasion Daphne will sing – she has a lovely voice – and Astoria will play accompaniment. It's quite a treat when they cooperate. I'm hoping that the competition will die down as they grow up."

Malcolm stopped by a fountain, bending to knock the bowl of the pipe on the heel of his boot, scattering dottle on the ground.

"Do you have to hide the pipe now?" Harry asked.

"No, she knows I do this – I just don't do it in the house, it's much more peaceful that way," Malcolm said. "Something you'd do well to learn."

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

#@#

Queenie's diary – June 2, 1998 – enciphered entry

Harry came to dinner tonight. All told, it was a nice night. He looked quite handsome in his formal

robes; the Peverell sigil was quite striking. If Father questioned him about it, he certainly didn't mention it to me. We started with the old traditional 'who-goes-there' drama, which in Harry's case was quite impressive. I'm proud to say that the midget did not screw it up by giggling at him when he said his lines.

Dinner was probably marvelous, but for the life of me I can't tell you what I ate. As we were breaking for coffee, Harry's communicating mirror chimed. To say that I was surprised to find that it was Hermione calling for me would be an understatement. I knew Hermione at school, of course, having several classes with her. She sat in on some study groups I had with Bones, Brockelhurst and Turpin. She is, apparently, Harry's best friend, although not, as alleged in the Daily Prophet, Harry girlfriend, ex-girlfriend or secret mistress. She said she loves Harry, but not 'in the sweaty way,' which was an odd turn of phrase. Hermione gave me some very useful intelligence and insight into how Harry thinks. I think I owe her for this, but I'm fairly certain she wasn't doing it for me; she was doing it for him.

While I was chatting with Hermione, Father was talking to Harry. Neither of them said much about what they said, other than saying that he was apologizing for putting Harry in a bind. Father seems taken with Harry, as are Mum and the midget.

We reconvened after our respective conferences, listening to the midget torture the piano. She's really quite good, and it was soothing; I really like Debussy.

And so does Harry. The midget's face lit up when he praised her playing. I think she seriously wants to pursue him if I fail.

Afterwards we played a table game and my parents in a not very subtle manner shooed Astoria away so I could walk Harry to the border of our grounds.

I stopped by the fountain because a) it's really pretty; b) the noise of the fountain makes it hard to be overheard and c) the only windows in the house facing the fountain are in the conservatory, which I knew was empty. We lingered for a while and then I conjured a small platform, about the size of a Muggle briefcase, asking Harry to step up on to it.

Then I asked him to kiss me.

He had no problem stepping up on the platform, but looked at me as if I'd grown a second head when I asked him to kiss me.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it would make me happy," I replied. That seemed to be an acceptable reason, and he kissed me.

I can't say that I have vast osculatory experience, but I liked it, and he seemed to like it too, given that we spent the better part of the next quarter hour in the activity. I then walked him to the entry gate and gave him another, briefer kiss, this time without the platform. The difference in height

didn't seem to be too difficult to overcome.

Thank you, Hermione Granger. I may name a daughter after you if this all works out.

Well, maybe Granuaile Hermione Potter, because Hermione as a first name would give some people the wrong impression.

End of enciphered entry – checksum 991

Kokopelli
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By right of conquest

Chapter the Fourth

By Right of Conquest

Chapter the Fourth

Daphne was in the business office for the estate, entering last week's receipts and disbursements into the ledger. The bright Muggle girl from the town who normally did this task was on holiday with her family. The Muggle girl had recommended to Father that they computerize the task, and Father had seemed impressed when she'd dragged him to a demonstration in Aberdeen, but as of yet the ledger was written and reconciled by hand. The phone rang on the house line and Daphne picked it up without much thought.

"Greengrass residence, this is Daphne speaking," she said mechanically.

"Uh, hi, this is Harry," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Harry, hey, what's up?" Daphne asked cheerfully.

"Uh, a couple of things, I guess," Harry said hesitantly. "I've got a new phone number, for Grimmauld Place, I thought you should have it, even though I'm not here consistently."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Harry, and I suppose that's less restrictive than putting a remote triggered Portkey around your neck, or some sort of tracking charm," Daphne mused playfully.

"Ha ha, very funny. Hey, am I supposed to write your family a thank-you note for the other night? I just thought of that before calling."

"It's never wrong, but it's not expected," Daphne explained.

"Uh, okay. Last night I was thinking about you," Harry began.

Daphne smiled broadly. "What were you thinking about?" she asked cheerfully.

"Well, I realized that when we were at the bank, I'd asked you the wrong question."

Daphne's cheerful mood vanished and she rolled her eyes. "So, what's the right question?"

"At the bank, I asked why I should marry you; I had it backwards. Your dad said that I was everything you were looking for in a husband, but he didn't elaborate any further."

"Uh, Harry, you know that when you call on this line that there's a better than average chance that the midget is listening in?"

“Is she on right now?”

“No, Mum’s out shopping with her, so I’m pretty sure that it’s just us right now. I think the question you’re asking is where I see my life going, and where are you in that picture.”

“Uh, yeah, okay,” Harry said.

“And I’m not going to talk about that on the phone,” Daphne said. “Come on over tomorrow – we can go riding and have a picnic and talk about that,” Daphne said, crossing the fingers of one hand.

“Uh, tomorrow’s busy, how’s the next day?” Harry asked.

“That would be great, okay, I’ll write it down on the calendar so Mum doesn’t try to book me elsewhere.”

“I wanted to ask you something else too,” Harry added urgently.

An intermediate length of silence followed “Go ahead,” Daphne prompted.

“Uh Shack, I mean, acting Minister Shackbolt thinks that I’m going to get called to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

“Uh huh.”

“I think I need to get my story out before that happens. I’m thinking of doing another interview in The Quibbler.”

“Okay, that makes sense. The last time you did that you changed a lot of minds.”

“There’s a catch.”

“There usually is with you Harry,” Daphne said.

“Last Christmas, Luna was snatched off the train. I think it was Riddle’s way of pulling Xenophilius into line,” Harry explained.

“We, that is, Ron and Hermione and I visited Xenophilius after that. He called the Ministry, letting them know that we were at his house. He thought that if he delivered Undesirable Number One, he could get Luna back. Then before the goon squad arrived he told us what he’d done. We barely got out of there alive.”

“Okay, what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know if I should work with Xenophilius again.”

“Ah, I understand. Let me think a minute.”

Another period of silence followed.

“Okay, let me try to step through this,” Daphne began. “Xenophilius was a good man who made a bad decision in a bad situation. Any father worth anything would want to free his daughter. He told you what he’d done with just enough time that you could get away. Does that about summarize things?”

“Yeah,”

“What happened after that?”

“Well, we pretty much blew up his house and the Ministry put him in Azkaban – just on general principle, I guess.”

“I think he’s paid for his mistake, Harry. Whether you forgive him or not is a personal decision. If it was me, I’d still be irked at him, but I’d try to forgive him; life’s too short to carry a grudge. As to working with the Quibbler, I still think it’s a better alternative than The Prophet – people have come to believe that the Quibbler tells the truth. If you’re going to boycott everyone who had any dealings with the Thicknesse administration, you’re going to have to leave the UK, Harry.”

“Okay, that’s helpful, thanks, Daphne.”

Daphne pumped her fist while mouthing ‘yes!’

“Harry, can I ask you a question without sounding like a stalker?”

“Sure.”

“What are you doing on the days we’re not seeing each other?”

“Lots of stuff. Taking care of Teddy on days that Andi needs to be out, I’m almost finished with the remodeling and repair here at Grimmauld Place. I’ve been helping Neville rebuild Longbottom Hall, and practicing our dueling when we’re not rebuilding, stuff like that. When I’m not doing that I’ve been reading through the grimoires and Riddle’s diary.”

“Riddle kept a diary?” Daphne asked incredulously.

“Yup, you have to be able to speak Parseltongue to get it into reveal mode, but that’s not a real problem for me,” Harry said.

“Of course,” Daphne said.

“I’m trying to understand him. I’d like to not have another Dark Lord during my lifetime, so I’m trying to get inside his head, without getting creepy. The thing is, I don’t think anyone knows about the diary, so I’d like you to not talk about that.”

“Sure, Harry,” Daphne agreed, while silently pumping her fist again.

“Do you duel? Is that something you’d like to do?”

“I do duel, but I’m pretty sure I can’t with you,” Daphne began.

“Because that’s something you can’t talk about,” Harry interrupted.

“Actually, that *is* something that I can talk about. One of the terms of the betrothal is that in the betrothal phase I can’t raise my wand against Riddle or any of his vassals. I’m fairly certain that if we were to duel, the magic would consider my promise broken.”

“What about after?”

“The agreement didn’t specify. I think I’m just limited by human decency after that, so you’re just going to have to behave yourself.”

“Something for you to look forward to, I guess. So, changing the subject back to what you asked, tomorrow morning I’m going to meet with George Weasley at WWW. I’m kind of involved with the business, and I wanted to run some stuff by him in the morning. Are you still open for a picnic after that?”

“Sure. Have you ever ridden before?”

“Does riding Thestrals count?”

“I don’t think so. Only you, Harry, would ask that question. I’ll get a nice gentle horse for you, how’s that?”

“That would be fine. Uh, Daphne?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“I like spending time with you. I gotta run.”

“Thanks, Harry, ‘bye,” Daphne said, a big grin on her face.

The phone gave a gentle buzz, the connection was gone.

#@#

Queenie’s Diary – enciphered entry

I am making haste slowly. Today’s phone call was a breakthrough, I guess.

Harry trusts me with a secret and he’s coming to me for advice. In the words of Hermione-not-the-sweaty-kind-Granger, he’s opening the door, and this witch is walking through.

On the home front, Mum and the midget went foundation shopping today in Aberdeen.

Yes, the midget is now a full cup size larger than her big sister.

Big deal – she looks like Grace (who in her forties is still a hottie) and I look like Fiona, who was tall and willowy, except my birthmother didn't have my ample bum.

I don't remember Fiona. In every way possible, except for genetics, Grace has been my mum. If there's a consolation here, I'm told that Fiona was an exceptionally powerful witch and I managed to inherit some of that. I will say, however, in the trade-off between magical power and cleavage, there are times that cleavage looks like the better deal, but I have to remind myself that I'm playing the long game here.

Telling the midget that I'm having a picnic with Harry seems to top a newly acquired c-cup brassiere in her estimation, which is strangely satisfying. I think I'll let the midget know that is she interferes tomorrow that I'll permanently bind her breasts and shave her bald – all over.

She knows I can do it, too.

Mum, of course, would make me reverse it, but it's good to have a credible threat.

Got to run, Mum's calling

End of cipher – Checksum 1121

#@#

“Daphne, I want you to know that I'm proud of you. I was fully expecting that there would be a blow-up this evening between you and the midget,” Grace said, sitting down in a chair in the corner of Daphne's bedroom.

“Thanks, Mum,” Daphne replied.

“I wanted to show you some pictures and tell you a story I don't think you've heard before,” Grace began.

She laid a medium sized Muggle photograph down on the bed. Daphne picked it up and made a face.

“Mum, you look terrible here, when was this taken?” Daphne asked.

“That was taken about a week before you were born,” Grace answered. “I was not in good shape.”

“You see, right out of Hogwarts I met a wizard at a Ministry ball. He was handsome, well-to-do, and a pureblood and he seemed taken with me. I lost my head and convinced myself that I loved him. We married using the traditional one year hand fast, against my parent's wishes.

“Over the next year he blew through my dowry, he often came home drunk, and was physically very brutal, and the sad thing was, I thought it was all my fault.

“I believed if I could conceive a child, that he’d love me, or if I was more submissive, we wouldn’t get into fights, or if I was better in bed that everything would be okay. A day before the one year anniversary of our hand fasting, he broke my wand, beat the living daylight out of me, and left me.

“When I was being treated at St. Mungo’s the healer informed me that my not-so-loving and entirely unfaithful husband had given me a disease that had destroyed my fallopian tubes, which was why I’d been unable to conceive.

“I had no money, no job, no wand, my parents wouldn’t take me back, in short, I was a wreck. I thought I was well and truly cursed in all senses of the word.”

“So, what did you do?” Daphne asked.

“I came here, to the town of Alford. My Muggle great-grandmother was still alive then and she let me live with her in her cottage. About a week after that picture was taken, the Baron, your father, came by and asked if I’d serve as a doula – a birthing assistant- as his wife, Fiona, was about ready to give birth.

“I knew next to nothing about being a doula, but the Midwitch assured me that she would teach me everything I needed to know. I jumped at the chance and became a member of his household. I assisted at your birth, and took care of you the moment you entered the world.

“I was in love with you the first time I ever saw you.

“At the time I was convinced that no wizard would ever want to have me, and I knew that I was never having children, so I latched on to you as the child I could never have.

“The weeks turned into months and Fiona didn’t regain her strength. The healer assumed that it was some variety of post-partum depression and suggested that I stay on until things improved.

“Things never improved; as it turned out, Fiona had stage four cancer of the liver and died before you were nine months old. I was asked to stay on as your nanny.

“You became my world. I was raising you and having the time of my life; other than colic, dragon pox and teething, you were a lot of fun.

“When you were a year old, the Baron asked me to marry him. I had no idea that he even knew that I was a woman – I was just another part of the well-oiled machine that was his household. I turned him down, fully expecting that he would turn me out and I’d be back in the street.

“Instead, he doubled my salary as a nanny and a month later asked me to marry him again.

“This time instead of just saying ‘no’ I told him the whole story – the hand fasting, the beatings,

the disease; he didn't bat an eyelid. I asked him why he wanted to marry me. I remember to this day what he said: 'the most important thing a man can do for his daughter is to love her mother.'

Grace's lip began to quiver and tears began rolling down her cheeks. Daphne started to sniffle in response.

"And so, I married the Baron, your father," Grace said with another sniffle, producing another photograph.

"You didn't look a whole lot better on your wedding day, Mum," Daphne said truthfully.

"No, I wasn't very attractive then. I wasn't sleeping well, you were teething, *constantly* it seemed and I was still nursing you.

"Wait, *you* were nursing me?" Daphne asked.

"I'm a witch, dear daughter, there's a charm for that," Grace answered dismissively.

Anyway, I became the Baron's wife, and officially your mother. Your father was a loving, attentive father, which I already knew. He was a kind husband and he turned out to be a gentle, marvelous lover. I began to think that perhaps I wasn't cursed after all.

Grace handed Daphne a third photograph.

"Wow, Mum, when was this taken?" Daphne asked.

"About a year before the midget was born," Grace replied with a smile.

"You look gorgeous," Daphne gushed.

"Thank you, dear," Grace said. "Your father's love made me feel beautiful. The fact that my broken nose was reset and had healed helped a bit, but most of the difference came from the inside. So, what is it that I always tell you?"

"That real beauty comes from inside," Daphne recited.

"So, at the risk of undoing everything I tried to explain in this story, I bought you some things in Aberdeen," Grace said, producing a small box.

"Oh, Mum, I hate it when you do that!" Daphne grumbled.

"Try one on, dear," Grace insisted.

"Okay, Mum," Daphne said obediently, taking off the top, tank top and bra she'd been wearing, slipping into a new teal colored bra.

"Adjust yourself and look in the mirror," Grace commanded.

“Mum! These are *magic* !” Daphne exclaimed.

“Nonsense, dear, it’s a Muggle product. I assure you that there’s sound engineering and some sleight of hand in the garment, but not a drop of magic,” Grace said with a smirk.

Daphne quickly pulled the tank top on, preened in front of the mirror so she could see from different angles, and then put the other top on.

“Mum, I look huge!”

“Hardly, if we brought the midget up here, *she’d* look huge and you’d merely look fetching,” Grace explained.

“I’ll try to take that as a compliment,” Daphne said.

Daphne sat and thought a while.

“Won’t he be disappointed when he takes it off -- when I’m not wearing it?” she asked hesitantly.

“Whomever would you mean, dear?” Grace asked innocently.

“Harry, Mum,” Daphne said with exasperation.

“Take this as an unshakable truth, Daphne, when your husband undresses you, he won’t remember what you looked like dressed, and I guarantee you that he won’t ask you to put this back on,” Grace said drolly.

“Why are you doing this, Mum? Am I supposed to seduce him or something?”

“No, Daphne, nothing like that. Sometimes a girl needs a little something to make herself feel confident. It’s like believing in a magic feather.”

“You think this Dumbo is going to fly?”

“Oh, eventually, I’m told that Harry’s quite the flier.”

“I didn’t mean that literally, Mum. Flying is Astoria’s thing, not mine.”

“So now my youngest child has a name?”

“Maybe when I’m feeling confident, I can be a little nicer to my sister, the midget.”

“So, what do you say, Daphne?”

Daphne drew herself up straight. “Thank you, Mother, for once again interfering in my life in a wonderful way.”

“You’re most welcome, dear,” Grace said. “Get some sleep; you need to be fresh tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Mum, I love you.”

“I love you too, dear.”

#@#

Before Harry left the house that morning, he used his mirror to call Hermione, trying to calculate the ten hour time difference between London and Melbourne in his head. He heard a chiming sound; the mirror lit up and then was filled with Hermione’s face.

“Hello, Harry,” she said brightly.

“Is it too late there?” he asked.

“No, it’s about 5:00 in the evening – we won’t eat dinner for at least an hour yet,” Hermione answered. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering if you knew what’s happened to Ron. None of the Weasleys have heard from him.”

“Huh, that’s weird. I’ve talked to him twice on the phone since we last talked. The first time I think he was drunk – he was trying to apologize. The second time he was more coherent. He’s in Macau.”

“Where’s that?” Harry asked.

“It’s in China – it’s a city like Hong Kong, only it’s nominally Portuguese,” Hermione answered.

“What’s he doing there?”

“Well, it seems that during the day he’s working in a casino as a dealer, and in the evenings he’s playing in casinos other than the one that employs him. He seems to be in his element. He wired me a wad of money and says that he’s going to do the same with his family.”

“That’s weird,” Harry said.

“Yeah, well, he says that in Macau he’s considered exotic, and ‘nobody’s heard of Harry Potter or his sidekick.’ I think he’s having some fun, and he doesn’t want to go back home until Molly can pull it together,” Hermione explained.

“Yeah, I’ve been avoiding the Burrow for the same reason. I hired some workmen to repair the Rookery, Luna’s house. It seemed only fair after we’d blown it up. I probably should check in on Arthur and Molly, but I’m not really eager for that yet.”

“Yeah, I understand,” Hermione said.

“So is he wearing one of those eyeshades, like in the movies?”

“I think those are Westerns, Harry, but honestly I don’t know what the fashion is in Macau,” Hermione said.

“What, you don’t have a book on that?”

“Bite me, Harry.”

“Hermione, language! Whatever is the world coming to?”

“So, how is the lovely Miss Greengrass?”

“Oh, Astoria’s just fine. It turns out that she’s a pretty fair pianist. I wouldn’t know Dvorak from Debussy, but it really sounded nice,” Harry said.

“That’s not the Miss Greengrass I was asking about Harry, and you know it.”

“She’s good – we’re going on a picnic later today.”

“Behave yourself.”

“What’s that mean? The woman has asked me to marry her; I don’t think she’d object to moderate amounts of hanky or panky, but probably not both at the same time, she is a lady after all.”

“Stick to your day job, Harry, stand up comedy’s not for you.”

“Seriously, she asked me to kiss her last night; she said it would make her happy.”

Hermione smiled knowingly. “Did it?”

“I dunno, I liked it – I think she did too.”

“You know what, Harry? I’m looking forward to the day when your life quiets down.”

“Yeah, let me know when that happens, I don’t think I’ll recognize it.”

“You know I love you, don’t you Harry?”

There was a long silence. Harry looked away from the mirror.

“Yeah, I know, you’ve always had my back.”

“And I always will.”

“Thanks – I’m going to say ‘bye’ now.”

“Bye, Harry, take care,” Hermione said.

Harry touched the mirror with his finger, making it go dark.

“And I love you too, Hermione.”

#@#

Harry spent the rest of the morning with George Weasley, helping with stocking the shelves before the store opened at 11:00, and leading George through a copy of the notebook Sirius had written on the construction of the Marauder’s Map. Eventually Harry took out his mirror.

“George old bean, I’ve been tinkering with this – I can make a mirror using the instructions in the notebook and link it to four different mirrors, but that’s fiddly at best,” Harry said.

“What’s stable?” George asked.

“Two’s really stable,” Harry replied.

“Can’t think of a joke that would use this right now, Harry, but I’ll think of one, maybe. It’s just not the same without Fred.”

“How’s your Mum?”

“She’s not on the potion any more, but she’s still not sleeping well. She needs another grandchild to take her mind off things,” George observed.

“Don’t look at me,” Harry said.

“Seeing anyone, Harry?”

“You ready to make Angelina an honest woman yet?”

George laughed. “Right, I read you loud and clear, your life is none of my business, unless, of course, I want to confess about my various shenanigans with Angelina.”

“Shenanigans?”

George sighed and slumped down. “You know the worst thing?”

“No?”

“I’ve not felt like shenanigans.”

“Bugger,” Harry stated.

“None of that, either.”

Harry paused. “Can I give you some advice?”

“I’ll brace myself. Can you use the word ‘tits’ in it?”

“Probably not. Anyway, here goes: you know the Veil of Death?”

“I know of it, I’ve never been there,” George said.

“When I was there, I could hear voices behind it – it sounded like I was hearing a party going on down the hall. I haven’t a clue what happens after we die, but I know that the people who love us – watch us, for lack of a better word, and they recognize us. In some way, Fred’s still alive, and he doesn’t want you to die – not yet. Harry paused. “Tits,” he added.

George looked at him for the longest moment and then started to laugh and laugh. Harry looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry, I couldn’t figure out how to work that in with what I was going to say.”

A second later, George was hugging him. “Thanks,” he whispered. “I needed that.”

“Right. Can we leave this emotional stuff and get back to work?” Harry asked plaintively.

“Yes, yes we can. Now, can I show this diagram to anyone, or is this an eyes-only project?”

“Who were you thinking of?”

“Oddly enough, Luna, rumour on the grapevine is that she’s fiercely good with runic arrays, she might see something here that I can’t,” George said.

“She sees all sorts of things,” Harry said with a smile.

“I don’t think there’s a Snorkack hiding in the diagram, if that’s what you’re getting at,” George said, breaking into a familiar grin, the first Harry had seen from him in a very long time.

“Sure, let me know what comes of it. I’m going to ring her up later this week,” Harry said.

“How do you do that?” he asked quizzically.

“It’s a Muggle idiom,” Harry explained.

“Oh, a telly-fone,” George said. “I’m thinking of getting one installed.”

“Here, in Diagon Alley?”

“No, at Land’s End, of course here in Diagon Alley, that’s where the shop is,” George huffed.

“I think this comes under ‘it’s easier to obtain forgiveness than permission’ when it comes to asking the Ministry about this.”

“Righto, Harry,” George said, smiling again.

“I gotta go,” Harry said.

“See you next week?”

”Righto,” George said.

#@#

A chime sounded, indicating that someone had just Apparated next to the gate. Daphne closed the ledger with a satisfying thump and said “about time, this job was driving me crazy.”

Grabbing a sun hat, she raced out the door.

“Harry, you’ve come to save me from the fearsome ledger,” she exclaimed dramatically.

“What ledger, and do I need a sword?” Harry asked, playing along.

“Only if you can do accounting with it.”

Harry was walking with his hands in his pockets, so Daphne kissed him on the cheek and then slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow.

“The girl from town who normally keeps the books is on holiday, so Mum asked me to make all the entries and get it to balance,” Daphne explained. “I thought I was fine, until I discovered £600 missing from the accounts payable. I just found it before you arrived.”

“You know accounting?” Harry asked.

“I wouldn’t attempt it if I didn’t,” Daphne said. “I was raised to run this estate, or to run someone else’s when the time came. I can balance the books, drive the tractors, shear sheep, and haul produce to market in the small trucks along with etiquette, deportment, ballroom dancing and vacuous small talk. I can cook adequately, I can sew, but I can’t do needlework, I can sing but I can’t play piano. While we’re at it, I have good teeth and I’m told I don’t snore at night,” she said, making a manic smile while twisting her finger in a dimple.

“Okay, I get it, you’re highly qualified,” Harry said with a laugh.

“Thank you for noticing, kind sir,” Daphne said.

“Think nothing of it, my lady.”

“No one’s home this morning; Mum’s in town, the midget is having lessons with her piano teacher, Father’s in Ireland, doing some sort of manly business transactions, leaving the house to me, substitute chatelaine and bookkeeper. Let me get my purse, we need to go to the grocers.”

Daphne dashed into the house and a minute later returned with a small clutch purse and some string bags.

“Come this way, we need to drive into town,” Daphne said, heading to the back of the house.

After a brisk walk they reached the carriage house and Daphne slid open the door with clatter, revealing an old, but well maintained Land Rover.

“We don’t lock it, so get in,” Daphne said.

“You drive?”

“Yes, Harry, weren’t you listening earlier? I’m eighteen, I have a C-1 license, and I’ve been driving here on the estate since I could see over the steering wheel.”

“Okay, that’s something I need to work on, I guess,” Harry said.

“Harry, if you live only in the Wizarding world then Floo and Apparation will get you by, but if you live in the Wizarding world *and* the mundane world, you really need to learn how to get around like the Muggles do,” Daphne said.

Harry got into the car and buckled himself into the seat.

Daphne smiled. “Good, we’re not going to have a fight about safety.”

“Wizards are tough, but I’ve seen enough hospitals to last me for a long while,” Harry said.

#@#

The drive into town was uneventful. Daphne found a parking space and then handed half of the string bags to Harry. They walked through an open-air market and then visited in turn a bakery and a butcher shop, returning to the car with several bags each.

Once they were on the road again Harry broke the comfortable silence.

“Daphne, what’s ‘Sassenach’ mean?”

“Ah, so you did hear the muttering,” she replied. “Literally, it means ‘Saxon’ and it’s what Highlanders call Englishmen. It’s not entirely pejorative, but if the townspeople like you, you won’t hear it much. If you were proficient in Scots Gaelic, you would have also understood people muttering ‘Baron’s daughter’ and ‘boyfriend.’ I may have miscalculated, coming into town with you.”

“Am I embarrassing you?” Harry asked.

“No, that’s not it, I just know that you like your privacy,” Daphne said. “This is the first time I’ve been seen in public with a male my age who’s not a relative. Apparently it’s a gossip-worthy event.

“The Statute of Secrecy is a funny thing around here – a lot of the Muggles know a fair bit about our world, and they have a pretty good idea which laddies and lassies are actually wizards and witches, but it’s not something they talk about,” Daphne explained.

“Any problem with witch burnings?” Harry asked.

“No, that was mostly a Lowlands problem a couple of centuries ago. The Saxons historically really liked to burn witches while the Scots were more live and let live, unless we’re talking Dark Wizards, which they had no problem feeding into the fire. It’s something you should ask Father about, he’s written some papers on the topic.”

“So, are you a Scot or a witch?” Harry asked.

“Perceptive question, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about today, we might as well start now.

“I am a witch. I can speak both Scots Gaelic and English with the proper accents. I am the Baron’s daughter. My brothers died before I was born. They were supposed to take over the Baron’s duties, but they can’t, so I’ve always known that I’d have to take over the estate, which means that I also have a responsibility to the people of the area.

“What would you say the median age is for the Muggles in the town?”

“Fifty, sixty?” Harry guessed.

“It’s about that. The people who are born here, most of them move away for a job or for school, and then never return. A few new folk have moved into the far edges of the area, but they’re largely just commuters to the bigger cities like Aberdeen. Father’s tried for years to invest in businesses in the area so that people won’t have to leave to get jobs. That and his rents policy have made him pretty popular.”

“What’s his rents policy?” Harry asked.

“The tenant farmers don’t pay a set amount of rent for the property. At the New Year they pay a nominal coin, usually an old six-pence, the silver ones, and then after harvest they pay a portion of their profits above a certain cutoff. If you clear £20,000 on a good year, you owe 10 percent rent on the net profit above £15,000. Years that the tenants do well, we are pretty flush. Years that they don’t do well; they pay no rent beyond the six-pence,” Daphne said.

Harry pondered that for a while. “I can see why that would be popular – I thought rent would be a fixed amount per month.”

“That’s how it’s normally done,” Daphne agreed.

“So, are you going to become the Baroness?” Harry asked.

“Technically, Father is the Earl of Marr, with two r’s, not to be confused with the Earl of Mar with one r or the Earl of Mar and Kellie, again with one r. His title is so old it doesn’t even show up in the records any more. I don’t really know why the townspeople call him the Baron instead of the Earl, but that’s the way it is. So, to answer your question, when Father dies, I will probably become the Countess of Marr, but the townspeople will probably call me the Baroness,” Daphne

said, looking over briefly at Harry to smile.

“I don’t give two pence about the title, but I care about the people.”

Daphne carefully pulled off the road and then drove into a field, heading towards a grove of trees.

“Here’s our picnic spot. It’s got a lovely view.”

Daphne got out of the truck and opened the back gate, pulling out a blanket and a wicker basket. Handing the basket to Harry, she then pulled out her share of the string bags and walked towards the grove. Harry picked up his share of bags and followed.

“The view from behind’s not bad either,” he muttered under his breath.

#@#

Daphne carefully spread the blanket on the ground and then gracefully sat and began pulling items from the basket, knives, cutting boards, bottles and plates and napkins. Closing the wicker basket, she then used it as an impromptu table.

“How’s your Scourgify?” she asked.

“Ah, not so good,” Harry said. “I tend to blast things across the room.”

Daphne smiled. “Hold out your hands,” she commanded.

Harry did so and Daphne cast a silent, wandless Scourgify on his hands.

“Wandless and silent, I’m impressed,” Harry said.

“You shouldn’t be. People think that wandless magic is hard, it just takes practice. Everyone who learns to Apparate has actually learned wandless magic, they just don’t know it. Take away the average witch or wizard’s wand and they will thoroughly believe that they can’t Apparate, so they don’t,” Daphne said.

“Hmph,” Harry said, pulling two wands, one from either sleeve. “Hold these please.”

He then concentrated and Apparated across the grove.

“I’ll be switched,” he exclaimed.

“You do know that asking me to hold your wands is a big thing in traditional Wizarding culture, don’t you Harry?”

Harry sighed. “What does it mean?”

“It means that you trust me,” Daphne said, smiling with some nervousness.

“Is there any reason why I shouldn’t?”

“I sincerely hope that there will never be a reason you wouldn’t trust me.”

“Okay,” Harry said, Apparating back to the blanket and sitting down. “You can keep them during lunch if it makes you feel important.”

Daphne stuck her tongue out at him and tossed his wands into his lap.

“I guess not.”

Daphne cleaned her own hands and then began slicing bread, meat and cheese. “What do you like on your sandwiches?”

“Ham and cheddar? That would mean mayonnaise and brown mustard,” Harry said. “But I’m not fussy. I didn’t have many condiments the year that I was on the run from the Ministry.”

“Father made sure that everyone in the family could wandless cast at least three charms, curses or hexes. Even the midget managed to do that before she started Hogwarts,” Daphne said with some pride.

“What are yours?”

“Initially, I worked on summoning, banishing and light,” Daphne explained. “Later I figured out the sticking charm and the cleansing charm.”

“So when you blasted the Inquisition Squad, that was a banishing and then a sticking charm?” Harry asked.

Daphne looked at him quizzically. “Where did you hear about that?”

“From a friend,” Harry said.

“Okay,” Daphne said grudgingly. “Yeah, a banisher to throw them off the ‘puffs’ then I used my wand to silence them, then I stuck them on the ceiling.”

“Did you Obliviate them?”

“Do you think I’m the kind of witch that would do that?” she asked with a pout.

“Yes,” Harry said with a grin.

“Yeah, I did – they all lost five minutes of their life, complete blank, nothing fabricated. I’d do it again, too,” Daphne said.

“My kind of girl,” Harry said appreciatively.

“Why thank you,” Daphne said demurely.

“Getting back to your question; I’m a witch, and I’m the Baron’s daughter.

“I don’t give a fig about the long running distrust between Highlander and Lowlander, or Scot and Englishmen; I figure all that happened a long time ago. I care a lot about the people living in Marr today; because that’s something the Baron does.”

Harry nodded, and then accepted the sandwich Daphne handed to him, putting half of it down on a plate beside him. After finishing the sandwich he picked up some apples, inviting Daphne with a gesture to clean them, and then proceeded to slice and core them, handing half of the wedges to her.

“Is this what happens on a picnic?”

“Is that a Pinocchio question?”

“Yeah.”

“A picnic is a meal shared outside. If it were a multi-family event, there’d be games before and afterwards. If it were a Greengrass family picnic, Mum and Father would be keeping the two girls apart or trying to insure that we didn’t wander off and make mischief. It’s pretty simple, really,” Daphne said.

“It’s my first.”

“Oh, I guess the wolves didn’t do picnics.”

“Actually, that’s a slander on wolves. I think in many ways it would have been preferable to be raised by a pack,” Harry said lightly. “The Dursleys were more like rats, maybe, or some other form of vermin.”

“Well, most of us can’t pick our family,” Daphne said sagely. “Speaking of which, the midget reads too many cheap romance novels, and thinks that we must be having a torrid affair with lots of bodice ripping.”

“That might be a bit hard,” Harry said. “I don’t know what a bodice is, or why I’d want to rip one.”

“You’re not kidding?”

“Nope.”

“It’s like a vest or a sleeveless jacket worn above a skirt and on top of a blouse or other top. It would usually lace up the front.”

“Why would you want to rip it, if it’s laced?”

Daphne put her head down and covered her face while she began to laugh.

“Oh, Harry, you are so precious,” she said.

“It’s a figure of speech; imagine an amorous couple who are too impatient to unlace the bodice, or if you read the midget’s novels, the hulking hero is ripping the bodice off so he can have his way with the heroine who is weakly protesting.”

“That sounds too much like rape in my book. Getting back to the bodice, wouldn’t it just be easier to lift her skirts?” Harry asked.

Daphne went back to giggling. “No, it’s a *rule*, in the midget’s novels the bodice always rips.”

“Wouldn’t that kind of be a giveaway as to what they’d been doing?”

“Oh, Harry, don’t ever change,” Daphne said, rising to her knees and leaning forward to kiss him soundly.

“I did something right?” Harry said.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

#@#

After cleaning up the picnic lunch, the blanket, basket and leftovers were returned to the truck and they went for a walk.

“What if Malfoy had inherited your betrothal?”

“Yuck, you have a sick imagination.”

“So I’ve been told. Answer the question. Please?”

Daphne sighed. “My family would have pleaded with Gringotts to not disclose the betrothal as an asset of the estate, and I would have refused to go through with it.”

“At the price of your magic?”

“At the price of my magic. It would be humiliating to be magically dominated by the midget for the rest of my life, but not as demeaning as living with Malfoy.”

“But you would have married Voldemort.”

“Only to protect my family. He wanted the grimoire, not me, so I suspect I would only have only spent one night in his bed, if that long. I have nightmares about it still.”

“Anything you want to share?”

“Oh, they’re great – Voldemort and Malfoy Senior holding a ginormous big snake as a battering ram, trying to break into my pants – that’s a recurring nightmare. Being dressed as a bride and finding myself in a newly dug grave, that’s been a repeater too,” Daphne said.

“The snake was real,” Harry said. “He had a familiar, named Nagini, it was a ginormous big snake, kind of like a big python, only it was venomous. Snape died when Riddle commanded Nagini to bite him.”

“Do I want to know how you know this?”

“Probably not.”

“So, ask your question, Harry.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re you. You care about people enough to sacrifice for them. You’re kind and honorable and funny. Because you loved a strange little house-elf enough to dig his grave by hand. Because you think family is important, even though you didn’t have much of one growing up. You’re not trying to get into my pants for the bragging rights; you’re not after my family’s money or title. You being cute and magically powerful doesn’t hurt either.”

“How’d you find out about Dobby?”

“Elves talk, Harry, even if most people don’t listen.”

“Where do you see yourself going, and what’s my part?”

“Well, I told you about Marr, the place needs jobs so that families move here and their children stay if they want to.

“Wizarding Britain is screwed up, stuck in a Victorian, bigoted mindset. The Muggleborn leave, because they can’t find jobs and they eventually figure out that nothing’s going to change. The gene pool for Purebloods is shrinking; in another generation we’ll start to see birth defects and more and more squibs.

“We need to provide a place where people can walk both worlds and the Muggleborn don’t have to leave the country to find a place where they can be accepted as first-generation magic users. If you and I put our money and influence together we can invest in businesses, generate jobs and promote change. I’m the Baron’s daughter, and I’ll do what I can for the people of Marr, but I’m also a witch who cares about Magical Britain.

“We’ll have a family, we will learn to love each other, and we’ll have clever, beautiful kids more obnoxious than the midget, who will succeed in both the Magical world and the mundane world.

“We can do this, Harry, together.”

“Has anyone told you that you’re beautiful when you’re worked up?”

Daphne looked down at the ground and chuckled.

“No, beautiful and Daphne are not words that often are found in the same sentence, but I like it when *you* say it. My mum is pushing forty and is still smoking hot, my sister’s already a hottie, and it will only get worse. I’m... I’m just me,” Daphne protested.

Harry looked like he was about to speak, but stopped himself.

“I, I like your vision of the future. I don’t know if it can be done, but it certainly needs trying,” Harry said.

“Do, or do not, there is no try,” Daphne croaked.

“Thank you, Yoda,” Harry said.

“What about your part in my vision?” Daphne asked.

“It’s attractive, maybe not the obnoxious kid part, but the rest of it is pretty good,” Harry said.

“You do know that I love the midget and she loves me?”

“If you say so,” Harry said.

“I do say so; we just have this dysfunctional competition. I’m hoping we grow out of it someday.”

“What’s the latest competition?”

Daphne rolled her eyes. “This is so embarrassing, but I want to tell you the truth.”

“Would it help if you looked away when you told me?” Harry asked.

“No,” Daphne said, stopping in mid-stride. She turned to face him and took his hands in hers.

“Harry, look me in the eyes. Mum and the midget went out bra shopping yesterday.

“The midget came home crowing because she’s now wearing a c-cup bra, and she’s still growing. I’m done growing and I’m wearing a b-cup bra with a little bit of room to spare.

“Okay, now you can look at my boobs.”

Harry closed his eyes instead and began to chuckle.

“Try to take this the right way, Daphne. I – don’t – care.”

Daphne hugged him, pushed herself away from him far enough to kiss him and then hugged him again.

“You’re a girl; you have girl parts, nice girl parts I might say, which are being pressed against me right now and I’m finding that I like that. Hermione says that the only times breasts are relevant is when it comes time to nurse a baby, and that there’s no correlation between size and ability to feed a child.”

“Hermione, I so owe you,” Daphne. “Wait, did I just say that out loud?”

“Yeah, you did, which reminds me,” Harry said, pulling away from Daphne and digging in his pocket.

He pulled a small, clumsily wrapped package from his pocket and put it in her hand.

Daphne let go of Harry’s hand and unwrapped the package, shoving the paper into her pocket. It looked like a compact mirror that might be found in any lady’s purse. She opened the mirror and saw two dots painted on the right and left sides, one green, one brown.

“Is this what I think it is?” Daphne asked.

“Only if you’re thinking that it’s a two channel communication mirror. You’re holding the first working prototype.”

“That’s amazing!” Daphne exclaimed.

“Nah, I was only fiddling with Spellwork my father and godfather came up with when they were in school,” Harry said.

“Who’s the green dot?”

“Me.”

“Who’s the brown dot?”

“Hermione, those are the only working communication mirrors that I know of.”

“Can I talk to you both at one time?”

“Eehhh, not reliably, I’m still working on that. Having two channels open works about half the time. The most channels I could fit on one mirror was four channels, linking one mirror to four other mirrors. After that, it just stops working. I don’t understand the magic enough to figure out the problem. It almost tempted me to go back to Hogwarts for another year, but I figure if I need charms and runic expertise now, I can rent it by the hour,” Harry explained.

“Harry, I still say that this is amazing. This is the type of thing that could spawn a new industry.”

“Maybe, it could also land me in Azkaban for violation of the Statute of Secrecy.”

“Harry, that just proves my point, Wizarding Britain has to change or die, and I’m not interested

in it dying.”

“You’re doing it again,” Harry said.

“What?”

“You’re getting worked up.”

“Which means you think I’m... beautiful,” Daphne said, looking embarrassed.

“Yeah, passion is exciting – which in this case is good. Of course, the late Bellatrix Lestrange was passionate too, which was also exciting, but not so good.”

“Don’t ever change, Harry.”

“Never? Not even acquiring better manners?”

“Well, we shall make an exception for that,” Daphne said, speaking in her ‘royal’ voice. “Wait, the sun’s going down. Where did the afternoon go?”

Harry looked down at their linked hands.

“I think it went right here.”

“Can you spend the night?” Daphne asked before considering how that could sound. “I mean, in our guest room?”

“I don’t see why not, I’ll just have to call Andi and let her know I won’t be home.”

“Good, I’d like to be able to make good on my promise to take you riding.”

“I’d like that.”

“Plus, it will drive the midget crazy.”

“No comment.”

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By right of conquest

Chapter the Fifth

By Right of Conquest

Chapter the Fifth

“How many people work here at the estate?” Harry asked as Daphne drove the Land Rover through the gate that marked the outer boundary of the manor.

“Two elves in the house – one cooks, one cleans. There’s a girl who comes in and keeps books, she works in the office but lives in town. We’ve got a bloke who keeps the horses, a gardener and a mechanic and another who’s the general handyman and groundskeeper; they each have small cottages on the grounds. That’s everyone who lives on the grounds, there are others who live off the estate that work the orchards, keep the flocks, and tend the vegetable garden. Most everyone else is seasonal: planting, harvest, shearing, lambing. As few as six, as many as twelve,” Daphne explained while driving over a particularly bumpy stretch of road.

“I thought there’d be more,” Harry said.

“There would be if we lived in one of those obscenely large estates, but there’s just the four of us Greengrasses now, so Father sold the old place and moved here around the time the midget was born.”

Daphne motioned for silence and swung the truck around before backing it into the carriage house.

“Father can do that while holding a conversation, but I’d rather not take out the wall when I’m backing in,” Daphne said.

“Does the midget drive?”

“She’ll start when she can see over the steering wheel,” Daphne said with some satisfaction. “We offered to let her drive one of the tractors, but she didn’t want to sit on a booster seat, and her feet didn’t reach the pedals.”

“Sucks being short,” Harry observed sympathetically.

“Sucks being tall if you’re a woman, don’t talk to me about clothes. If I didn’t sew I’d be dressed in men’s clothing all the time. It’s bad enough being called ‘sir’ in the stores, and that’s when I’m in a dress with long hair!”

“Never thought of that.”

Daphne turned off the ignition. “Okay, open, honest and very vulnerable time here, Harry.”

“Okay,” Harry replied.

“When we met in the bank, I admired you for all the things you’d done. Now I know you better, and I’m getting... very fond of you. I guess what I’m saying is I need you to make a decision soon, because I’m getting emotionally involved.”

“Okay, thanks for telling me. I’ll do what I can.”

“That’s all I ask.”

#@#

Dinner that night was far more casual and was served in the kitchen at a smaller, less formal table than that found in the dining room. Malcolm Greengrass wasn’t due to return until later that night, so it was just Harry, Daphne, Astoria and Grace.

After dinner Harry persuaded Daphne to sing while Astoria accompanied. She sang several songs in German, followed by a song in Gaelic that she sang unaccompanied. Grace busied her hands with needlework while listening to her daughters, tapping her toe in time with the beat. Harry clapped with enthusiasm after every song and Astoria and Daphne took turns making bows and curtsies. When they returned to the kitchen Mimsy had already cleaned up and had left a tray with tea and biscuits.

Grace broke out a deck of cards and taught Harry how to play bridge, Harry and Daphne being partners against Grace and Astoria. After two rounds in which he picked up the rudiments of the game but lost soundly, Grace excused herself from the kitchen. Astoria looked from Harry to Daphne.

“You two are looking coupley – can I leave you safely here?” she asked.

“We’ll try to keep the noise down,” Daphne said.

“Don’t do anything that would frighten the horses,” Astoria said before she too left.

“We’re being left alone again,” Harry asked. “Is this normal?”

“Probably not, but I don’t have enough experience to make an informed judgment,” Daphne replied. “I think the normal convention is that the male suitor is not trusted with the female’s virtue, so there’s a good amount of supervision, but there’s just not a lot of precedent for my situation.”

“Care for a walk?” Harry asked.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Daphne said with a broad smile.

#@#

“Did I tell you about the mechanics of the betrothal?” Daphne asked.

“You never went into any detail,” Harry said.

“I really don’t want to revisit it right now, but it was like an unbreakable vow,” Daphne said as they walked through the garden.

“Who was the bonder?”

“It’s *like* an unbreakable vow, but different. An unbreakable vow is really a misnomer, because if you kill the bonder, the vow is also broken, which is why we chose something that wasn’t really alive to serve as bonder. Father and Bellatrix were the witnesses, but instead of a bonder to the promise, we were at a magical ritual spot – some old standing stones and a rocking stone. There’s some really old magic there,” Daphne said. “The magic from the stones is doing the bonding. I’ve felt the magic since I performed the ritual; it was part of how I knew that the promises were still in effect after he died.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

“There’s a mild compulsion involved,” Daphne confessed. “The magic is semi-sentient – it will punish me if I break the promises, but it also will nudge me towards keeping the promises. It’s kind of like a conscience in that regard.”

“*Magic* is not semi-sentient,” Harry said. “Ghosts are sentient, demons are sentient, spirits like elementals and territorials range from semi-sentient to sentient, but that’s all technical - what are you telling me about the compulsion, Daphne?” Harry asked.

“There will be times that I will pull away from you, because I’m resisting the compulsion,” Daphne said. “You need to know that I’m not rejecting you when I do that.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said.

“You are such a sweet man, Harry. The final promise to be fulfilled is that we will be joined as man and wife on the marriage bed, that’s how the betrothal is executed.”

“So it’s sex?”

“Yes and no. You have to intend to take me *as your wife*. A quick bonk *without* the intent wouldn’t fulfill the promise,” Daphne said, looking away.

“Is this embarrassing you?”

“Yes, it is, terribly,” Daphne said. “This is not how I ever envisioned I’d be speaking with any man.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize – you did nothing wrong.”

“I can still be sorry,” Harry said.

“I guess I just wanted you to know that if you’re encouraging me in that way, that you’d best mean it,” Daphne said earnestly.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand, I must be thick,” Harry said.

“No, Harry, it’s that you’re the least lecherous man I’ve ever met,” Daphne said. “Let me be plain spoken. If you call me to your bed *as your wife*, I will come. Primarily because I’m convinced that being your wife would be really good for me, and secondarily, because that’s what the binding magic is pushing me towards.”

“Will the magic always influence you?” Harry asked in a worried tone.

“No, Harry, it’s not making me a puppet, I really do like you, I can tell the difference between what’s me and what’s the magic.

“When - if I become your wife, the binding magic will dissolve. I had Father put on a charm that would neutralize the effect of the compulsion two days ago. I felt the compulsion dwindle to nothing, but how I felt and thought about you didn’t change a bit. This is really Daphne speaking to you right now, not the binding magic, or spirit or whatever it may be.”

“What happened to the charm?”

“It’s not permanent.”

“Oh,” Harry said.

“Oh, indeed. I need to put something in your room tonight. I’d appreciate it if you weren’t in the room with me,” Daphne explained.

“Because of the compulsion?” Harry said.

“Because Harry, Daphne and *marriage bed* sound really good right now rolled into one sentence, and I’m pretty sure you’re not thinking that way.”

“I like you, Daphne, but I’m not there yet.”

“I know; that’s why we’re having this conversation.”

“What are you putting there?”

“It’s probably best that you not know, but it’s something that will protect you from the midget.”

“She’s going to attack me while I sleep?”

“Something like that; you I trust with my life and my future. Her? Not a bit.”

#@#

Harry walked to the border of the estate and Disapparated, reappearing outside the garden at the Tonks house. Inside he found that Andi had prepared a small package for him containing a change of clothes, pajamas, shaving kit and another bag containing two brooms and the equipment he’d made for his latest magic project. He smiled broadly. Andi had left a note that said:

H,

Stuff for your visit – if she’s taking you riding, you should return the favor and take her flying. Have fun, be good, and stay safe.

A

Harry pondered for a moment just what Andi would consider fun, good or safe and decided that he didn’t care; this was his adventure, not hers. He Apparated back to the outer border of the Greengrass estate and walked in through the open gate. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that the gate closed itself after he’d passed through.

#@#

One of the benefits of the post-Voldemort life for Harry was that he thoroughly enjoyed sleeping, provided that he was sleeping on something other than a pile of jagged rocks. He still had the occasional bad dream, but nothing approaching the visions and nightmares of his past. Notwithstanding this new-found enjoyment, he still slept lightly, waking at small noises, but he usually could return to sleep, so it was still good.

He’d left the window open in his room because he didn’t mind the cool evenings of Scotland in June and was asleep before eleven PM.

When he’d lived in the Gryffindor tower, from time to time Crookshanks would come to visit during the night. He would jump to the bottom of Harry’s bed and walk up the length of Harry’s body, sometimes to curl up next to his head; on other occasions after verifying that it was indeed Harry in the bed Crookshanks would lightly jump off, returning to his nocturnal rounds.

At twelve thirty he felt a weight on the bottom of the bed, similar to the bounce made by Crookshanks, only more so. He opened his eyes to see Astoria's face, inches from his own. In the moonlight the tendrils of hair that framed her face were white and luminous. He felt the tip of what he assumed was her wand under his chin.

"What are your intentions towards my sister?" she whispered menacingly.

"I think your father's supposed to ask that question, and we already had that conversation," Harry replied in a normal tone of voice. "Astoria, you really shouldn't be in here, I'd like you to leave."

She sat up a little and twitched, setting her breasts swinging gently under the thin fabric of her nightgown.

"Like what you see?" she asked, setting her voice into a husky timbre. "It can be yours."

"Ah, not interested, thanks. You're a lovely girl, Astoria, but you're underage, you're the sister of what I guess is my girlfriend, and I'm a guest in your father's house," Harry explained patiently.

"What does she have that I don't have?" she asked, twitching to set her breasts in motion again.

"Taste and good sense, I suppose," Harry answered.

The bedroom door swung violently into the room and then fell off its hinges, clattering to the floor with a bang.

"Astoria, you evil, thieving cow," Daphne growled in a quiet, clear voice.

"Hello, Daphne," Astoria said sweetly.

"Harry is MINE!" Daphne screamed as a flash of light exploded in the room.

"If Harry's yours, why am I here and you're out there?" Astoria countered.

"You know NOTHING!" Daphne shouted. There was another flash and Astoria's body was hurled off the bed, stopping inches before she should have smashed into the wall. Astoria's arms and legs were pulled by invisible forces so she was spread out, her wand clattering to the floor.

Daphne's hair was rising and falling, seemingly of its own accord, bits of static discharging randomly; a blue nimbus surrounded her body. The breeze from the open window was blowing Daphne's long nightgown, pulling the fabric taut against her lean frame. A minor part of Harry's consciousness announced that Daphne's flesh was the only matter beneath her nightgown, and that this was an unqualified good thing.

"He doesn't want you, he won't even kiss you unless you *ask him to*," Astoria hissed. "He liked it when I was on top of him, I could tell."

"Liar!" Daphne screamed, snapping her arm as if throwing a ball. A blob of yellow appeared in

mid-air and splattered against Astoria and the wall behind her.

“Harry is honorable, and kind,” Daphne said in a slightly more calm voice as she hurled a blob of color again, this time in red. “He has but to whistle and I will be in his bed.”

“I don’t hear him whistling, do you?” Astoria asked mockingly.

Daphne didn’t bother to reply, instead hurling a blob of blue with her left hand, followed by a blob of green with her right. The green covered all of Astoria’s head and a white ball appeared and stuffed Astoria’s mouth.

Harry could see motion in the hallway behind Daphne.

“That will be enough, Daphne,” Malcolm said calmly.

Daphne hurled a rapid staccato salvo of smaller balls in lurid colors. Her chest was heaving as she tried to catch her breath. This too, Harry’s internal commentator said, was a good thing.

“Stand down, Daphne,” Malcolm commanded.

Daphne turned sideways, her back to Harry, head down as she moved out of the doorway.

“I am sorry, Father; Harry, I am ashamed,” Daphne murmured.

“Compose yourself and wait for me in the parlor,” Malcolm said. “You might consider a dressing gown.”

“Yes, Father,” Daphne said as she disappeared from sight.

“Beloved, please attend to my daughter,” Malcolm calmly directed Grace. “If you cannot get her unstuck, ask Daphne to free her, but don’t let her in the room.”

“Harry, I would like to talk to you in my study,” Malcolm said before turning and disappearing into the hallway.

#@#

Malcolm was bent over his desk, writing, when Harry found his way to the study. He looked up and silently slid a note to Harry across the desk.

H – There are at least three listening devices active in this room – M

“On behalf of House Greengrass, I apologize for tonight’s actions. I hope you now understand the

depth of the twisted competition between my daughters,” Malcolm began. “I appreciate Daphne’s restraint.”

“That was restrained?” Harry said.

“Yes,” Malcolm answered. “Astoria’s still alive, isn’t she?”

“What was going on, sir?” Harry asked.

“There was a recording orb in your room; I suspect it was left there by my brown haired daughter. I have reviewed it twice. My hypothesis is that Astoria was attempting to stage a scene that would lead Daphne to believe that you were acting in an untoward manner with Astoria,” Malcolm explained.

“That was a set-up?” Harry asked incredulously.

“I’m afraid so, my young friend. You are an attractive young man, but I don’t think attraction alone would spur my youngest to such foolish action.”

“Okay, thanks, I think.”

“Knowing Daphne as you do now, what do you believe that she would do if she truly believed that you were fornicating with her sister, or even attempting to do so?”

Harry pondered that question.

“She would be furious, she would be hurt, and she would break the betrothal,” Harry said.

“Exactly, and the binding magic enforcing her betrothal pledge would strip her of her magic,” Malcolm said gravely. “I have done many things during my life, including serving as a jurist, hearing many feud claims between magical clans in the Highlands. Theft of magic is a capital offense. Attempted theft of magic is a banishing offense. I cannot conclusively prove Astoria’s intent, but personally, I have no doubts.”

“Okay, that’s bad,” Harry said.

“Indeed.”

“If Daphne was monitoring things, she knew I wasn’t – doing that – but she was outraged that Astoria would try – all to steal her magic.”

“Exactly; I will be dispensing justice tonight. You are not required to attend, but given the unique circumstance, you are permitted to do so.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll stay. May I go see Daphne now?” Harry asked.

Malcolm smiled broadly. “Yes, see to your woman,” he said.

Harry left the study, bypassing the kitchen where he assumed Astoria would be waiting. There was light on in the parlor, so he wandered in there.

Daphne was dressed in a blue bathrobe over her nightgown and was staring out the window, arms crossed, chewing on a tendril of hair while tears streamed down her face.

She turned as he approached and began to say something but Harry put a finger to her lips and pulled her into a hug.

After a long moment, he broke the embrace and wiped the tears on her face with the balls of his thumbs. He then kissed the tear tracks on the right and then the left side of her face and then kissed her lips tenderly.

When he pulled away from her, Daphne looked confused.

“You’re not upset?” she asked.

Harry kissed her again.

“You’re not disgusted with me?” she asked again.

He kissed her again, tenderly, and then deepened the kiss. He moved away from her mouth and began kissing down one side of her neck.

“Harry, this is marvelous, but you need to talk to me,” she exclaimed.

“Talking’s overrated,” Harry said, moving to the other side of her neck.

Daphne curled as Harry kissed her and then resolutely pushed him away.

“You’re playing with live ammunition, mister, stop it,” she growled.

“As you wish,” Harry said with a flippant bow.

“That was marvelous, by the way,” Daphne said apologetically.

“Tonight, upstairs, that was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” Harry began “you were terrible and beautiful and really, really sexy.”

“What are you talking about?” Daphne demanded.

“You, the clever woman defending her claim; you were hurling big time magic in there with absolute control. You were passionate. What have I told you about that?”

“That you think that’s beautiful,” Daphne sniffed.

“No, I think *you’re* beautiful when you’re that way,” Harry corrected. “That’s the real you, isn’t

it?”

“I prefer to think of it as releasing my inner arsehole and I don’t like letting other people see that side of me. I have no desire to become the next Dark Lady,” Daphne explained. “So, let me get this right, you only think I’m beautiful when I’m verging on insane?”

“That’s not what I said, if you want to fish for compliments, you’re going to have to try harder,” Harry said, rubbing his hand across her back.

“You’re not making this any easier,” she complained.

“Nothing about this has been easy, Daphne, deal with it,” Harry said.

“I have been,” she snapped “for almost a year now.”

“I’m sorry, that was flippant and out of line,” Harry said.

“Kiss me,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because it would make you happy too,” she said somberly before chuckling.

“As you wish.”

#@#

“Why, Grace, why did she do it?” Malcolm asked in anguish.

Grace said nothing, only sighing as she sat down. She fiddled with the orb on his desk, rolling it from one hand to another.

“Queenie gets everything,” Grace said in an amazing imitation of Astoria’s voice. “You never wanted another child. She gets the magic, the title, and the grimoire. I’m as much a Greengrass as she is, and I can’t even open the blasted book!”

“It’s that simple, just the jealousy?” Malcolm asked.

“Who knows?”

“I can’t ignore this.”

“I know you can’t, Malcolm,” Grace said soothingly.

“How’s Queenie?” she asked.

“She thought that Harry would reject her,” Malcolm said.

Grace arched an eyebrow.

“He said, quote ‘that was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,’ end of quote” Malcolm reported. “I think that means he approved.”

“Yes, that’s the popular idiom,” Grace said, once again remembering that there were at least two generations separating the time she grew up and the era in which Malcolm was raised. “Did you place an orb in the parlor?”

Malcolm snorted.

“No, there are limits to my skullduggery, although apparently that sentiment is not shared with the female members of the family. I was merely reading lips. She was crying, waiting in the parlor, Harry embraced her, talked to her, and kissed her.

“Providence has been kind to us, Grace.”

“Indeed,” Grace said. “Well, we must do our duty.”

“Call Harry and Daphne in, I want to talk before the unpleasantness.”

#@#

Grace entered the parlor and stopped. Her child was leaning against a window sill, wrapped in his arms. It wasn’t the frenzied thrashing of youth, and his hands weren’t anywhere that would have gotten him swatted by Aunt Rose. They would kiss, break apart and murmur to one another, and kiss again.

Grace cleared her throat.

Harry pointedly didn’t stop, although she could tell that Daphne was trying to pull away. After one last kiss, he turned.

“Yes?”

“My lord husband wishes to speak to you both.”

“Yes, Mum,” Daphne said obediently.

Grace turned and headed to the office.

#@#

Malcolm was now dressed in a formal robe and sitting upright behind his desk.

“There was a recording orb in the guest room,” he stated. “Do any of you know how that happened to be found there?”

Daphne raised her hand. “I put it there, Father.”

“Is this your work?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Congratulations I didn’t think you were capable of such complex work,” Malcolm said.

“I was... motivated,” Daphne said.

“How did this happen?” Malcolm asked.

“I thought Astoria would try something stupid,” Daphne began. “I never thought it would be so....”

“Let’s play the orb,” Malcolm suggested.

He slipped the orb onto the top of what appeared to be a candlestick holder and stroked the side. The orb began to project a picture against the drapes covering the office window.

“There’s nothing at the beginning but Harry asleep in bed,” Malcolm began.

“It was on a time delay, I set it to start an hour after he retired,” Daphne explained.

Malcolm stopped the display. Astoria was now visible, facing the now-closed door. Runic characters displayed like a subtitle on the projection.

“Real time analysis of ambient magic,” Malcolm observed. “Very impressive. Beloved?”

“Astoria is locking the door with a Class Three charm and then applying a sticking charm to the door frame,” Grace said, interpreting the runes.

Malcolm touched the orb again. Astoria was now pointing her wand at first one breast and then another.

“Grace?”

“She’s applying cooling charms to her nipples,” Grace murmured.

“Excuse me, why is she doing that?” Harry asked.

“Her nipples will stand erect and her breasts will take on a more spherical curve,” Grace said clinically.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“It makes her look aroused. Some men find that titillating,” Grace said.

Daphne was examining her lap with great interest.

The projection then showed Astoria carefully climbing up onto the foot of the bed and crawl up the length of Harry’s body, her hips straddling his when she stopped.

“Do you want to hear the sound?” Malcolm asked.

There was embarrassed silence as Daphne looked from her parents to Harry.

“Yes,” Daphne said. Harry reached over and held one of her hands.

Malcolm stroked the orb and a thin sound came forth replicating the brief dialog. Malcolm stopped the projection.

“Would you like to hear that again?”

“Yes, please,” Daphne said, her face flushed.

Malcolm stroked the orb in a counterclockwise fashion and the projection began again.

“Mother, Father, please stop the playback and turn away,” Daphne said.

She quickly straddled Harry and placed her hands on either side of his head. “Harry,” she whispered. “I am so glad that you are who you are.” She then placed a lingering kiss on his lips. She then returned to her chair.

“Might I continue?” Malcolm asked, trying to suppress a grin.

“Certainly, by all means,” Daphne said.

Malcolm resumed the playback.

The projection went white and then the door was visible as it fell into the room.

Daphne was now visible at the far right of the projection.

“What are you thinking here?” Malcolm queried.

“I knew she was going to try something,” Daphne began. “When I came into the room and found her clothed, for lack of a better word, in diaphanous film, straddling my betrothed, I was furious.”

“Furious at whom?” Malcolm asked.

“At her, of course; I trust Harry.”

Malcolm resumed the projection, letting the orb play to the end.

“How did you stop her from smashing into the wall?” Malcolm asked.

“I cast a cushioning charm before I started the banishing,” Daphne explained. “I was furious with her, but I didn’t want to kill her. Harry, did my hair really look like that?”

“Yup, you had that blue light around you too,” Harry said, grinning.

“Yes, and now I see why Father suggested that I put on a dressing gown,” Daphne said, the top of her ears turning red.

“Like I’d said, it was the hottest thing I’d ever seen,” Harry replied.

Malcolm took the orb from the stand and placed it into his desk drawer. He then brightened the lights in the office.

“Grace, what did you find in the halls?” Malcolm asked.

“Our doorway, the stairwell and the hallway had Class Three wards in place, consistent with Astoria’s signature. There was nothing on Astoria’s doorway or Daphne’s doorway,” Grace reported.

“Very well, bring in my daughter,” Malcolm commanded.

#@#

“Astoria Jacqueline Greengrass, you are before me this evening charged with Attempted Theft of Magic and Violation of Hospitality,” Malcolm began.

Astoria sat straight in a chair placed before Malcolm’s desk. She was wearing a dressing gown over her pajamas but it was evident that that her clothes and skin were still stained with the colors hurled by her sister. Grace had managed to clear most of her face, but the balance of her head, including all of her hair was a brilliant green in color.

“Before I go any further, I will let you know that there was a recording orb in the guest room, and we have everything, sight, sound and ambient magic recorded,” Malcolm intoned.

Astoria turned and stared daggers at Grace who said nothing in reply.

“How do you plead?” Malcolm asked.

Astoria said nothing for the longest while.

“I wish to stand mute,” Astoria said with deliberation.

“Very well; having chosen to stand mute, you may not speak to either the facts of the crime, or any factors in mitigation.”

Astoria’s head bowed slightly.

“I find that you did this evening use magic to increase your allure and approach an unrelated male who was a guest of this house. You did solicit the attention of this unrelated male, knowing that your sister was betrothed to him. Given the years of competition between you and your sister, it was reasonable to assume that your intent was to disrupt the betrothal, although the evidence on this point is all inferred from circumstance, namely that there were wards placed upon your parents’ bedroom door, the stairwells and the door to the guestroom, but there were no such wards placed between your sister’s room and the guestroom. It is again reasonable to infer from the circumstances that you intended that your sister discover you in inappropriate circumstances with her betrothed.”

“Before I pass judgment, I wish to state that the day you were born was one of the happiest days of my life, and that I have loved you as I have loved all of my children. You have been blessed with extraordinary beauty and a fine mind, with a mastery of many subtle magics far beyond your age.

“I find that of the charge Attempted Theft of Magic, you are guilty.

“Of the charge Violation of Hospitality, you are guilty.

“The penalty for Attempted Theft of Magic is banishment. In light of the fact that you are not yet of age, your sentence for both crimes will be suspended for a year. If the year passes with no further incidents of a criminal nature, your conviction will be voided.

“If, during this year you take any action of a capital criminal nature against your sister, Daphne Isabella Greengrass, or her betrothed, Harry James Potter, or any action intended to disrupt their betrothal, either of them may execute judgment against you as they see fit, up to and including death.

“I would remind you that there is no evidence of your existence in the mundane world. No birth certificate, no public records of any sort. Her Majesty’s government, for all intents and purposes, does not know that you exist. As head of the family, my pronouncements tonight are regarded as internal deliberations of an old family and not subject to review by the Wizengamot or any other body of the Ministry of Magic. Were you to disappear tonight, the mundane world would not know of your passing, and the magical world would consider it to be a family matter, if it considered it at all.

“Do you understand the sentence?”

“Yes, my lord Father,” Astoria replied in a whisper.

“Harry James and Daphne Isabella, do you understand the sentence?”

“Yes, my lord Father,” Daphne said.

“Yes, sir,” Harry added.

“This session is now adjourned,” Malcolm said, his shoulders sagging. “Just so you know, Astoria, the orb was placed there by your sister, not your mother.”

“What? She doesn’t have the skills!”

“Apparently she does have the skills, given sufficient motivation,” Malcolm said in rejoinder.

“Please clean up as you can, Astoria,” Malcolm instructed. “Daphne will help you tomorrow to remove any color that remains. I’m going to the kitchen for a drink, and then I’m going to attempt to get some sleep in what’s left of this evening.”

Malcolm then nodded to each in turn, stood and left the office.

Astoria stood slowly and without looking at any of the others, walked from the office.

“She’s walking with a great amount of dignity, given that she looks like an explosion in a paint store,” Harry quipped.

“You will not find either of my daughters lacking in pride, Harry,” Grace said.

Five minutes later, Harry and Daphne were still in the office.

“Do you want to go back to Andi’s now?” Daphne asked.

“No, I’m here through tomorrow,” Harry said.

“Thank you.”

#@#

Sleep did not come easily to Daphne that night, and by daybreak she wondered if she’d slept at all. Giving it up as a lost cause, she threw on a dressing gown and padded downstairs to the kitchen where Mimsy was already bustling about.

“Missy’s tea is on the counter. Missy’s Mister is still sleeping,” Mimsy said without looking up from the counter where she was measuring ingredients into a bowl.

“Where’s Astoria?”

“Little Missy is awake, but she’s still in her room,” Mimsy reported.

“Thanks, Mimsy,” Daphne said, snagging the cup of tea on the way out.

Astoria's bedroom was empty, but Daphne heard the sound of the shower. Swallowing the rest of her first cup of tea for the day, she pushed the bathroom door open.

"Do you mind?" Astoria bellowed. "I'm naked in here."

"That didn't seem to be much of a problem last night," Daphne observed.

"Ha, ha," Astoria replied, shutting the shower off and flinging the curtain open.

"Come to admire your handiwork?" Astoria asked, striking a pose with her arms spread out on either side.

"I've come to make you look like something other than an Oompa-Loompa," Daphne replied.

"Is that a secret short joke?" Astoria growled.

"Hands up," Daphne commanded.

Daphne made gestures with her hands and the color drained away from Astoria's body, peeling away from her skin and swirling down the drain with the remaining water in the tub.

"Do you want to keep the green hair? It's quite striking."

Astoria glared at her.

"I guess not."

Astoria turned the shower back on as Daphne returned to Astoria's room, finding a plate with toast and marmalade on a side table, along with a tea pot and cups.

"Thank you, Mimsy," Daphne whispered.

She heard a faint giggle in reply.

She picked up a piece of toast, spreading it thick with butter and thin with marmalade, setting it aside for Astoria.

"Come to gloat at the convicted felon?" Astoria said haughtily. Her head was wrapped in one towel while her body was wrapped in another.

"Get dressed, I want to talk," Daphne said.

Astoria shed both towels, dropping them on the floor and then bent over, pulling underwear from the drawer beneath her bed. After some stirring in the drawer, she plucked plain white pants and a matching sports bra.

"Working out?"

“I hope to,” Astoria replied.

“I want to know why, Astoria,” Daphne said, not much louder than a whisper.

Astoria shrugged and then slipped into her underwear. She then found knee length shorts and a crew neck shirt, both pale blue.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t go for bold colors today,” Astoria said acerbically.

She then sat on the bed and reached for the tea and toast Daphne had prepared for her.

“Do you know what a pain it is to have a perfect sister?” Astoria asked rhetorically.

“I’m hardly perfect,” Daphne protested.

“I try to hate you and you keep loving me back; it’s infuriating,” Astoria said.

“When Father first announced to the family that Voldemort was negotiating for your betrothal, I was livid. There was no way he was going to get my sister,” Astoria said, hands waving for emphasis.

“I went to Mum and told her that I was going to go in your stead. I could be the hero, save the family, and be the one to find out if the Dark Lord’s trouser snake was cold blooded.”

“Yuck!”

“Mum told me I couldn’t do it – I was under age, and I didn’t have enough power to do the blood ritual. I cried for a day because I was going to lose you, and then I cried for another day because I wasn’t good enough to save you. After the hand fasting, things settled down at school. We were safe, or at least safer than most, and I knew you were dreading the call.

“When Potter did it last month, and I was happy, because you’d live and have a life. Then we found out you were still betrothed, and I spent another day crying because I knew you were going to lose your magic.

“You brought him home, and it was clear he was sweet on you.”

“Yeah, right. Still no ring, Astoria,” Daphne said, waving her unadorned hand.

“When do you *ever* lose?” Astoria asked. “I don’t know why I did it – no, that’s not true, I thought we were finally playing a game where I could beat you without magical power. I’m a natural blonde, I have a nice rack, and boys like me. I really thought I could win, for once.

“You’re the heir, Daphne; you’ll be the Countess after Father’s gone. You have magic in spades. Me, I’m just what’s left over; *I’m not even good enough to be a spare* .”

“Is that what all this is about? Beating me in a *game* ?” Daphne asked incredulously. “Midget, I

love you. If I could give you the power, I'd do it. I don't decide who gets the title, and Father may live for another fifty years."

"See, this is just what I mean," Astoria said. "I'm trying to resent you and you're being all sisterly and loving. Game's over, you win. You always win when it's important. I just didn't expect that you'd snag the dark-haired hotness, but he didn't give me a glance. He asked me to leave and there wasn't any 'maybe' in his voice."

"I'm sorry," Daphne said.

"For what? For having a faithful boyfriend who's not interested in action on the side? Not your fault, sister dear.

"You win, game's over. I'm going to have to figure out some other way to make my mark on the universe. He doesn't have a brother hidden away somewhere, does he?"

"I'm afraid not," Daphne said. "I don't always win, and I don't mind the many times I've lost to you, because every time you've worked so hard. You're my sister, and I'll always love you."

"I hear a 'but' coming," Astoria said.

"Do what you want with me, Astoria. You must promise to never, ever hurt Harry. If you break that promise, I will kill you, personally and without magic. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," Astoria said with a smirk. "I do so pledge," she said, raising one hand. "So, what are you and the hotness doing today?"

"We're going riding. I think he said something about flying too," Daphne said.

"Well, one and naught isn't bad. You ride like the wind, but you fly like a turtle," Astoria said.

"Yeah, I'm really looking forward to that," Daphne said, making a funny face.

#@#

Queenie's diary – June 1998 – enciphered entry

What a night!

I simply do not understand the midget. She staged a scene tonight to make me think that she was having her wicked way with Harry (or he with her – somewhat harder to believe). I figured she was going to do something stupid, but never this. The midget has certainly learned over the years how to push my buttons (an idiom that pureblood wizards would never understand), and I certainly reacted as predicted. I blew the door off the hinges, the little scamp having locked and stuck it. She's brilliant with any type of ward or lock, and even more brilliant with undoing them. Me? Not so much. I applied the "ka-boom" school of dynamic entry and saw my sister astride my betrothed.

To say that I lost it would be an understatement. I threw a lot of magic around and made a lot of booms, but managed to not destroy the house or kill my sister.

My hair, which is never attractive under the best of circumstances was filled with static electricity and was doing a credible Medusa impersonation. My nightgown, a sensible summer weight silk gown with a modest neckline, that reaches down to my ankles, might as well have been a wet t-shirt for all the good it was doing keeping me covered.

While I was proud that I did not kill my sister on the spot, I was also certain that my display of rage would have led Harry to reconsider any interest he might have ever had in me, or in a future that included me.

It seems I don't understand Harry, either. He thought it was 'hot,' that I was beautiful, and very sexy. I don't know what he sees in me, but I'm not exactly in the position to object much right now. He was incredibly affectionate in the parlor when I thought he was going to call it off (the "it" being somewhat undefined at the moment).

The midget is under suspended sentence right now for Attempted Theft of Magic and Violation of Hospitality. If she's a good little witch, the sentence will disappear long before she reaches her majority. If she steps out of line again with a capital offense (against either Harry or me) then we have carte blanche to impose justice as we see fit. I don't see this as being realistic, as I'm not inclined to murder my sister under any circumstances, although last night the temptation was great. I did extract a pledge from her, and I told her privately that if she did anything to hurt Harry that I would kill her, personally and without magic. Harry has had such a wretched life.

I know that I can make a life with him, and that together we can do many of the things that I dream about for Marr and for Wizarding Britain. I used to fear that what I felt for him was from the binding magic of the rocking stone. I'm fairly certain now that very little of what I feel for Harry comes from the compulsion.

I know that I can make Harry happy; now my fear is that he will agree to marry me out of a sense of duty, or his "people saving thing."

It's never simple, is it? Why couldn't I just finish Hogwarts, study privately and then go to Uni at Aberdeen and go on with my plan?

Weirdness note: I asked the midget where she came up with the nipple trick. She said she read it in a book, where the plucky apprentice detective hardens her nipples with a cold bottle of beer and then interrogates an uncooperative (male) suspect. The things I've missed, not reading trash.

It still sounds awfully uncomfortable to me.

End of enciphered entry – checksum 307

#@#

Harry woke at 9:00, showered, shaved and after dressing, went to the kitchen. Grace was sitting at a table covered with correspondence.

“Good morning, Harry,” Grace said cheerfully. “I won’t ask if you slept well.”

“Is it always this exciting?” Harry asked.

“I’d love to say that it’s only exciting when you’re here, but Daphne and Astoria have an amazing ability to take common place ingredients and produce explosions,” Grace said wearily. “I wanted to thank you for the time you’re taking to get to know Daphne; I just wish the circumstances were different.”

“You’re welcome, I’m quite fond of Daphne, and I really appreciate the way you’ve welcomed me into your home.”

“Enough of the mushy stuff,” Grace said. “You’ll find breakfast in the chafing dishes, and you’ll find my daughters out at the horse barn.”

“Both of them?”

“They seem to have reached an understanding. One can only hope,” Grace said with resignation.

#@#

After breakfast, Harry brushed his teeth, picked up his equipment bag and walked to the horse barn. The man in charge of the stable nodded politely to Harry and pointed out the back door of the stable where in the foreground he could see Astoria running an obstacle course and in the background what he presumed was Daphne, racing a horse through a different type of course, jumping hedges, ditches and hurdles. He leaned against the door and watched both. When Astoria was at the top of a wooden fence she spotted him and hopped lightly to the ground, heading towards the barn. She picked up a towel and wiped the perspiration from her face and hands. The rest of her body was glistening in the morning sun.

“Hey, Harry,” Astoria greeted him. “About last night...”

Harry looked at her with one eyebrow raised.

“I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry, I was incredibly stupid last night. I’ve been in a struggle with Daphne for years and you got in the way,” Astoria explained.

“You were trying to hurt her, and you were trying to use me,” Harry said, trying hard to be civil. “It can’t happen again.”

“So that was all a show to yank your sister’s tail? You don’t want to have your wicked way with me after the obligatory ripped bodice?” Harry asked trying to change the mood.

“I didn’t say that,” Astoria replied with a grin. “It just so happens at the moment that I am fresh

out of bodices. Daphne and I have an understanding. I'm not trying to beat her any more, she loves me, and if I hurt you, she's going to kill me, personally and without magic."

"You're not kidding, are you?" Harry asked.

"Nope, on all three points. I'm a pretty fair witch, Harry, if I say so myself, I was doing NEWT level projects in my second year at Hogwarts.

"What I don't have is power, at least not at Daphne's level. You want something locked up? I'm your witch, I can ward it six ways from yesterday, but if Daphne wants to open it, ka-boom, no more wards.

"It's not very subtle, very direct, very un-Slytherin.

"I've been trying to beat Daphne every chance I get, because I can't take her in direct combat, she's got too bloody much power. There's more behind it, but that's the brief explanation.

"So, can we start over?"

Harry nodded.

"Hi, I'm Astoria, are you going to marry my sister?"

"Hi Astoria, I'm Harry, I'm still trying to figure out the answer to that question."

They shook hands.

"So, yonder you will see the delectable Miss Greengrass, Runner-up All Scotland Junior Champion, Point-to-Point racing when she was fifteen, All Scotland Junior Champion when she was sixteen."

"What's point-to-point?" Harry asked.

"It's kind of like a race and an obstacle course combined. The horse and rider have to really work together, and you have to really have confidence that you're not going to go splat when you're jumping a wall. What Daphne's running right now has every obstacle that you'd find at the course at Balcoromo Mains, down in the Lowlands."

"You sound proud of her," Harry said.

"I am, it's one of the things that drive me crazy in my relationship with her," Astoria confessed.

"So, if she was runner-up at fifteen and Junior Champion at sixteen, what's she been doing since then?" Harry asked.

"Oh, she kinda retired once she made All Scotland Junior Champion," Daphne said. "There was also this little war going on in Wizarding Britain, she wanted to keep a lower profile, that sort of

thing.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard something about that,” Harry said drolly.

“Let me get you kitted up, she really wants to take you riding. Hey, what’s in the bag?”

“A slightly used Firebolt and a Firebolt-X,” Harry said.

“Firebolt I’ve heard of, what’s the Firebolt-X?” Astoria asked, her eyes glistening with interest.

“It’s an experimental model from Randolph Spudmore,” Harry explained. “It’s not in production yet.”

“Ooooh,” Astoria exclaimed. “Forget about my bungling attempt at seduction, Harry, I want your broom instead.”

“Your likelihood of success is a lot higher with the broom,” Harry said with a grin.

“I will be a very good girl then,” Astoria gushed.

“When it’s here and I’m not riding it, feel free,” Harry said. “Be careful on the Firebolt-X, it’s prone to over steering at high speed.”

“Ooooh, I’m going to be an extraordinarily good girl,” Astoria said, picking up the Firebolt-X, looking down the shaft. “Fascinating, it’s asymmetrical, the shaft’s not aligned with the bristle axis.”

Harry took that as his cue to leave; he reckoned that Astoria was good for the morning now, and walked out into the field to get a closer look at Daphne’s jumping.

#@#

He’d been watching for about a half hour, marveling at the coordination between horse and rider as she raced and jumped. It appeared to Harry’s inexperienced eye that there were two different jumps, those where the obstacle was paced so that the jump was part of the horse’s stride, and those where the horse and rider had to break stride to make the jump. For the former, the horse and rider seemed to fly over the obstacle, for the latter it seemed like more work; with a disruptive clatter on landing before the stride rhythm was resumed. She was dressed in what he could only call a harlequin costume, left and right sleeves, torso and trouser legs alternating between black and white. Her helmet was a black and white checkerboard pattern. He assumed that was to allow the spectators to pick their favorite rider from the crowd.

Daphne finished the last jump and sprinted back towards the barn, slowing the horse’s gait at the end to allow a fancy dismount where she flung herself through the air to land next to Harry.

“I am impressed, Miss All Scotland Junior Champion,” Harry said, bowing.

“Thank you kind sir,” Daphne replied, holding an imaginary skirt hem as she curtsied. “I am, alas, merely a former Junior Champion, as another holds the honor this year.”

“Hey,” Harry said.

“Hey, yourself,” Daphne said. “Kiss me.”

Harry did so.

“You’re getting good at that,” she said, undoing the strap of her helmet and shaking her hair loose. She made a clucking sound at the large black horse she’d just dismounted. The horse swished its tail and sauntered back to Daphne.

“Harry, this is Deimos,” she said by way of introduction. “Deimos, this is Harry, he’s very special.”

The horse looked carefully at Harry, snorted and then turned away.

“Yes, I can see we’re going to be the best of chums,” Harry said.

“He doesn’t like men, which is one of the reasons I was able to buy him at auction a few years back. He’s a good jumper, lots of energy, but he’s a bit on the skittish side. His brother, named Phobos, of course, is a little more steady.”

“He’s big,” Harry said.

“Bigger than some, smaller than others,” Daphne said. “I’m not big enough to control the largest jumpers, so I had to find an energetic horse that I could control.”

“Why does the size of the horse matter?”

“The bigger the horse, the bigger the jump – within limits of course. A Belgian draft horse is enormous, but they aren’t built for jumping. The really big jumpers are impressive, but I can’t straddle them, much less control them. Yes, Harry, you can now stare at my legs,” Daphne said with a laugh.

“You seemed to fit him well enough,” Harry said.

“We’ve been jumping together for four years,” Daphne said. “He’s about ready to retire. He’s a gelding, so we won’t be putting him out to stud, he’ll just be a horse that runs around the estate grounds until he’s too old to leave the paddock.”

“Gelding?”

“He’s castrated – it makes him less valuable for breeding purposes, but he’s easier to control and train,” Daphne explained.

Harry made a face.

“Don’t be such a big baby,” Daphne said. “I have long range plans for you, so your precious parts are safe.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Where’s the midget?” Daphne asked.

“She’s probably flying somewhere. She saw that I brought two brooms, so I told her she was free to use either of them.”

“That must have made her happy,” Daphne said.

“She seemed pretty happy. She apologized for last night and said that you two had worked out an understanding. She said the game’s over, you love her, and you’re going to kill her if she hurts me,” Harry said. “Was the last point really necessary?”

“I wanted to make clear that you’re off limits,” Daphne explained. “It’s kind of like Hermione’s warning that if I hurt you, she’s going to make the short, bitter remainder of my life miserable beyond compare. The message was sent and received, we have an understanding, I hope.”

“So, where’s this mild, gentle horse you’ve been promising me?” Harry asked.

“I thought I’d let you ride Deimos whilst I rode Phobos,” Daphne said with an evil grin.

“I don’t think so,” Harry said.

“Okay, spoilsport, we’ll go to ‘Plan B’ and put you on a catatonic gelding,” Daphne said. “C’mon, I’ll brush Deimos down and we’ll get you saddled with something gentle and wimpy.”

#@#

The ‘gentle and wimpy’ horse turned out to be a five year old gelding named Mouse. Daphne said that he was Grace’s favorite. Harry helped install bit and bridle and watched carefully when the saddle was being attached and strapped down. When prompted, he attempted to put one foot in the stirrup and then swing into the saddle. Daphne found Harry’s struggles with this equestrian fundamental to be a source of mirth, taking mercy on him on the third attempt by boosting his bum at the critical moment of balance, helping him into the saddle.

“You enjoyed that too much,” Harry complained.

“One must take pleasure where it may be found,” she said philosophically.

“You know we’re going flying after this,” Harry reminded her.

“I’m seriously hoping that you’ll forget,” Daphne said, effortlessly mounting her own gelding, a

four year old named Toffee and coming up along side of him as they left the paddock.

“Okay, we’re in motion, what do I need to know?” Harry asked.

“Horses are grazing animals, which mean that they’re towards the bottom of the food chain, and they know it,” Daphne began.

“What’s going to eat a horse?” Harry asked.

“Horses weren’t always this big, Harry, the current thoroughbred size is the result of a century or two of selective breeding. Genghis Kahn conquered most of the world riding a horse considerably smaller than the one you’re riding right now. Just take it as fact that one of the first things a horse does is size up whether or not you’re a predator. The other fact to rely on is that once the horse is trained, he’s looking to you for leadership, because he assumes that you know what you’re doing.”

“Bad assumption on his part, I’m afraid,” Harry said.

“Be easy on the reigns, sit up straight, try to move with the horse, rather than bouncing in the saddle, don’t shout if he starts running, and be prepared to get back on if you fall off,” Daphne rattled off.

“Yeah, right,” Harry said.

“Harry, loosen your grip, your knuckles shouldn’t be white,” Daphne called. “Now catch me!”

Daphne took off at a trot that became a gallop.

Harry looked after her, relaxed his grip on the reigns and said “Go?” to the horse, hoping that he would understand.

Mouse began to saunter slightly faster until Harry nudged his heels into Mouse’s ribcage, at which point Mouse began to trot.

Daphne looked behind her and flashed a brilliant smile. Harry wasn’t certain if the smile was meant for him or for the horse.

#@#

After an hour or so of riding, they crossed a shallow creek and entered into what Harry recognized as the far side of the meadow where they’d had the picnic the day before. They stopped and Daphne showed Harry how to loosen the saddle before the horses were turned out to drink in the creek and then graze in the meadow.

Harry headed towards the grove, taking off his helmet as he walked.

“I think I’ve got this riding thing down, except for the ‘move with the horse, don’t bounce in the saddle’ bit, which I’ll be hanged if I can’t figure out how that’s done. I didn’t have that problem

with the Thestrals,” Harry said.

“The Thestrals were *flying* , Harry,” Daphne objected.

“And your point is? If God had intended us to ride horses, we’d be naturally bowlegged,” Harry said.

As they reached the grove a picnic basket appeared.

“Thank you, Mimsy,” Daphne said.

Harry opened the basket, pulled out a bottle and sat down, leaning up against a tree.

Daphne followed suit, plucking her own bottle from the basket.

“Spread your legs apart,” she said to Harry.

Harry gave her a quizzical look, but moved his knees apart.

Daphne turned and sat down between his knees, leaning up against him.

“If I’m your girlfriend, I get to do this,” she announced.

“Who said you were my girlfriend?” Harry said teasingly.

“You did, it’s on the orb, don’t try to deny it,” Daphne said firmly.

“Busted, I guess,” Harry said, wrapping one arm around her middle.

Daphne sighed contentedly.

“I wish that time would slow down right now and this moment would last a day,” she announced.

“Is that because you’re dreading something happening later today?” Harry asked.

“Oh, you had to spoil it, didn’t you?” Daphne exclaimed. “For the record, no, I’m not dreading anything later today; I’m simply stating that for the moment, I’m really, really happy, and it’s because I’m with you. Way to spoil a buzz, Potter.”

Harry said nothing, but adjusted his grip, pulling her closer.

Daphne sighed again.

“You know, the problem is that one of us has to get up if we’re going to get anything to eat,” Daphne complained.

“Are you a witch or not?” Harry asked.

Pulling a wand from his sleeve, he pointed the wand at the basket, twirled the tip, and then pulled back on the wand like a fisherman reeling in a catch. The basket rose six inches into the air and slid to them across the clearing.

“Are you satisfied, my lady?” he asked.

“Ecstatic,” she said, shaking her head until her hair flipped into his face. Looking back briefly she smiled and reached into the basket.

#@#

The ride after lunch was much slower, allowing for more conversation. They took turns taking the lead, making a lazy arc back to the horse barn.

“Can I ask you a couple of questions?” Daphne asked.

“Sure, you can ask me more than that, no limit today,” Harry said generously.

“Why did Snape hate you so much?”

“Ah, very good question; it all goes back to my parents. I never saw a picture of my parents until I was eleven and came back into the Wizarding world. The first thing people would say when they’d see me was ‘Harry, you look just like James, except you have your mother’s eyes.’” Harry explained.

“Severus Snape was a half-blood living in a Muggle neighborhood. His first, and possibly his only friend, was a little Muggle girl named Lily Evans, who got a Hogwarts letter when she was eleven.”

“Your mother?”

“Yup, Lily Evans, red-haired beauty with bright green eyes,” Harry said.

“Snape was sorted into Slytherin, Lily into Gryffindor. Also sorted into Gryffindor that year were Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew and James Potter.”

“My father was an arrogant little toe rag, and he and Sirius delighted in picking on the Slytherins. I am sad to say that he was quite the bully.

“My father was tormenting Snape one day, holding him upside down by his foot from a tree until his underwear was showing. Mum rushed to Snape’s defense, and Snape lost it, saying that he didn’t need a Mudblood’s help.

“That kind of put an end to whatever friendship they had, which was sad. The next year, my father did *something* to pull his head out of his arse and he grew up a bit, and he started dating my Mum. That probably broke Snape’s heart. So, to make a long sad story much shorter, the only thing that Snape saw when he looked at me was his boyhood rival, who tormented him to no end and who

took the one girl he ever loved away from him.”

“Wow,” Daphne exclaimed.

“Yeah, wow. He was still a prick, but I understand him a lot better now. Great Potion Master, lousy teacher, pretty good headmaster,” Harry concluded.

“That’s some story,” Daphne commented.

“Yeah, so what’s the other question?”

“What are you finding in the Riddle trove?”

“That’s a good story too,” Harry said enthusiastically.

“Aside from this troublesome betrothal that I’m still trying to figure out, it seems that pretty much everything that Riddle did with his wand is remembered, for lack of a better word, by the wand. So as I read through his diaries, or the grimoires, if I try to replicate the magic described in the diary when I’m using his wand, it kind of flows right through me.”

“Wow,” Daphne said.

“Of course, there are a lot of things that I just don’t *want* to know, like six incremental improvements in the Entrail Expelling Curse, but there are some gems in there as well. The guy was nuts, but he had a big thirst for learning things. Case in point: it seems that there were two versions of Cruciatus, one that almost anyone could learn, and another that could only be performed by the heavy hitters, the wizards and witches with lots of power.”

“So?”

“So, Neville’s parents were tortured into insanity with Cruciatus, and I think that part of the reason that St Mungo’s can’t reverse things is that they’re trying to undo the wrong version of the curse. That’s my hope, at least. I haven’t told Neville about it yet, I was going to bring it up today when I was supposed to meet with him, but my schedule got rewritten by this hazel eyed tigress who thought that I needed to have my bum tenderized by a saddle, so I’ll have to move it to tomorrow.”

“Do you think it’s going to make a difference?”

“I don’t know, but I’d certainly like to try; if I could give Neville back his parents....”

“You’re a good man, Harry Potter,” Daphne exclaimed.

“I wish that were true,” he said with a sigh.

“I’d just like to point out that the betrothal isn’t at all troublesome; you just have to say ‘yes.’”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Thanks.”

#@#

Upon their return to the horse barn they were met by Hector, the man who ran the stable. He brushed Toffee down while Daphne showed Harry how to brush down Mouse. Once the horses were put away, Harry found a note on top of his equipment bag.

H

Thanks, the broom was brilliant! The Firebolt-X really does tend to oversteer at high speeds.

Please marry my sister; I want to ride this broom again!

The Midget

Harry laughed when he read the note, passing it to Daphne.

“You seem to have an ally,” he said.

Digging into the equipment bag he handed a black wad of fabric to Daphne. She unfolded it and looked at it.

“It’s a leotard,” she said.

“I call it a vest, much manlier that way. Put it on, over your clothes,” Harry said.

“Will it fit?”

“It should, it’s stretchy as all get out.”

“Why am I putting this on?”

“Because I want to show you something really, really cool.”

“You do know that it’s not going to look like the nightgown did last night,” Daphne said with a puzzled look on her face.

“Last night was great, but this is a functional garment, not for show,” Harry explained.

Daphne pulled off her boots and sat down on a bench outside of the horse barn and then carefully threaded her legs through the neck of the leotard and out the leg holes. She then pulled the leotard up her torso until she could reach back and place her arms in the neck and out the arm holes, stretching it on over her blouse.

“Okay, I look like a confused dance student who forgot to get undressed before suiting up for class,” Daphne observed.

Harry was struggling with his own version of the leotard, pulling it on with a grunt.

“The suits are matched – there’s runic work on the inside and outside of the leotard. Hold out your wand with your dominant hand,” he directed.

Daphne did so.

Harry closed his eyes briefly and then said “I’m going to do ‘Lumos’ through your wand.”

Daphne’s wand tip glowed weakly at first, and then cast a brilliant light.

“That was weird,” she said. “I could feel your magic coursing through me; it was kind of nice, actually.”

“This is something mentioned in Riddle’s diary. He came up with the idea of something like these suits as a way of teaching magic to new recruits. I can explain what ‘Lumos’ is supposed to do until I’m blue in the face, but when you feel the magic coursing through your own body, it’s better than any instruction I could imagine.”

“You’re kidding me, Riddle invented these?” Daphne objected.

“Nope, no kidding, like I said, the guy was twisted as a corkscrew, but he spent a lifetime learning some really neat magic, not all of which was loathsome,” Harry explained.

“Can you make me like a robot? Is it like Imperius?” Daphne asked.

“I don’t think so,” Harry said. “I’ve not tried to control anyone with this. I tried it out last week with Neville, he was guinea pig number one, and you’re guinea pig number two. It goes both ways – I can feel your magic, you can feel mine.”

Daphne furrowed her brows for a moment and put her wand behind her ear. Holding her now empty hand like she was using a wand, she concentrated. Harry felt a surge of magic through his spine and out his arm. A spray of blue flowers exploded from the end of his wand.

“Wow, I see what you mean, that *is* nice; it - it feels like you. That might explain why Neville looked embarrassed last week,” Harry said.

“He didn’t mention it?”

“Daphne, we’re guys, we don’t talk about feelings,” Harry explained.

“Oh, right, I forgot,” she said, rolling her eyes. “So, why am I in this geeky costume, Harry?”

“I’m going to teach you how to fly,” he said.

“I already know how to fly,” she objected. “I’m just not very good at it.”

“I’m going to teach you how to fly without a broom,” Harry said.

“No way!”

Harry concentrated and slowly began to rise until he was three feet off the ground. Daphne then began to rise until she too was three feet off the ground.

“Wow, that’s different. The flying is cool, but feeling your magic flow through me is really *personal*,” Daphne gasped. “You need to put me down, right now Harry,” she said, a tone of panic in her voice.

Harry brought her to the ground gently.

“Now come give me a hug,” she demanded. She was panting.

He did so, and she sighed in relief. “This is what it feels like, only more so, and *inside*,” she said.

“Yeah, I’m feeling it too,” Harry said. “I think we’re getting feedback.”

“This didn’t happen with Neville?”

“No, not like this,” he said. “Maybe it’s a male/female thing.”

“Good, I’m not going to have to smack him for putting the moves on my boyfriend,” she said.

“There you go using that word again,” Harry said.

“There’s another word I’d rather be using, I’ll have you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Harry went back to his equipment bag, pulling a notebook out. Riffing through the pages he came to a page filled with diagrams.

“Okay, I think I can make a change here,” he said, pointing to a diagram.

He walked to Daphne and traced a series of runes on her leotard, slightly above her navel.

“Careful, that tickles,” she warned.

“Miss Greengrass is ticklish?” he asked. “Tell me more.”

“None of your business,” she answered.

“Okay, again,” he said, levitating three feet above the lawn and then levitating Daphne to the same level.

“Better?”

“Yeah, it’s less *stirring* . It’s still very personal; I like feeling your magic.”

“Okay, that’s stage one,” Harry said.

#@#

“We good?”

“I’m on the broom, aren’t I?” Daphne replied.

“No feedback?”

“I can feel your magic, but I’m not getting all tingly,” she said.

“Okay, follow me,” Harry said, launching into a lazy spiral that took them both to an altitude of one hundred feet.

“Why do we have to be so high?” Daphne shouted.

“It’s actually safer,” Harry answered, moving closer so he could be heard.

“Yeah, right,” Daphne muttered.

“Daphne, look at me, look into my eyes,” Harry said.

She did.

“Am I going to let you fall?”

Daphne shook her head.

“Am I going to let you get hurt?”

Daphne shook her head again.

“What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid that I’m going to let go of this blasted broom and fall to my death,” Daphne said earnestly.

“Good, I can work with that,” Harry said.

Harry flipped on the horizontal axis of the broom so he was now flying upside down, his back to the earth.

“Do what I’m doing,” he instructed.

“You are insane, you know that right?” Daphne shouted.

He pointed at Daphne’s head with his wand and released a bit of magic. “I’ve heard it said a time or two,” Harry replied, but this time Daphne heard it directly in her ear.

“It’s a linked charm so you don’t have to shout,” he explained.

Daphne slowly rolled to the right until she too was upside down.

“If I don’t think about what I’m doing, this is kind of pretty,” she said.

“Do you trust me?” Harry asked.

Daphne said nothing, but he could see that her lips were moving.

“Do you trust me?” he repeated.

“I am choosing to trust you,” she replied.

“Let go of the broom.”

“ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?” Daphne screamed.

“Yes,” Harry replied.

“YOU’RE NOT HELPING, HARRY,” she shouted.

“I won’t let you get hurt. Trust me,” he whispered.

Daphne closed her eyes and then unwrapped her fingers from the broomstick; then she moved her legs away from the shaft of the broom.

Nothing happened.

Then she felt herself falling backwards as Harry’s magic flowed through her. Opening her eyes she saw that she was no longer upside-down; the ground was now below her. She felt fingers wrap around her wrist. She clamped on to Harry’s hand.

“We’re about eighty feet up, constant altitude. What’s that mean, Daphne?”

“Constant altitude?”

“Constant altitude.”

“It means I’m not falling,” Daphne squeaked.

“Say it positively,” Harry said.

“It means I’m flying.”

“If there’s no broom, there’s no broom to fall off of,” Harry explained.

“Okay, but what happens when you stop flying me?”

“I’m not flying you now,” Harry answered.

“WHAT?”

“Feel your magic, do you feel mine flowing through you right now?”

“Now that you mention it, no.”

“I’m going to let go right now and you’re going to follow me,” Harry said.

“NO!”

“Okay, Plan B I guess,” he said.

“What’s that?”

Harry twisted and flipped about so he was behind her.

“If you wanted to snuggle, Harry, I would have been quite willing to do this on the ground,” Daphne said.

“What’s the fun in that?”

Harry flipped about again, and Daphne was behind him, grasping each of his wrists.

“Fly me,” he whispered.

“You’re not a broom,” she objected.

“You’re right, I’m better than a broom. I’ve got a magical core and my own power supply.”

“You know, Harry, I’m over-thinking this; I’m just going to go with the flow,” Daphne said.

“Good girl,” he said approvingly.

Flying in tandem they did a lazy roll and then a loop.

“Once you get past the pants-wetting terror, this is fun,” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, that’s why I brought you here.”

They flew in tandem for a while, banking and curving.

“I’m going to let go now,” Daphne announced.

Harry felt her hands release and then felt air rushing over his back. He peeled aside and found her gently ascending.

“Was this a test?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you love to fly. I think that trust is important to you, so yeah, it’s a test.”

“Did you pass?”

“I think I’m supposed to ask you that,” Daphne said.

“Then you know the answer already. For what it’s worth, I’m proud of you.”

They played a game of follow-the-leader, dipping to tree-top height for a while and then returning to what Harry called “a decent height.”

“Harry?”

“Yes?”

“I’m loving this, but I’m getting cold,” Daphne said. “How do you stay warm when you fly?”

“Well, a jacket and hat help, but some witches are known to use warming charms,” Harry replied.

“I already told you that I’m pants at that, Harry,” Daphne said.

“Okay, if I must,” Harry said.

Daphne relaxed as the warmth spread through her.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Do you want to try landing or would you rather that I bring us in?”

“I’ll let the expert do it,” Daphne replied.

“Good choice. Neville flew like a champ, but his landings sucked the first time out.

Harry flew until he could link up and hold one of Daphne’s hands. She then felt his magic flow through her core as she began to bank into a shallow spiral, bleeding off speed and altitude.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his magic. The spiral turned into a slow spin and she knew without opening her eyes that she was now upright, slowly touching down inside the paddock next to the barn. Her feet touched the earth again and the thrum of his magic vanished.

“This is your captain speaking. We hope you enjoyed your flight with Air Potter and when your future plans call for air travel, we hope you choose to fly with us. The local time in Alford is now four thirty in the afternoon and the temperature is a cool 18.3 degrees Celsius.”

“That was sooooo cool,” Daphne exclaimed.

“Still think that flying is a dumb idea?” Harry asked.

“I’m still not wild about brooms, Harry, but I really liked flying Air Potter,” she replied.

She tugged at his hand and pulled him to her, wrapping him in an embrace.

“Uh, sorry to interrupt, Daphne, but is Deimos supposed to be out in the paddock?” Harry asked.

“Damn,” she said. “Little monster is an escape artist, he lets himself out of his stall on a regular basis. Hector went home at four o’clock, so Deimos has probably been out wandering all the while we were flying. I’ll get a halter and bring him in; you make sure that his stall door is open, okay?”

#@#

Harry walked into the horse barn, noting that his equipment bag was where he’d left it previously, but now only one broom, the Firebolt, was sticking out of the bag. He assumed that Astoria was back on the broom and headed further into the barn to find Deimos’ stall, which was indeed open.

He pulled the door to its widest open position and looked about the stable, noting the other stalls, some with horses, some empty. The door he’d walked through faced east, and another door at the end of the barn was also open, facing west. The walls were cluttered with leather equipment he assumed was bits and bridles and other pieces of equine equipment whose names he didn’t know.

He heard Deimos nickering and felt a flicker of Daphne’s magic. He assumed that she was cleaning the horse’s coat, given the feel of the magic. He then heard her come in through the west door. She’d evidently put the halter on him and was now leading him to his stall.

“Mischief managed?” Harry asked.

“I have the escaped prisoner,” she replied, patting Deimos on his flank.

Daphne led him into the stall and began to remove the halter

Harry saw something from the corner of his eye and turned.

Deimos flattened his ears and began to snort and stomp.

At that moment, a shrieking, twisting mass flew through the eastern door; it was Astoria, flying at extremely high speed on the Firebolt-X.

Deimos began to rear, striking at the walls of the stall with his hooves, scattering shards of wood

as he did so. Daphne pulled on the halter, which was halfway off already, and ended up holding a halter without any horse attached. Deimos went into full panic mode, rearing and striking randomly with his hooves.

Harry yanked at Daphne, pulling her from the stall while pushing on the swinging door with one hand. One of Deimos' hooves struck the side of his face and then the next hoof hit beside his neck, smashing him to the ground as the gate swung backwards. Daphne screamed as she threw herself on Harry's prone body just as Deimos shot out of the stall.

Astoria, meanwhile, had almost cleared the barn, until she glanced off a support beam and then bounced against a wall covered with leather straps. She ended up hanging from the wall, snarled in leather as the Firebolt-X flew out the barn and came to a gentle stop in the western yard. Astoria moaned gently as she hung upside down.

#@#

It was dark, much darker than the interior of the horse barn, but not completely black. It was quiet, abnormally so. His head hurt, his shoulder hurt, and he was underneath something warm and heavy. He couldn't see worth anything, which meant he must have lost his glasses.

It came back in a rush – Deimos, the stall, Astoria careening out of control.

“Daphne?” he called.

“Right here, Harry,” she replied. The warm mass on top of him moved.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Deimos got spooked, I don't know why,” Daphne said as she began to carefully look Harry over, touching his face tentatively.

“Astoria was flying through the barn,” he said.

“Idiot, we could have been killed,” Daphne said sharply. “Okay, your face is a mess. You've probably got a broken nose and your glasses are smashed. You've got some lacerations on your face. I suspect that you have some sort of concussion and your collarbone is broken. Wiggle your fingers for me,” she commanded.

“Now wiggle the others. Okay, toes? Okay, probably no damage to the spine, which is good. You'll live to fly again,” she said. “I'd kiss you, but your face is kind of messed up and bloody right now.”

“I'll take a rain check. Where the heck are we?”

“Ahh, officially, I'm not supposed to tell you, but that's been overtaken by events,” Daphne temporized.

“Is this yet another grimoire secret?”

“No, this is something that never made it into the grimoire, so I’m physically able to talk about it.”

“I’m listening,” Harry said.

“About ten years ago Father was trying to manipulate the magical properties of shadows. He goofed and found himself transported into someplace else – a place near our reality, but not quite touching it. He describes it as being perpendicular to reality, which is nonsense as to maths, so I called it shadow land, because we can see reality when we’re in the shadows, but we can’t be seen in the shadows,” Daphne explained.

“So it’s invisibility?”

“No, when you’re invisible you’re not seen, but you’re still there. If you’re in the shadows, you’re not in our reality any more. You can’t be seen, because you’re really not there.”

“So, how did we get here?”

“When Deimos was freaking out I landed on top of you and pulled you into the shadows. You would have been trampled otherwise. Thanks for pulling me out of the stall, by the way,” Daphne said calmly.

“Thanks for not letting me get trampled.”

“I’ve got a big investment in you, Harry,” Daphne said.

She sat still for a moment, competing emotions showing on her face.

“There’s something I need to do, and then I’ll come get you some help. Moving you is not a really good idea, because that collar bone is going to hurt like crazy,” Daphne explained.

“I don’t really feel like moving anyway,” Harry said.

“I’ll be back,” she said. She closed her eyes and faded out of sight.

#@#

Daphne reappeared in the barn, standing in the now empty stall where Deimos had gone berserk seconds ago. She looked around the barn until she spotted Astoria, still hanging from one of the walls, tangled in tack. She went to Hector’s work area and brought back a leather knife, a short, curved blade used to cut straps for leatherwork.

“Queenie!” Astoria exclaimed. “I’m so glad to see you, cut me down from here, will you?”

Daphne stood stock still, the only thing that moved was the knife, which she twisted in her hand.

“I wanted to believe you, Astoria. I wanted to believe that you were quitting the game, and more importantly I wanted to believe your pledge to not hurt Harry,” Daphne said bitterly.

“What are you talking about?” Astoria cried.

“Your little stunt – you almost killed Harry,” Daphne said.

“Queenie, what are you talking about?”

“We were putting Deimos away and you spooked him,” Daphne explained. “You were quite clever; you made it look like an accident, very Slytherin.”

“It was an accident!” Astoria wailed.

“I don’t want to kill you, Astoria, but now I have to, promises have to be kept; it’s going to break my heart,” Daphne said softly.

Astoria screamed in fear.

“Help me,” Daphne murmured as she stepped forward, knife in hand.

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FanficAuthors.net

By right of conquest

Chapter the Sixth

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"I don't want to kill you, Astoria, but now I have to. Promises have to be kept; it's going to break my heart," Daphne said softly.

Astoria screamed in fear.

"Help me," Daphne murmured as she stepped forward, knife in hand.

She stepped back and then forward again.

"I'm really sorry, Astoria, but I have to do this."

Astoria wailed.

"Dear God in Heaven, help me," Daphne murmured. Her hand raised the knife.

"QUEENIE!" Astoria shrieked.

"Harry, I need you, help me," Daphne whispered.

#@#

Harry felt the wave of what he now recognized as Daphne's magic as she disappeared. He paid close attention to the shape and flavor of the magic, it resembled Apparation, but it was somehow different.

He then felt a different wave of magic, one that didn't feel like Daphne at all.

"Oh, shite," he croaked.

The shadows had no substance, for lack of a better word. Willing himself vertical while trying to not move his shoulder he peered into the shadows. There was a smoky something corresponding to the horse barn, but it wasn't really there. Deeper in the shadows were two luminous things. Concentrating hard he saw what must be Daphne; the other luminous blob most likely was Astoria.

He concentrated on replicating the feeling of the magic Daphne had used to leave the shadows. He felt a strain against his magic. He tried harder, the resistance increased.

Then he heard it, a soft, familiar voice murmuring.

"Harry, I need you, help me."

"Bugger it all," he said, punching power into the magic. The resistance increased, wavered and then was gone.

He was back in the barn. Sight, sound, smell and hearing rushed on him, making him stagger. The loudest sounds were coming from Astoria, who was alternating between blubbering and shrieking. Harry slid into the remains of the gate to Deimos' stall, snagging it with his good hand to stay upright.

Daphne was approaching Astoria, her hand raised, clutching a knife with a short, curved blade.

"I have to do it, Astoria, there's no other way," she said, sniffing with tears.

"Daphne," Harry said.

If she heard him, there was no response.

"Queenie," he said, slightly louder.

Astoria stopped blubbering. "Harry, please make her stop," she begged.

"I'm not in much shape to make her do anything right now, Astoria," he said.

Daphne turned slightly. "Harry?"

“Put down the knife please, Daphne,” he said calmly.

“She tried to kill you, Harry,” Daphne said in a matter of fact tone.

Astoria began wailing again. Loudly. The sound reverberated through his skull, causing his already hurting head to explode.

“Astoria, stop it!” Harry barked.

Astoria whimpered into silence again.

“Look at me Astoria,” Harry commanded.

Astoria twisted until she could see him clearly, albeit upside down, as she was hanging that way from the wall.

“Did you know that Deimos was out of his stall?”

“NO!” she screeched.

“Did you try to hurt me?”

“NO, IT WAS AN ACCIDENT, YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE ME!” Astoria shouted, and then began blubbing again.

“She’s telling the truth, Daphne,” Harry said urgently.

“How do you know, Harry? She’s quite a good liar,” Daphne said, her voice curiously distant and flat.

“I got a lot of things from Riddle. I may not be much of an Occlumens, but my Legilimency is just fine.

“She’s telling the truth; she’s thirteen, she made a mistake,” Harry said, wishing he were able to do something other than hang on to the gate to remain upright.

“Don’t you see, Harry, she’s just going to keep at it until you’re dead. I can’t marry you if you’re dead, Harry, I have to keep my promise,” Daphne said flatly.

Realization came to Harry. He hoped it wasn’t too late. A different line of attack was needed.

“Spirit, let me speak to Daphne now,” Harry said.

The expression on Daphne’s face changed slightly.

“Harry, help me,” Daphne said, urgency in her voice.

“Daphne, put down the knife,” Harry repeated.

“I want to, Harry, but I can’t,” Daphne whimpered.

“My queen, the mother of my children will not be known for murdering her sister,” Harry said, hoping he was doing this right.

“What?”

“You heard me. Spirit, put the knife down. If she kills the girl, the deal’s off.”

Harry concentrated, pushing his magic through Daphne. He could see a smile come across her face. He warmed the handle of the knife until it became searingly hot. Daphne threw the knife down.

Daphne’s eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed like a lifeless doll.

Astoria began to hiccup and cry softly.

“Kreacher,” Harry called.

Kreacher appeared, looked about the barn and then said “Master Harry is hurt.”

“Kreacher, please go to the big house next to this barn. Tell whoever you find that we need medical assistance in the barn,” Harry directed.

“Kreacher can help,” he said, concern flowing into his gravelly voice.

“Please go to the mistress of the house, her name is Grace, that’s the best way you can help me right now,” Harry said.

Kreacher disappeared.

“What is it with me and possessed girlfriends anyway?” Harry said to no one in particular.

#@#

Harry woke in the familiar surroundings of the Greengrass guest room, complete with the Technicolor silhouette of Astoria on the wall across from the doorway. Large, rough hands gently put his spare pair of glasses on his face.

“How is the pain?” Malcolm asked.

“It’s not bad. If stubbing my toe is one and being bitten by a Basilisk is ten, it’s about a two right now,” Harry said.

“What was the pain like when you were in the barn?”

“Oh, about a nine,” Harry said glibly. “I’ve never been kicked by a horse before; I can now cross

that off my list.”

“Astoria’s sedated while the healer sets her broken legs; Daphne’s not talking, you mind telling me what happened today?” Malcolm asked.

“Where do you want me to begin?”

“The beginning would be fine,” Malcolm said.

“Well, you see, there was this terribly sad child named Tom Riddle who discovered that he was a wizard,” Harry began.

“Perhaps not that far back,” Malcolm said with a smile.

“Oh,” said Harry with a smile. “What have you done to me, by the way?”

“I immobilized your shoulder, healed the superficial lacerations on your face and chest, and placed a pain block on your spine. After setting your collar bone more or less in place, I dosed you with Skele-Gro,” Malcolm reported.

“Impressive,” Harry said.

“I was a medic in the war,” Malcolm replied.

“Which one?”

“*The* war, the one that started in 1914,” Malcolm said with a grin. “Whippersnapper.”

“After breakfast I went riding with Daphne. We had a picnic. I’d brought a pair of brooms and told Astoria that she could use either of them while we were out riding.

“After we got back from riding, I taught Daphne how to fly – without a broom. It’s something that Riddle perfected and one of the things that I’ve been learning as I go through his papers. When we got back to the barn, we found out that Deimos had slipped his stall, so Daphne went to go return him to the barn and I held the stall door open.

“What we didn’t know is that Astoria was back on the Firebolt-X – it’s an experimental model. She was trying to correct a corkscrew pattern and flew into the barn. Deimos spooked and I got punched by the horse a couple of times. Daphne pulled me into the shadows to keep me from getting trampled.”

“So you know about that,” Malcolm said.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “I now know; on the whole, I could have done without the honor.”

“Getting back to the story; Daphne checked me out and then said she was going to do something and then get help for me. I felt her magic as she left the shadows, and then I felt some magic that

wasn't her. I figured it was the magic, the guardian spirit that was binding her betrothal promise," Harry said.

"How were you feeling her magic?" Malcolm asked.

"We had on matching vests – it was something I used to teach her how to fly without a broom. When we're both wearing them I can feel her magic and vice versa. I can also push my magic through her," Harry explained.

"Fascinating," Malcolm said. "Please continue."

"Astoria crashed in the barn and was hanging upside-down on a wall, tangled in all those bridle things, I don't know the collective word for it."

"Tack," Malcolm explained.

"Daphne must have thought that Astoria did this on purpose, and the guardian kicked in and tried to influence Daphne to slit Astoria's throat," Harry said.

"I heard Daphne calling to me in the shadows, so I blundered out and tried to sort things," Harry said.

"You made it out of the shadows unassisted?" Malcolm asked.

"I was motivated," Harry said dryly.

"Indeed," Malcolm said. "Pray, continue."

"By that time, Daphne was struggling with the guardian spirit. They were in a stalemate, the spirit urging Daphne to kill Astoria, and Daphne resisting as hard as she could."

"So, how did you break the impasse?"

"Well, I was and am physically messed up – if I'd tried to wrestle a kitten, I'd have put odds on the kitten. I pushed my magic through Daphne, heating the handle of the knife until it was so hot she had to drop it."

"That explains the burn, which Daphne refused to have treated," Malcolm said.

"Daphne collapsed and I called for help. I'm not sure how much I was aware of after that," Harry said.

"You've done well today, Harry. You continue to amaze me as to your character and your resourcefulness," Malcolm said.

"I don't think your suspended sentence against Astoria helped things," Harry said accusingly.

“What do you want me to say, Harry, that I screwed up, again?” Malcolm asked, staring at him intently.

“Yes, I screwed up. I was counting on Daphne’s character,” Malcolm said. “Something had to be done to break Astoria’s drive to best her sister.”

“Daphne’s character is the only reason Astoria’s still alive,” Harry said firmly. “She was resisting the guardian spirit, big time. Once Riddle died, the spirit’s presence with Daphne probably doubled; I think it’s a minor elemental.”

“Doubled?” Malcolm asked.

“Of course, the magic won’t be free to return to the rocking stone until the promise is fulfilled or broken. How could I have missed that? I once again regret my past decisions and find myself in your debt, Harry,” Malcolm said sadly. “Astoria probably owes you a life debt too.”

“Oh puh-lease!” Harry exclaimed. “Tell her to be a good girl and I’ll consider it square.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way, Harry.”

“I’m not marrying them both!” Harry exclaimed. “No way!”

Malcolm chuckled.

“So, which one do you want?” Malcolm asked, grinning widely. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“Thank you, but there’s really no contest. I find myself quite taken with Daphne.”

“But you are still undecided?”

“It’s becoming clearer, but no, I’ve not decided.”

“I will not ask you to decide before the Solstice.”

“I will make a decision soon, sir, I owe that to Daphne.”

“Very well, I remain in your debt, a condition that does not please me,” Malcolm said gravely.

“Are you ready to see her?”

“If I say no, will she go away?”

“Probably not,” Malcolm said. “She’s quite stubborn.”

“Can you sit me up?” Harry asked. “I don’t really like to talk to people when I’m flat on my back.”

“I think I can arrange something,” Malcolm said.

#@#

Queenie's diary – June 1998 – enciphered entry

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.

I always thought that line was crap, but now I get to summarize today.

Somehow it fits.

Here's what happened today:

I discovered that I am in love with Harry Potter. It's not the magic, it's really real.

I learned how to fly without a broom, and more importantly, without wetting my pants.

And I almost killed my sister – in cold blood.

I haven't told him that I'm in love with him. I don't think I will. He's got enough on his plate already.

For mistakes, Harry is very forgiving. I heard him talking to the midget. He apologized for not warning her more about the instability of the Firebolt-X. Harry reckons it won't ever go into production because only the best fliers can control it and those who are less than the best can get killed when they try to fly beyond their skill level. It's only blind, dumb luck that the midget didn't kill herself today. She's a pretty hot flier, but she's only thirteen.

He also forgave her for the injuries he sustained with Deimos.

Harry's first words to me afterwards were "which one of you am I talking to?"

That hurt, but he has a point.

He then told me that there's a grand tradition that his girlfriends have up close and personal experience with being possessed. He told me a condensed version of Ginny's possession, and confirmed that knowing all about that, he was still thinking of marrying her. Implicit in that story is that he doesn't consider my own possession to be marriage disqualifying – unless he's wised up and raised his standards.

Father has reapplied the charm and promises to renew it daily if he has to. I'm no longer attacked by unbidden randy thoughts when I'm near him.

I still think he's hot though.

Harry's going home tonight after dinner. He says he has to do some other work, including his postponed chat with Neville about possible treatment for Neville's parents.

I suppose it's good for us to be apart for a while, but couldn't I just let one of my limbs go on vacation instead?

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times, and now I have to go to dinner.

End of enciphered entry – checksum 2067

#@#

Daphne knocked on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Midget, it's me,” Daphne said.

“What do you have in your hands?”

“Ha ha, very funny. Nothing in my hands, nothing in my pockets. May I come in?”

“Knock yourself out. Please excuse me if I don't open the door for you.”

Daphne opened the door and walked into Astoria's bedroom.

Astoria was in bed, propped up with pillows, with both legs in temporary casts. In her case the Skele-Gro had to work overnight before she could return to normal activities. There was a stack of magazines and books next to Astoria on the bed.

“Do you need anything?” Daphne asked.

“A big do-over on my second flight on the Firebolt-X? Obliviation for the fifteen minutes that happened after that?” Astoria offered.

“I was thinking more about turning on the radio or putting some CDs on to play,” Daphne said.

“I don't know – it's either Rachmaninoff or the Rolling Stones, I can't decide,” Astoria said airily.

“I'll put on Rachmaninoff, I can't talk over the Stones,” Daphne said.

“Yeah, and you hate the Stones anyway,” Astoria said.

“I never said that, I just said that I greatly prefer the Beatles,” Daphne said.

“Old fogy,” Astoria said.

“Yeah, well Keith Richards looks amazingly like Kreacher,” Daphne said.

“That's a low blow, even for you, Queenie,” Astoria said, smiling broadly.

“We good?”

“Yeah, we’re good. It took me a while, but I finally figured out that there were two of you, and *you* were fighting hard to keep me alive,” Astoria said.

“I do love you,” Daphne said.

“Isn’t that what I just said?” Astoria asked.

“I guess so,” Daphne said, closing the lid on the CD player.

“Have you told him yet?” Astoria asked.

“What?”

“That you’re madly in love with him?”

“No, and how did you know that anyway?” Daphne asked.

“I’m a girl, I have eyes. Probably the only person at the table tonight who didn’t get it was Harry,” Astoria said, and then sighed.

“Father says you probably have a life debt to him,” Daphne said.

“Yeah, great; I owe a life debt to my sister’s future husband who isn’t exactly that fond of me anyway,” Astoria complained.

“Oh, I don’t know about that, he said he really liked the new artwork in the guest room and Father said that when he brought up the notion of your life debt with Harry, Harry’s first response was to vehemently declare that he wasn’t marrying *both* of us.”

“I wasn’t aware that was a possibility,” Astoria said, furrowing her brow. “Nah wouldn’t work. I’m not willing to share.”

“Good thing, I wouldn’t want to have to keep picking up your towels in the bathroom,” Daphne said.

Astoria stuck her tongue out at her.

“Are you going to tell him?” Astoria asked.

“Harry? No, he’s got to figure out what he wants,” Daphne said.

“Queenie?”

“Yeah, midget?”

“I’m really glad you’re my sister.”

“Me too. G’nite.”

“G’nite ‘my queen.’”

“You heard that too?”

#@#

Longbottom Hall was a mess. The habitable portions of the old house were now gutted as part of the renovation process. Augusta and Neville were living in a Muggle hotel nearby for the two weeks that the living space would be unlivable. Augusta thought the hotel was a big treat, but Neville treated it as an inconvenience. During this time Harry’s regular meeting with Neville was conducted in a coffee shop about a block from the hotel. They commandeered a booth and after being served, invoked aversion charms, guaranteeing that they wouldn’t be interrupted. Their practice was to leave a big tip, so the staff, if they noticed, didn’t seem to mind.

“So, it’s like this, Neville. I don’t think it was the regular version of Cruciatus that was used on your parents. There was an alternate version used by some of the heavy hitters, and my suspicion was that the other version was the curse that was used instead,” Harry said.

“Okay, so what?” Neville asked.

“I think that explains why your parents haven’t responded to treatment,” Harry replied.

Neville seemed to be lost in thought.

“I took the matter to Healer Hodge and explained the difference between the two curses. He called in Mrs. Stevens, an Arithmancer who used to be on the faculty of the Irish Institute of Magic, and she calculated a way to undo the effects of the alternate curse.”

“Okay, what am I supposed to do with that information?” Neville asked.

“If you’re game, they’re willing to try a new therapy on your mum and dad,” Harry said.

“If I’m game, what are you, nuts? Of course I want to try!” Neville exclaimed. “But I’ve got a question for you, Harry.”

“Go ahead,” Harry said.

“I know Healer Hodge, and by reputation, I know Mrs. Stevens – these people are booked months or years in advance, you just don’t call them up and ask them off the wall questions,” Neville said.

“And your point is?”

“What’s going on?”

“Well, it’s like this, Neville, these people *are* booked months and sometimes years in advance, but

there's this git named Harry Potter who's famous for something, I'm not sure what, because he surely didn't cut the head off a ginormous snake with a hat in one hand and a goblin sword in the other, but I digress. It seems when this git calls, people fall over themselves to fit an appointment in," Harry said, a boyish grin on his face.

"And what does this git pay the Healer and the Arithmancer?" Neville asked.

"Oh, they try to do it for free, but this git insists on paying double their usual rate, and because he's such a git, he gets his way most of the time," Harry said.

"Hmm," Neville said.

"So, what do you say?" Harry asked.

"I say we tell Healer Hodge to go ahead, and it's a really good thing my friend is such a git," Neville said.

"Cool," Harry said. "Now I've got a question for you."

"Shoot," Neville said.

"How do you buy property?"

"Like houses and such?" Neville asked.

"Yeah."

"Muggle or Magical?"

"Muggle," Harry said.

"Most residential property is sold through agents – 'estate somethings' I forget the exact term. Gringotts has a bureau that does that sort of thing so that John Q. Wizard doesn't stuff things up when he tries to go Muggle. It's a really good place that hires Muggleborns, 'cause they aren't nearly as hard to train as the rest of us," Neville explained.

"Okay, thanks," Harry said.

"You looking to buy something?"

"I expect that I'll sell Grimmauld Place, or rent it when I'm done, and I've got to live somewhere," Harry said.

"Cool – you ready to help me mulch the North Greenhouse?"

"Did you get the dragon dung?"

“Sure did,” Neville said.

“Well then, I’m your man.”

“You know, for being such a git, you’re pretty handy to have around.”

#@#

Brigit was back from holiday, which meant that she was back in the office, reconciling the ledger. Daphne walked by the office as Brigit called out.

“Hey, Queenie!”

“Yeah, Brigit?”

“I’ve got a note here, somewhere,” she said, shuffling the paper on her desk.

“Okay, here it is,” she said. “Some guy, Henry, or maybe Harry called. I wrote his number down. He says he wants to meet you for lunch tomorrow.”

“Did he say where?”

“Ah, it’s some pizza joint in Aberdeen, it’s on the note,” she said, handing it to Daphne.

Daphne stood transfixed with an enormous smile.

“Hey, c’mon, it’s just lunch,” Brigit said. “Wait a minute; was this that hot guy you were out with a couple of weeks ago in Alford?”

“Yup.”

“Well, behave,” Brigit said.

“Thanks, Brigit,” Daphne said.

#@#

Daphne showed up at the "pizza joint" Brigit had mentioned, to discover it was a small cafe with a red exterior. She walked in to see Harry sat at a little table near a deli counter. Behind the counter an old woman was berating someone out back in rapid Italian.

Daphne pecked him on the lips as he stood to welcome her, and sat down, looking for a menu. It was stood upright between large salt and pepper shakers.

"While I know nothing about Italian food, this place came highly recommended," Harry said.

"Welcome," the Italian lady said as she appeared next to their table. "I get you drinks?"

"We'll share a bottle of red," Harry said, "Whatever you recommended."

"What you going to eat?"

Harry blinked a few times, before a grin appeared. Daphne knew that he had no idea how cute that grin was. "Whatever you recommend?"

The woman laughed. "An Englishman with sense, whatever next?" she asked, as she plucked the menu out of Daphne's hands. "You good girl, not on silly diets?"

"I have no food issues," Daphne agreed.

"Smart girl, smart boy, good couple," the woman approved. "Antonio," she yelled, before continuing in Italian. "Starter coming soon, real Italian, best in town," she finished, turning her attention back to them.

"That's what I heard," Harry agreed. "I'm looking forward to it. How's the midget?"

"Her legs work," Daphne said. "She's been running and working the obstacle course, but I don't think she's been on a broom yet."

"Hmm," Harry said. "Do you think I need to come over and fly with her?"

"As long as she's not on that killer broom, you either for that matter," Daphne said. "You're *not* going to teach her how to fly without a broom," she said adamantly.

Harry looked at her quizzically.

"Because?"

"Because it wouldn't be proper," Daphne said, flustered.

"I don't understand."

"Harry, when your magic was flowing through me, especially with the feedback, it was *flowing through me*, from my bum to my head. I explained it to Mum and she said it sounded like – what married people do—without, you know," Daphne said, waving her hands.

"So that would be bad," Harry said.

"With my thirteen year old precociously hot sister, yes, Harry, that would be bad."

"Oh, okay" Harry said, a tone of reluctance in his voice. "No flying without brooms."

He picked at his salad. "You liked it though."

“Yes, Harry, you are my betrothed, *I liked it a lot, and I'd like to do it again*, but that's not the point.”

“Okay.”

Harry finished the salad.

“Neville's parents are going through a new procedure next week.”

“Really? That's great,” Daphne said. “Are your hopes up?”

“It'll work, or it won't,” Harry said sagely. “If it doesn't work, that will suck, but I figure we've got to try.”

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Why didn't you call me on the mirror this week?”

“I didn't tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“It was in my pocket when Deimos was using me as a punching bag. I haven't had time to rebuild it. If I don't get it exactly right, I'll have to make new ones all around. Your mirror should still work with Hermione though.”

“She's not the one I want to talk to,” Daphne said.

Harry smiled.

Lunch was excellent. They left the restaurant pleasingly stuffed. Harry began to walk with purpose. Having longer legs, it wasn't a chore to keep up with him, but Daphne was puzzled.

“Are we going somewhere in particular?” Daphne asked.

“Yeah, I've got something I want your opinion on,” Harry said.

The ended up in a residential neighborhood. Harry took a side street that looped back to the street they'd been walking.

“I wanted your opinion on this house,” Harry said.

“Okay,” Daphne said, “it's a house.”

It was a white two story house with gray-green shutters with a small fenced garden in the front, suitable for flowers, and a larger garden in the back, including a decorative fountain.

“What’s it for, Harry?”

“It’s for when you’re at the University. It’s about a twenty minute walk to campus.”

Daphne’s heart went cold.

“So you’ve decided?”

“Yeah, I have,” Harry said, nodding.

“Just like that? Pat me on the arse, give me the keys to a house and say ‘have a nice life without magic, Daphne.’”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said.

“You’ve decided.”

“Yeah, I have, we’ve already said that.”

Daphne began to wave her hands.

“This is the booby prize? Thanks for playing, now get out of here?”

Harry was blinking his eyes. “I thought it would make you happy,” he said.

Daphne pinched the bridge of her nose, remembering Hermione’s advice.

“Okay, Harry, *why* do you think this house would make me happy?”

“I thought it would be a place -- where you’d wish that time would slow down, because you were happy in the moment...” Harry began, his voice dwindling to nothing.

“...because we’d be together,” Daphne said, finishing his sentence.

“Harry Potter, are you proposing to me?”

“No,” Harry said, looking puzzled.

“Okay, now I’m *really* confused,” Daphne said.

“I just don’t get the whole proposing thing. It seems like a scam to sell overpriced rings, I mean, a girl wouldn’t say yes just because some bloke bought a big sparkler, would she?” Harry said. “If *you* wanted a ring, I’d take you shopping and we’d buy the one you wanted. What do I know about rings?”

Daphne pinched the bridge of her nose again.

“Okay, Harry Potter, let’s back up.”

“Okay.”

“What was your decision?”

“I’m saying yes,” Harry said, a smile returning to his face.

“You’re saying yes?”

“Well, you’re the one who said that you wanted me to accept the betrothal, and all I had to do was say ‘yes.’” Harry said as if that were self-evident.

“You really were raised by wolves,” Daphne said. “Strike that, you were raised by bower birds.”

“Did I break one of the rules again? Is this like bodice ripping?” Harry asked.

Daphne covered her face with her hand and began to guffaw. She pulled him to her and wrapped her arms around him.

“You wonderful, infuriating, totally un-socialized man,” Daphne said.

She pushed herself away far enough to give him a kiss.

“Thank you for saying ‘yes.’” Daphne said, before she started to cry.

“So, did I get it right or not?” Harry asked.

“Shut up and kiss me,” she said.

#@#

“We’re going to have to tell my family,” Daphne said. “Who do you need to notify?”

“Immediately?” Harry asked. “Probably just Neville and Hermione; Ron’s hard to contact at the moment, he’s somewhere in China and I don’t know how to reach him by Floo or phone.”

“Want to make it interesting?” Daphne asked a wicked grin on her face.

“I’m all ears.”

#@#

“Are we going through with this?” Daphne asked.

“Are we talking marriage or the pending prank?”

“I think they’re kind of related, Harry. What I’m saying is, are you sure?”

“I wasn’t sure when I walked into the Chamber of Secrets; I wasn’t sure when I faced the dragon

in the tournament; I wasn't sure when I walked into the Forbidden Forest to meet Riddle. Are you catching a theme here?"

"Your judgment stinks?" Daphne said with a smile.

Harry smiled. "I prefer to think of it as making a decision and then sticking to it."

"Why?"

"You're asking me *now*?"

"Yes, humor me."

"I dunno, I think it must have been how you looked in your nightgown."

"Harry, I looked like Medusa with static cling!"

"Yeah, but static cling looks good on you when you're going into battle."

"Pig," she said affectionately.

"Your pig," he replied.

"Thanks, you haven't answered the question, but it's show time, you have to take your place before the guests arrive."

#@#

Through a series of Floo calls and phone calls, the immediate circle of friends and family were assembled for a pizza dinner at Andromeda Tonks' house. Harry arrived after all of the guests, bringing a chilled case of butterbeer and a smaller pack of Black Isle's Red Kite ale.

The more astute guests noticed that Daphne's eyes were red and puffy, and that when Harry arrived, he choose the seat furthest from Daphne.

Andromeda, being a good hostess, tried to keep conversation going, but it was strained.

Daphne stood, sniffed and pointed at Harry, who also stood.

"Well, we said that we had an announcement to make. Your turn," Daphne said, pointing to Harry.

"As all of you know, Daphne bravely contracted to marry Tom Riddle as a means of protecting her family. The real prize for Riddle was coming into the Greengrass bloodline so as to gain access to the Greengrass grimoire," Harry said.

"And then Harry defeated Riddle and when he claimed Riddle's wand as his own, he ended up inheriting Riddle's estate by right of conquest," Daphne explained.

“So, late last month Gringotts called us in separately and let us each know that Daphne’s betrothal was deemed an asset of the Riddle estate, and I had to decide whether or not to accept that betrothal,” Harry said.

The audience was watching this narrative unfold like a tennis match, the conversational ball moving from Harry to Daphne and back.

“One of the first questions Andromeda asked me was what my plans were if I was to lose my magic. I answered that I’d planned on studying privately and then going to Uni at Aberdeen. So, today Harry and I looked at a house in Aberdeen, close to the Uni,” Daphne said. “Harry wants to buy me a house.”

“When Daphne’s no longer able to Apparate or use the Floo, it will be important to be close to campus,” Harry said.

“Oh, Daphne!” Andromeda exclaimed, sorrow pouring into the expression.

Astoria stood up. “You rat bastard! How can you do this to her?”

Grace stretched out a hand to pull Astoria back to her seat, but Malcolm put a warning hand on Grace’s shoulder.

“Hawa bad?” Teddy asked earnestly. Andromeda whispered something in his ear.

“Astoria, what was the first thing you said to Harry when you saw him at our estate?” Daphne asked.

“Um, I think it was ‘Hi, I’m Astoria, are you going to marry my sister?’” Astoria said with a bit of bewilderment.

“The answer is yes,” Harry and Daphne said in unison.

There was a second of silence after that, followed by an explosion of voices.

“Andromeda, the look on your face was priceless!” Daphne exclaimed.

“What’s this business about losing your magic and needing to be close to the Uni?” Astoria asked.

“I don’t think either one of us actually said anything about Daphne losing her magic,” Harry said.

“But you said when she can’t Apparate or use the Floo...wait, is Daphne preggers?” Astoria interjected.

Daphne chuckled. “I assure you with one hundred percent confidence that I am not pregnant. But in a year or two, I *could* be pregnant, and if I’m a student at Uni then, it would be nice to still be able to get to classes.”

Augusta Longbottom stood and glared at Harry. “Whose idea was this very clever dinner announcement?”

“Uh, it was my idea,” Daphne said “but Harry worked out the fine details.”

“But your eyes,” Grace said, “you’ve obviously been crying.”

“Yes, Mum, I did spend a good amount of time crying this afternoon, but not like you thought. To make sure, before you all arrived, I spent some quality time in the kitchen with an onion and a very dull knife, which is why I look so attractive,” Daphne explained.

Harry had moved around the table by this point and was now standing behind Daphne, arms around her waist.

“Truly a prank worthy of my cousin,” Andromeda exclaimed. “I propose a toast, to Sirius Black, may he enjoy this prank, wherever he may be.”

“To Sirius!” they exclaimed, clinking glasses together.

“Now we’ll tell you what really happened,” Daphne said.

“I called the house and left a message for Daphne that I wanted to have lunch today in Aberdeen. I left the name of the restaurant and a time. We had a marvelous lunch, and then went for a walk and Daphne asked me why I was walking so fast and I replied that I had something I wanted her opinion on,” Harry said.

“And so, we’re standing in front of this really lovely house in a quiet neighborhood in Aberdeen, not far from the Uni, and Harry asks me ‘What do you think of it?’” Daphne said.

“She says ‘it’s a house,’” Harry added.

“And then the light dawns on me and my heart turns into ice and I say to Harry, ‘so you’ve decided?’ and he nods yes, and then I get really, really, really shirty with him about what I think his decision is and then I look at his face and he looks like his owl just died and he says ‘I thought it would make you happy’ which just fueled the fire until I remember that our hero here really wasn’t raised by human beings, so I ask *why* the house is supposed to make me happy,” Daphne said.

“So I said ‘I thought this would be a place where you would wish that time would slow down because you were happy in the moment.’” Harry said.

“Which is something that *I’d* said to Harry when I was telling him how happy I was *being with him*,” Daphne explained. “So I said ‘Harry Potter, are you proposing to me?’ and he said ‘no.’”

Grace began to giggle. It was infectious, and soon the table was bouncing with laughter.

“So Harry then starts telling me how he doesn’t understand the whole ring-and-man-on-bended-

knee cliché of marriage proposals, and that it really didn't apply in his case, because I was asking him to agree to accept my betrothal, so he didn't have to ask me, he just had to say 'yes.'" Daphne explained.

"So she cut to the chase, thanked me for saying yes, and then she told me to kiss her," Harry said.

"So, where's the ring?" Astoria asked in a loud voice.

"Midget, he's buying me a *house*, I don't think I need a ring too," Daphne said. "Besides, it's going to be one of the world's shortest engagements; we have to get married in twelve days."

"Have you decided *any* of the details?" Grace asked.

"No, and when I ask him about most everything, he says 'I don't care.'" Daphne said, in an exaggerated male voice.

"That's not quite right; I said 'no elephants, no horses, and no pink tuxedos.'" Harry interjected.

"Scratch the elephant, Malcolm," Grace said.

"At the risk of sounding crass, why do you need a wedding?" Neville asked.

"I did offer to visit the blacksmith at Gretna Green with him," Daphne said.

"Let me guess, he said 'no, you deserve more than that?'" Neville volunteered.

"Guessed it in one," Daphne said.

"That's Harry," Neville said. "So, what can we do to help?"

"We need to find a place to get married," Daphne said.

Malcolm cleared his throat. "I, uh, I've already done that, after a fashion," he said.

"Um, you want to elaborate, Father?" Daphne said.

"In late May I had one of my associates makes some quiet inquiries with the churches in Alford," Malcolm said.

"All three of them?" Daphne interrupted.

"The Kirk and the Scottish Episcopal church. I gave up the Roman church as a lost cause. Father Snoozen know what we are and -- disapproves," Malcolm said diplomatically.

"The usual dates are already booked," Malcolm continued.

"So what are the unusual dates?" Harry asked.

“You could get married at either church on a Sunday afternoon,” Malcolm answered.

“There’s only two Sundays left before the Solstice; the second Sunday is the twentieth,” Harry said.

Daphne flashed him an appreciative look and a smile.

“I was paying attention to the calendar,” Harry said, giving her a squeeze around the middle.

“You want a church wedding?” Harry asked.

Daphne smiled and nodded. “The twentieth will be fine.”

“What about clergy? I have no idea as to the politics or theology involved,” Harry began.

“I have a friend, from the war, who would probably be available if I asked,” Malcolm said.

“Pray tell, Malcolm,” Grace asked.

“Father Backer, he’s a Greyfriar,” Malcolm said.

“He’s still alive?” Grace asked incredulously.

“Ahem, he’s not that much older than I am, dearest,” Malcolm said, making a lump in his cheek with his tongue.

“What else?” Harry asked.

“I’ll need a dress,” Daphne said. “I don’t do off-the-rack clothing, Harry, it doesn’t fit. Either the sleeves and hem are too short, or I look like lolly stick in a sock.”

“I think we can take care of that,” Grace volunteered.

Augusta cleared her throat. “I have several vintage gowns that could be altered, and Coni, my elf, is amazing at alterations. There were many tall willowy witches in my family.”

“The pub will be open after 12:30,” Malcolm said.

“You’re having her reception at the *pub* ?” Grace asked.

“I’m sure the publican can make it presentable,” Malcolm said.

“No,” Grace said adamantly.

“Yes,” said Daphne “I think it would be fun.”

Grace turned to Harry, glaring at him.

“Don’t look at me, *I don’t care* . Whatever Daphne wants, except for the elephant, is okay with me,” Harry said.

“Good man,” Malcolm said.

“We will talk about this later, Malcolm,” Grace said.

“Bridesmaids?” Astoria asked.

“Yes,” Daphne said, “but I get veto power over your dress.”

“Spoilsport,” Astoria said, winking at Daphne as she said it.

“I know a florist and a lady who has a business limited to wedding cakes.” Andromeda offered.

“Check and see if they’re available on such short notice,” Malcolm said.

“I’d like Hermione to be in the wedding party as well,” Daphne said.

“As best man or bridesmaid?” Neville asked.

The older members of the dinner chuckled.

“She really could do either,” Harry said.

“I think she’d *rather* wear a dress,” Daphne said.

“We’ll ask her,” Harry said.

“Music?” Astoria asked.

“Homer plays the pipes,” Malcolm said helpfully.

“I meant *inside* the church, Father,” Astoria said, rolling her eyes.

“Pipes outside, organ inside,” Daphne said.

“I’ll be responsible for finding a suitable musician,” Grace said.

“Is that it?” Harry asked.

The women all laughed.

“I guess not. Let me know when the bills come in,” Harry said.

Malcolm harrumphed. “Traditionally, the expense of the wedding is borne by the bride’s family.”

“Is there wisdom in that tradition?” Harry asked earnestly.

“As applied to this circumstance? Probably not,” Malcolm conceded.

“We will settle that in private then,” Harry said.

“Very good,” Malcolm said. “About dowry...”

“Father, *don't* start,” Daphne said urgently.

“Actually, the dowry's already has been set,” Harry said. “It's the grimoire.”

“But...” Malcolm protested.

“A deal's a deal, sir,” Harry said.

“We will talk of this in private,” Malcolm said firmly.

“I'm sure we will,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Is there pudding with this dinner?” Astoria asked.

“Pud!” Teddy shrieked, clapping his hands.

#@#

Pudding was served and planning continued until Andromeda announced that she was putting Teddy to bed, which most took as the cue to leave. Harry and Daphne walked into the front garden and sat on a bench facing the pond.

“I wish I were shorter now,” Daphne said.

“Why?”

“I could snuggle with you better.”

“Maybe I should get a booster seat.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” Daphne said with a huff. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“I was drifting – I thought how nice it was to sit here with my arm around you – I thought about whether we'd live at Grimmauld Place or in Aberdeen – I thought that I might be able to fix the mirror tonight after you leave,” Harry replied.

“We will spend our wedding night at Grimmauld Place,” Daphne said.

“Well, that will make Kreacher happy,” Harry said. “He's always wanted to serve *the Mistress*, seeing me as a poor substitute.”

“There's no way we're going to get the house in Aberdeen furnished and stocked before the

wedding – there’s just too much to get done,” Daphne said.

“Am I going to see you again before the second Sunday, or are you going to disappear into the bridal cloud?”

“You’d best see me again before the wedding, if you know what’s good for you, Mister Potter,” Daphne said.

“I’d like that,” Harry said.

#@#

Queenie’s Diary – enciphered entry

I wish to state for the record that Harry was not raised by wolves. It must have been bower birds.

Harry really does want to make me happy. I just have to watch what I say, because usually he interprets it literally.

Note to self: I should probably banish “bugger me” from my stable of choice expletives.

We’re going out tomorrow to look at rings. I think he really did want to buy me an engagement ring, but I’ve convinced him that a plain gold band on my right hand will suffice; it’s very traditional.

He is right; the whole cult of the diamond solitaire engagement ring is a marketing triumph of the DeBeers Company. I’m frankly surprised that the custom has made its way into the Wizarding world.

End of Entry – checksum 2257

Addendum – enciphered

It was a different nightmare this time. In the dream I didn’t get to Harry in time and Deimos split his skull like a melon. I woke with a start and picked up my mirror, but then thought that Harry probably hadn’t rebuilt his mirror yet, so I went down to the office and called the Tonks’ residence. I unfortunately didn’t look at the clock to check the time until after Andi picked up.

“I’m very sorry, Andi, I just had a bad nightmare.”

“Do you want me to wake Harry?”

“No, that’s not necessary – if you could just tell me he’s still there I would be very grateful to you.”

Andi put the phone down and in a moment picked it up again.

“You’re going to love this,” Andi said.

“What?”

“Teddy must have escaped from the crib. He’s snuggled up to Harry, one hand grabbing a fistful of Harry’s hair, the other hand stuck in his mouth, sucking his thumb. Teddy’s hair is black and wild.”

“That’s got to be really cute,” I said.

“I’m going to take a picture of it – if it turns out, I’ll give you a print. You’re very lucky, Daphne, he’s going to make a great father.”

“Please tell him that,” I said. “He’s of two minds on that topic. He desperately wants a family, but he’s terrified that he’ll be rubbish as a parent.”

“I’ll talk to him – are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“When Dora was an Auror, I often had dreams of her dying in the line of duty. I know what it feels like to wake up from those dreams.”

“Thanks, Andi, you’ve been wonderful, really.”

“All I ask is that you love Harry and take care of him as best you can.”

“With all my heart.”

“Good night, Daphne.”

End of entry – Checksum 237

#@#

Ring shopping took a grand total of thirty minutes. At first Harry would not believe that the austere gold band was indeed Daphne’s first choice until she explained that Grace wore such a band, Fiona had worn such a band, and similarly on through three generations of Greengrass brides.

“I don’t know what my great-great-great grandmother wore, but frankly, I don’t care, Harry. This is what *I* want,” Daphne said earnestly.

They spent more time discussing the engraving and enchantments for the rings than selecting the rings themselves.

“Are you up for a quick coffee?” Daphne asked, pulling him into a café near the jewelers.

They were briskly seated and served. Daphne took her coffee black with sugar; Harry took his with cream and sugar.

“You on a schedule or something?” Harry asked.

“Augusta wants me to drop by and look at gowns,” Daphne said.

“You want company for that?”

“No, definitely no,” Daphne said resolutely. “I’ll be spending more time out of the gowns than in them, and I wish to preserve some mystery as to my physical charms between now and the twentieth.”

“I’m not sure that there’s a lot of mystery left,” Harry said. “But I’m looking forward to it.”

He finished his coffee and kissed her.

“I certainly hope so,” Daphne said, after he’d left.

#@#

The day had been a long one for Harry. After the ring shopping, he’d stopped by Gringotts to talk to the human specialist who was in charge of wrangling the paperwork for sale of the house in Aberdeen. It was a cash transaction, which should have simplified things, but Harry quickly learned that simple and real estate rarely fit together in the same sentence.

After he escaped Gringotts, he had a brief bit of time to do some shopping before the first of his scheduled interviews with Luna, preparing for the series of articles that would appear in the Quibbler. Xenophilius was not quite ready to deal with meeting Harry, according to Luna, so it was an one-on-one meeting held in the public garden not far from Grimmauld Place. They were in plain view of anyone in the park, but they were layered behind multiple privacy charms.

“You’re looking good, Harry,” Luna said.

“Thanks,” he replied.

“Your soul is much more firmly rooted than the last time we spoke,” she said in a matter-of-fact manner.

“Well, that’s good, I guess,” Harry said.

Luna then got out a dictation quill, tested it, using both of their voices, and began a thorough question and answer session that ran two hours straight.

“Luna, do you want to take a break for dinner?” Harry asked.

Luna gave him an appraising glare and then turned off the quill.

“I don’t think that would be proper,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re obviously in love, I don’t remember any dalliances I ever had with you after the Slug Club, so I’m fairly certain that you’re not in love with *me*, so I’m questioning the propriety of whether we should be dining in private together,” Luna said, looking at him with a perpetually surprised expression.

“What do you mean?” Harry said.

“The Churzwizzles are gone; love drives them away. There’s probably not a Churzwizzle in a block or two in all directions,” she said confidently.

“Ah, Luna, do you mind if I make a quick call?” Harry asked.

“Go right ahead, would you like some privacy?” Luna asked.

“That won’t be necessary.”

Harry pulled out a duplicate to the mirror he’s made for Daphne, having concluded that it was as easy to fabricate a clone of Daphne’s mirror from his notes as it was to rebuild his original mirror. He touched the hazel colored dot on the mirror rim and waited patiently.

The mirror chimed quietly and then lit up.

“Harry, how delightful,” Daphne said as the connection opened. “We are finally done. Sixteen dresses, eight fittings and we finally have something that works. Augusta has been wonderful,” she gushed.

“I’m here with Luna, doing the first interview,” Harry began.

“I remember you saying that you were doing that today,” Daphne said.

“Hi, Daphne,” Luna said, looking over Harry’s shoulder and waving.

“Hi, Luna,” Daphne replied, returning with her own wave.

“Luna thinks that it would be improper for us to go grab a bite to eat,” Harry said.

“Well, she is correct,” Daphne said.

“Is this another rule?” Harry asked.

“Ah, more of a recommendation,” Daphne said. “You’re never wrong to be out socially in a group, but almost always wrong to be with a young, single woman, unless she’s your employee, your ward, or some sort of relative.”

Harry pondered this for a while.

“We’ve been alone together, lots,” Harry objected.

“Yes, and it’s been with my parents’ direct permission, besides, you are my betrothed, as far as magic is concerned, you’ve been so since Riddle died,” Daphne explained.

“This is all terribly fascinating,” Luna exclaimed. “I suppose this is off the record?”

“Oh, shite,” Harry said. “I’d forgotten that Luna was a reporter.”

“That’s because you think of me as a friend, Harry,” Luna said.

“You are my friend, Luna,” Harry said firmly.

“Thank you, Harry. I value your friendship,” Luna said.

“Luna, how would you like an exclusive on this story, but sit on it until Sunday?” Daphne asked. “I suppose I should probably ask you first, Harry, but I was assuming that you’d say ‘I don’t care.’”

“I do care, but I think that would be okay. What’s happening Sunday?”

“The reading of the banns,” Daphne explained.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“A public announcement that a couple will be getting married – usually it’s done every Sunday for a month prior to the wedding, but that’s not practical in our situation,” Daphne said. “We’re getting off track – you asked about dinner.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied.

“Harry I trust you with my life and with my magic, I certainly have no qualms about you grabbing a bite to eat with Luna,” Daphne said. “Luna?”

“Yes, Daphne?”

“He’s mine, just keep that in mind and everything will be fine,” Daphne said cheerfully.

“I will try to comport myself with dignity and keep my hands to myself,” Luna said solemnly.

“We’re good then,” Daphne said. “Is there anything else?”

“No, I can’t think of anything,” Harry said.

“Can you pop by for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“Good, see you then,” Daphne said and blew him a kiss. The surface of the mirror went dark.

“She didn’t say she loved you,” Luna observed.

“No, we haven’t said that yet,” Harry said.

Luna raised one eyebrow.

“Harry, I have a confession to make,” Luna said.

“Oh?” Harry said, somewhat distracted.

“I can’t really see Churzwizzles,” Luna said. “You just looked happy, and the last time I saw you this happy you were with Ginny.”

“You played me,” Harry said.

“This isn’t a hobby, Harry, it’s my job.” Luna said.

“Good thing you’re my friend then,” Harry said.

“I think so,” Luna said. “How about kabobs?”

“Kebabs?” Harry asked, feeling confused.

“No, kabobs, it’s like a kebab but it’s from Afghanistan.”

“Oh, where can we get one?”

Luna paused. “Afghanistan?”

“Why don’t we settle for kebabs – there’s a good place in Leicester – and plan an international trip another day?”

“I guess,” Luna sighed.

#@#

They Apparated to the unassuming looking take-away in Leicester, Harry ordered for both of them, and they carried the food to a different park, and continued the interview under the lights that illuminated the paths in the park. Two and a half hours and one warming charm later, Luna closed her notebook and silenced her quill.

“I’m cream-crackered, Harry, we’ve got to finish this interview another time,” Luna said.

“We’re not done?”

“Oh no, we’ve got lots more kebabs and maybe even fish and chips to go through before we wrap up the first story. Plus, I’ve got to interview you, or Daphne, or maybe both of you together for the story that’s running next Monday,” Luna said.

“I was hoping you’d forgotten about that,” Harry said.

“I think it was you who said that hope was not a strategy, Harry,” Luna said with a smirk.

“Okay,” Harry said with resignation.

“I’ll call Daphne and set up the next interviews. I’m assuming that she knows your schedule?”

“Pretty much,” Harry said.

“You look happy, Harry. I’m really glad for you,” Luna said, smiling broadly.

“It’s been amazing,” Harry said.

“Save it for the interview, I’m off the clock,” Luna said.

“Good night, Luna. Do you need me to walk you somewhere?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Luna said, fading and disappearing with a puff of steam. “I’ll see myself out,” a disembodied voice said.

#@#

“Long day, Harry?” Andi asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“Yeah – almost five hours interviewing with Luna,” he replied. “She only looks spacey – there’s a very sharp mind under that eccentric persona.”

“Let me make you some tea,” Andi said.

“I need to sleep, Andi,” Harry objected.

“I’ll make it herbal, it will help you sleep. Did you eat while you were out?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

Andi bustled about the kitchen and minutes later a steaming cup was in front of Harry.

He sipped it cautiously and then murmured his approval.

“What’s in here?”

“Oh, this and that,” Andi said, “it’s my own blend.”

“It’s good, thanks,” Harry said.

“You’re welcome. Did I ever tell you what I did after Hogwarts?” Andi asked.

“I thought you helped Ted in the brokerage.”

“That’s what I did after Nymphadora went to school. Before that I worked in an apothecary, compounding potions,” Andi explained. “You need to know that I’ve frozen you to your chair and with that tea in your system, you won’t be able to Apparate for another hour.”

“I don’t know what to say, Andi,” Harry said, noticing that he did feel a little light headed. It was a pleasant buzz.

“Did Sirius ever give you the Wizards and Witches talk?” Andi asked.

“You have to remember that I was just fifteen when he died, and we didn’t spend all that much time together,” Harry said. “He said that sex had two purposes, making babies and building the love bond, and that anyone who said you could separate the two purposes was lying.”

“Did he now?” Andromeda asked. “I’m impressed, that’s rather mature for him.”

“Do you agree with that?” Harry asked.

“More or less.” Andi said, “What do you know?”

“I know that I like girls, and I like Daphne a whole lot, and tab A goes into slot B, but other than that, not much.”

“Oh good,” Andi said, opening a cupboard, pulling out a medium sized box. Opening it, she pulled out two cloth dolls, each slightly less than two feet tall. The dolls were male and female, dressed in typical Wizarding robes.

“These are teaching props, we’ll call them Adam and Eve,” Andi said, loosening the ties that held robes on the dolls. Beneath the robes the dolls were naked and incredibly detailed. “I’m going to give you a lesson in how to make a witch happy. We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“What’s the hard way?” Harry asked.

“The hard way is the dolls are transfigured to look like you and Daphne,” Andi said.

“You are an evil witch,” Harry said. “I’ll be a good little wizard and we can do this the easy way.”

“Oh good,” Andi said brightly. “Now pay attention.”

#@#

Harry was sluggish the next day. The tutorial with Andi had alternated between being enlightening and horrifying, with large doses of embarrassment to spice the mix. Thanks to the tea he's slept like a rock, but he was groggy when he woke the next day. He showered, shaved and gave Teddy a hug before Apparating to the Greengrass estate.

Daphne met him at the gate, kissing him before taking his arm.

"You look peaky," she said.

"I was ambushed last night," Harry explained, "by Andi, with Adam and Eve dolls."

"The little cloth dolls with gentleman and lady parts?" Daphne asked.

"You're familiar with them?"

"Father has a set," Daphne said.

"Because?"

"Because he uses it when he investigates child abuse allegations; little children may not have words for things, but they can tell horrifying stories with those dolls," Daphne said.

"Oh," Harry said.

"Yes, oh, they weren't created just to torture you," Daphne said. "Enlightening?"

"Very," Harry said. "I might start blushing randomly when we're together, but... she wanted to make sure that I could make you happy."

"I'm sure you will," Daphne said, pausing in the path. "Harry, I'm a virgin, I'm terrified that I'm going to be rubbish in bed, but I'm really glad my first time is going to be with you."

"I feel the same way," he said.

"We're in this together," Daphne said.

"Always," Harry said.

#@#

A marvelous smell permeated the kitchen when they came into the house through the back entrance, closest to the kitchen.

"Smells great, what is it?" Harry asked.

"Mum got up early this morning and made cinnamon buns," Daphne said.

"I thought Mimsy ran the kitchen," Harry said.

“Not all the time, sometimes Mum wants to make things special. When I was a little girl growing up, whenever I was sick, Mum would make this after I’d recovered. Some sort of minor celebration, I suppose. She’d also make it when I came back from competitions, win or lose,” Daphne explained.

“So, what’s this?” Harry asked.

“I think she’s happy that we’re getting married – or that I’m moving out of the house, it could go either way,” Daphne said in a perfect deadpan expression.

“Hmm,” Harry said noncommittally.

They served themselves from the chafing dishes on a side table and carried their plates to the kitchen table.

As they were pouring tea, Astoria came in.

“Sticky buns! What’s the occasion?” Astoria asked.

“I think it’s anticipating your new bedroom,” Harry said.

Astoria stuck her tongue out at him.

“Is this a couple-y meeting, or can I eat here?” Astoria asked.

Harry looked to Daphne.

“We’re going over some details, but nothing that would harm your maidenly ears,” Daphne said.

“Oh, good, I hate eating breakfast alone,” Astoria said.

Harry watched with some amusement as Astoria piled her plate with buns.

“Are you eating anything other than buns?” he asked.

“Probably not,” Astoria replied.

“You need something more than that, midget, the sugar crash is going to flatten you,” Daphne commented.

Astoria went back to the side table and spooned a minute portion of eggs onto her plate and then added one rasher of streaky bacon.

“Satisfied?” Astoria asked.

“I’m thrilled,” Daphne said, rolling her eyes for effect.

They ate for a while in silence, excepting Astoria’s noises of enjoyment as she ate three buns in

succession.

Daphne pulled out a clipboard.

“Okay, some details. We have the rings,” she began.

“I thought you weren’t getting a ring,” Astoria interrupted.

Daphne brandished her right hand where her wedding band was now serving as a sigil of engagement.

“When we get married, it will move to the other hand,” Daphne explained.

“Oh,” Astoria said. “Does Mum have an engagement ring?”

“No,” Daphne said with a mild amount of annoyance. “May I continue? Without waiting for a reply, she said, “Rings are done; Mum says she’s got a musician signed for that date.”

“Good,” Harry said.

“Homer’s bringing some pipers with him; they don’t seem to be available as anything other than a set.

“Father Backer has let Father know that he’ll be officiating. There’s something about a license for him to perform up here that didn’t make sense to me, but I’ll leave that to someone who cares.”

“Father Backer is Church of England, and we’re in Scotland,” Astoria volunteered.

“So?” Daphne said.

“He’s got to get permission from the local Scottish Episcopal bishop to perform services in that bishop’s diocese,” Astoria said.

“Where’d you learn that, midget?” Daphne asked.

“I paid attention in *my* history lessons,” Astoria said proudly.

“You are truly a well-rounded marvel,” Daphne said. “Harry, how is the house coming along?”

“The paperwork is done, its title is in your name,” Harry said.

“Why?” Daphne asked.

“They asked how I wanted it done, and that just seemed right,” Harry explained. “I was buying it for you, after all.”

“Any houses after this will be titled in both names,” Daphne said.

“Okay,” Harry replied. “Is that one of the rules?”

“Yes,” Daphne replied curtly.

“We have a cake, the pub is providing all the rest of the refreshments, which is kind of them, since Father’s paying the tab for the bar, and my gown is finished.”

“May I see it?”

“No,” Daphne said flatly. “You’ll see it on the twentieth.”

“How will I know which dressed up woman is you?” Harry asked.

“I’ll be the one dressed in blue, glaring at you, asking you to behave,” Daphne said playfully. “The veil might be a giveaway too.”

“Not white?” Harry asked.

“No, Harry, virgin brides in white is a Sassenach custom, and while I’m eminently qualified to wear white, this is a *Scottish* wedding,” Daphne said proudly. “Getting back to the list, Father Backer has some questionnaires he wants us to fill out, and he’s going to be dropping by for some counseling.”

“We have to have counseling?” Harry asked.

“It’s not required, but it’s a good idea,” Daphne said.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Managing expectations, mainly; it’s coming to agreements on money and property, children, if we’re going to church, where we’re going to church, whether toothpaste tubes are squeezed from the top, the bottom or the middle, things like that,” Daphne said.

“How do you squeeze toothpaste?” Harry asked.

“From the middle,” she said. “You?”

“From the bottom, usually,” Harry said.

“You going to be freaked out if you find it squeezed in the middle?”

“No, I’ll probably just re-squeeze from the bottom and roll it up a bit,” Harry said.

“She’s a blanket hog,” Astoria warned. “She also kicks the sheets out at the end of the bed.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“It’s more comfortable that way, the bed’s usually not long enough,” Daphne said.

“Yeah, we probably need to talk about that stuff,” Harry said.

#@#

“Have you talked to Hermione?” Daphne asked.

“I forgot, sorry,” Harry said.

“Let’s call her now – it’s about 6:00 PM her time,” Daphne said. “We’ll do it out by the fountain.”

#@#

Daphne pulled out her mirror and then saw Harry pull out his mirror too.

“It’s just like mine,” Daphne exclaimed.

“Not so, it has a manly Celtic knot inscribed on the back,” Harry said.

“Is that what the scratching is supposed to be?”

“I never said I was an artist,” Harry said.

“What happens if we both call her?” Daphne asked.

“I’m not quite sure – she should see a split screen with both of us,” Harry said. “It works most of the time. This is experimental; it’s not quite ready for the big leagues.”

“Okay, here goes,” Daphne said, touching the spot on the mirror frame that activated the mirror. Harry touched his mirror at the same time.

They heard background noise before they saw Hermione.

“Hang on, hang on, I have to pull this out of my purse – it was at the bottom,” Hermione said.

Her face appeared in both mirrors.

“Cool, split screen – I can see both of you!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Not a really difficult feat, since we’re sitting together on a bench,” Harry said. “It is something I’ve been working on.”

“So, the two of you are calling me, am I to assume that you’ve reached some sort of understanding?” Hermione asked.

“You could say that,” Daphne said, looking at Harry.

“What are you doing Sunday the twentieth?” Harry asked.

“Are you talking the day before the solstice? Cutting it a little fine, aren’t you?” Hermione asked. “I assume that I’m going to be scrambling to find a way to Scotland.”

“What if I can bring you here?” Harry asked.

“Harry, international flight is expensive, and the international Portkey takes forever to get approved,” Hermione objected.

“Are you inside or outside?” Harry asked.

“I’m inside my parents’ kitchen,” Hermione said. “It’s my turn to do dishes.”

“Help me out with an experiment here, Hermione,” Harry said. “Go outside and show me the outside of the house.”

“Okay, let me get out the door,” Hermione said.

The picture jumbled and tossed as Hermione walked out the door and then stabilized.

“I’m placing it on top of the bird bath,” Hermione explained, and then walked back into the picture.

“This good enough?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “We’re going to ring off, and in a minute we’ll either call you right back, or we’ll be there.”

Harry touched the surface of the mirror and Daphne followed his lead.

“What are we doing, Harry?” Daphne asked.

“Come into the shadows with me,” he invited.

She took his hand and they both faded from sight.

#@#

At the best of times the shadows was a disorienting place. They saw smoky images corresponding to the Greengrass estate: house, fountain, barns in the distance.

“Are you going to try Apparating from the shadows?” Daphne asked.

“I’ve already done it,” Harry said. “I’m good for about five hundred miles in the reality we know, but I haven’t yet found my limit in the shadows.”

“Where’d you go?” Daphne asked.

“Cape Town, South Africa,” Harry replied.

“Why there?”

“I had a really good picture,” Harry answered. “Do you have the image of Hermione’s house set in your mind?”

“Uh, not really,” Daphne said.

“Come here,” Harry said.

“Oh, if I must,” Daphne said dramatically. “Seriously, I think this is the best way to Apparate.”

She molded herself to Harry as he put his arms around her and they disappeared from the shadows.

They reappeared in a small walled in garden. The Granger residence appeared to be the end unit of a row house. Daphne looked at Harry and gave him a quick peck.

Hermione cleared her throat.

“Yes, it appears that you *have* reached an understanding,” she said. “Congratulations.”

“Hey, Hermione,” Harry said in greeting.

“Hey, yourself,” she replied. “That wasn’t Apparation.”

“Um, no, it wasn’t,” Harry said.

“You are going to tell me what that was?” Hermione asked.

“Um, no,” Harry said. “It’s not my secret.”

Daphne looked from Harry to Hermione and back.

“We’ll talk to Father,” Daphne concluded. “To make it official, Harry has accepted the betrothal and we’ve set a date for the twentieth.”

“Okay, I guess transportation is *not* going to be a problem,” Hermione said.

“Probably not,” Daphne said.

“Do I have to get all cuddly to travel that way?” Hermione asked.

“That’s up to Daphne,” Harry said.

“You have him trained already,” Hermione said.

“It’s hard, but yes, he is teachable,” she said, smiling brightly at Harry. “Go hug your friend, Hermione.”

Hermione sprang across the distance and applied one of her signature hugs. She then reversed the field and hugged Daphne.

“You two look happy,” Hermione said.

“Well, we had a choice between scared out of our wits and happy and chose the latter,” Harry said.

“Harry, I think I can find my way back, can you excuse us and let us talk for a while?” Daphne asked.

“Sure, call me on the mirror if you need help,” Harry said, and then disappeared.

“You done with the dishes?” Daphne asked.

“I just started,” Hermione said.

“You dry, I’ll wash. I don’t know where anything goes in your kitchen,” Daphne proposed.

“Sounds like a deal,” Hermione said.

#@#

“Can you warm the water a bit?” Daphne asked.

“Add more hot water or with a warming charm?” Hermione asked.

“You know, I didn’t even think about adding hot water,” Daphne said. “As I told Harry, my warming charm has two settings, tepid and extra crispy, so I don’t use it much.”

Hermione cast a quick charm, raising the temperature.

“Thanks,” Daphne said, sinking her hands into the dishwater.

“So, what are we talking about?” Hermione asked.

“I need to know why you’ve been so helpful and why it’s not you getting married to Harry,” Daphne said.

“What difference would it make?” Hermione asked.

“If you’re the one he really wants, I’ll break the engagement,” Daphne said.

“At the price of your magic?”

“Yes,” Daphne said fiercely.

“Okay,” Hermione said, composing her thoughts as she dried the pot that Daphne had just handed to her.

“I guess it boils down to the notion that I love Harry, but I’m not in love with Harry,” Hermione said.

“Elaborate, please,” Daphne asked.

“Harry was my first friend in the Magical world, and it’s all or nothing with Harry, if he’s your friend, he’ll be your friend to the end,” Hermione explained. “There’s practically nothing I wouldn’t do for him, and I expect he feels the same way.

“There’s a catch, though. Harry’s wife will need to give birth to or be willing to adopt a pack of children. I simply don’t want to be a mother,” Hermione said.

“That’s it?” Daphne said incredulously.

“I would like to marry, someday,” Hermione said. “If my husband-to-be is willing to be childless, that would be optimal, if not, I would bear *one* child to make this as-of-yet hypothetical husband happy, but that’s about as far as I’m willing to think of going right now.”

“Harry wouldn’t be happy with just one?” Daphne asked.

“Harry would do whatever his wife wanted,” Hermione said. “But if his wife wanted only one child, or preferably no child, a little part of Harry would die inside.

“What do you know of the Mirror of Erised?”

“It’s a legendary artifact, it shows you your heart’s desire,” Daphne answered. “Does it really exist?”

“Harry saw it in his first year at Hogwarts. Dumbledore had it hidden in the castle, which of course meant that Harry found it,” Hermione explained.

“What did he see?”

“He saw what he can’t have,” Hermione explained. “His family – grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents, brothers, sisters, a wife and children in abundance.”

“What did you see?” Daphne asked.

“What makes you think I ever saw the mirror?”

“Let’s call it a hunch,” Daphne said.

“I saw myself in the Headmaster’s office at Hogwarts, or rather, the Headmistress’s office. The desk was littered with books that I’d written. There was a picture of someone, probably Harry, on the desk, but no pictures of children,” Hermione said.

“So, you can’t *both* be happy,” Daphne said.

“No,” Hermione said, tears welling in her eyes. “I love him enough that his happiness is more important than mine.”

“I thought about it, I thought about it a lot.

“I had plans and schemes by the dozen.

“Very Slytherin,” Daphne said.

“Most people think the Hat wanted to put me into Ravenclaw,” Hermione said.

“It offered you Slytherin?” Daphne asked incredulously.

Hermione nodded.

“Harry’s not the type of man that you have a brief, brilliant affair with and then move on – that would devastate him.”

“He doesn’t find me that attractive, although he enjoys my friendship. If we were married, the situation that would make him happiest would make me miserable, and vice versa.

“I’m not going to do that to him.

“Harry could make me happy, but I can’t make him happy, not in the long run, so I will cherish his friendship, hope that he marries a witch who can make him happy, and wait for the wizard who will make me just as happy.

“I’m very content with the possibility of being his children’s favorite aunt,” Hermione concluded.

“So that’s why you helped me?” Daphne asked.

“I was rolling the dice, hoping that you had what I lacked. The fact that we’re having this conversation means that you love him, truly love him, which makes me very happy,” Hermione said, tears running down her cheeks.

“Which is why you’re crying right now,” Daphne said.

“Of course,” Hermione said, sniffing. “Didn’t you cry when Harry proposed?”

“He didn’t exactly propose, but yes, I cried. It confused him a bit,” Daphne said.

“There’s a story there,” Hermione said.

So Daphne told that story, and then another, and then another.

#@#

Queenie’s Diary – June 1998 - enciphered entry

Written from what I hope is a guest room at Grimmauld Place.

And so it came to pass that Harry Potter was loved by two Slytherin women, one of whom loved him so much that she conceded the field to the other.

How I respect Hermione Jean Granger!

I worry about a lot of things, most of which are inconsequential.

I worry that Harry is marrying me not because he loves me (or thinks I'm 'hot' in a clinging silk nightgown – as if) but from a sense of duty.

It doesn't matter in the long run, because I know I will be a good wife to him, and a good mother to his children (very plural) and we will come to love one another.

But still I worry.

Tomorrow is another day, and I must bring this entry to a close if I have any hope of not being a sleep deprived zombie.

End of entry – checksum 3223

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By right of conquest

Chapter the last

By Right of Conquest – Chapter the Seventh

Returning from Australia by way of the shadows, Harry picked up his travel kit from Andromeda and returned to Grimmauld Place for the rest of the day, dividing his time between business and reading more chapters in the Riddle diary. The house was more or less habitable now, and Harry felt that he had to give the place a chance now that it was not choked with dust, doxies and the shadows of Sirius Black.

He woke the next day and reached for his glasses, finding instead a note written in Kreacher's copperplate script.

Master Harry

Mistress-to-be came home early this morning. I led her to her room and I have advised Mimsy of the Greengrass household as to the whereabouts of the young mistress. Her room is found on the third floor.

K

After the initial cleanup of Grimmauld Place, Harry rarely had occasion to go up to the third floor, as everything he needed was either on the ground floor (the library, kitchen, office) or second floor (bedroom). He pulled on some trousers and plucked a clean t-shirt from the drawer. After a quick visit to the loo, he decided that it was time to see just exactly what Kreacher had been doing whilst Harry was away.

Harry found three rooms newly made up and furnished from the Black storage rooms, where treasures and junk from prior generations were stored without any apparent system of organization. He found a large bedroom decorated in a masculine style with a large bed. The room had a connecting door to the adjacent room, which was considerably smaller and furnished with a single bed. The decorating theme for this room was light and floral. Daphne was asleep under the covers, sheets and blankets askew at the foot of the bed, one pale foot sticking out over the edge.

This room had a connecting door as well, leading to a bright, spacious room furnished as a nursery with changing table, crib, a low day bed and a rocking chair next to the window. Harry felt drawn to the rocking chair.

As he sat in the rocking chair some previously locked portion of his memory unfolded sights, sounds and smells. He was in a room much like this, only now of enormous scale, rocking away, snug and warm. He saw a yellow bathrobe covering a white nightgown, scarlet hair draping over his feet as he looked up at an enormous woman and listened to a lullaby. The memory receded and he was once again here and now in the newly decorated nursery at Grimmauld Place.

He wiped his eyes and rose from the chair, heading back to what he would now always call Daphne's room. Before he entered the room, he turned and looked back at the rocker.

The room changed again, and he saw Daphne sitting in the rocker, dark blue bathrobe covering a white nightgown. The nightgown had seven buttons all of which were undone and a small bundle with dark hair was attached to her breast, with a thup-thup-thup sound coming from the infant. Daphne looked tired with bags under her eyes, but she had an enigmatic smile on her face as she rocked and nursed.

Tears flowed freely down his face and he pondered the scene until it faded, and the room was empty again.

"Harry?" Daphne called from the next room.

Harry turned and entered the room. Daphne sat up in bed and patted the mattress next to her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Seeing things," Harry explained.

"Like what?" Daphne asked.

"Past and the future, I guess," Harry said, wiping his eyes. "I think the nursery triggered both – although I'm not sure that I believe in visions of the future."

"What was in the past?"

"I remembered something from when I was living as a tot in Godric's' Hollow. Before today I remembered nothing about my parents apart from the night they were murdered, and that I remember all too well."

"So, what do you remember now?"

"My mum was holding me, she was rocking me in a nursery – it wasn't this nursery, but there was a rocker in it. She was wearing a yellow bathrobe over a white nightgown and I could see her hair falling down over her shoulder. She was singing, but I don't know any lullabies, so I don't know which one it might have been."

"That's it?" Daphne asked.

"It's more than I had before," Harry said, smiling.

"What about the future?" Daphne asked.

"The same, only different; I saw you, sitting in a different nursery, different rocker. You were wearing a dark blue bathrobe over a white nightgown. It was different than what you're wearing now, it had seven buttons down the front," Harry said, tracing his finger down Daphne's

breastbone. If he noticed her slight shiver he didn't mention it.

"You were unbuttoned, and you had a small person, sorry, I don't know the gender. And you were feeding this person that we'd made together with that wonderful, amazing, beautiful breast," Harry said, tracing the curve under her right breast through her nightgown with the tips of his fingers. "The sight of the two of you there was breathtakingly beautiful."

Neither said anything. Harry traced the upper swell of her breast with his thumb and then took his hand away.

"Where are my manners?" he said, pushing himself back a bit. "Good morning, my queen. I didn't expect to find you here."

Daphne laughed.

"I didn't expect to find me here either," she said.

"I stayed very late with Hermione. I met her mum and dad, and we went for a long walk, and then we polished off a bottle of wine, and after I realized I'd been there *way* too long, I went back to the shadows and tried to Apparate home. Long story short, I couldn't find home. So, not wanting to be a damsel in distress, I Apparated to you," she said, smiling at the thought.

"That's supposed to be really hard," Harry said.

"Well, I was coming in from the shadows, so maybe it's easier from there. You were in bed, sleeping. My wicked plan was to just climb in bed with you, but Kreacher came and took me by the hand and led me here. Apparently this is *my* room," Daphne said, wrinkling her nose.

"It's a little stingy in the bed department," she said. "And I'm really not happy about the notion of separate rooms, much less separate beds."

"Don't look at me," Harry said with his hands raised. "This is all Kreacher's doing, this must be what was fashionable and decent, perhaps when Victoria was queen."

"You're not planning on keeping me in a separate room when we're married?" she asked.

"You'll sleep wherever you want when we're married," Harry said with a shrug. "I was hoping that it would be with me. Changing the subject, Kreacher says he told Mimsy where you were, so your parents are either no longer worried about where you might be, or they're just now starting to worry."

#@#

Grace wandered into the kitchen where her husband handed her a cup of coffee mixed to her preference.

"Did you get any sleep?" Grace asked.

“A little,” Malcolm said. “I got back around midnight, you were already asleep. I stayed up when I found that Daphne wasn’t home yet. Mimsy let me know this morning that Daphne made it back to Harry’s house in London.”

“They weren’t together?” Grace asked.

“No. They started the day out together and then Daphne went off with one of her school friends. She didn’t come back until late this morning,” Malcolm explained.

“Which one?” Grace asked, raising one eyebrow.

“I’ve told you what I know,” Malcolm said, swiveling in his seat to look out over the estate.

“So, how was the trip?” Grace asked.

“About what I expected; the Potters are English and Welsh, the Blacks are completely English as are the Gaunts,” Malcolm reported.

“You’re leaving one out, Malcolm,” Grace said, a knowing smile on her lips.

“Clan Gordon’s historian can document Peverells in the Highlands in the 1100’s, and the documentation dovetails nicely with what I’ve found subsequent to that,” Malcolm said.

“So, he can wear the Gordon tartan?” Grace said.

“As rightly as we wear Cheyne,” Malcolm said.

“After all this, his kinsmen were our neighbors?” Grace exclaimed.

“That was quite some time ago,” Malcolm said.

“The historian, he’s not just blowing smoke to curry your favor?” Grace asked.

“Hardly, he can’t stand me.”

“Well done, my lord husband, we’re almost there,” Grace said.

“Did she buy your suggestion about executing the betrothal?” Malcolm asked.

“She took no convincing, but there was no sale with Harry,” Grace said.

“That’s counterintuitive,” Malcolm said.

“Yeah,” Grace replied. “He did have a point. He objects to the terms of the current betrothal. He says if he accepts the only the negotiated terms, Daphne is physically safe, but not much more than that.”

“What’s he want?” Malcolm asked.

“The Prayer Book vows: love, honor, comfort, keep, forsaking all others,” Grace quoted from memory. Daphne says that Harry intends to fuse the mundane ritual with magical intent. He’s going to make a mundane rite magical.”

“He is a very singular young man,” Malcolm said.

“Indeed.”

“Are there any rolls left?” Malcolm asked.

“I hid some from the midget.”

“Ooohhhh,” Malcolm sighed.

“You get one, I get the other,” Grace said, reaching for a dish on a high shelf.

“Deal!”

#@#

Harry and Daphne ate breakfast in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place and then Daphne went upstairs for a shower. When she returned from the *en suite* in Harry’s room to her tiny bedroom, she found the bed made and the clothing she’d worn the day before laid out on the bed, cleaned and pressed.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” she said.

She wasn’t sure, but she thought she heard a faint sigh.

Going downstairs she found Harry in the office, staring at a statement from Gringotts.

She rubbed his back as she read over his shoulder.

“Need help?” she asked.

“A lot of the portfolio’s been on autopilot since my parents died,” Harry said. “I think there are some really underperforming assets in here.”

Daphne looked further at the reports, spreading the sheets out, side by side.

“I think you need to look at more than just the prior year’s performance, Harry,” Daphne said.

“Oh?”

“One year’s performance may or may not be significant. Do you want me to give you a five and ten year report on earnings? That would let you see the trends you can’t spot in one year’s earnings statement,” Daphne volunteered.

“You can do that?” Harry asked.

“It might take me the better part of a day if I did it by hand, but sure, I can do that,” Daphne said confidently. “Remember, I’ve been in training to run an estate, mine or someone else’s since the time I could read.”

“It’ll be yours soon enough,” Harry said.

“Where are the prior year reports?” Daphne asked.

“Uh, at Gringotts?” Harry said, looking sheepish.

“Well, I think I know where we’re going this morning. You’ll need to be there, because until we’re married, they won’t give me the time of day on your accounts,” Daphne said. “Beside, this will give me a plausible reason to delay coming back home, as I’m probably in a bit of hot water.”

“What for?”

“For not coming home last night or more accurately, for not telling Mum or Father that I wouldn’t be coming home,” Daphne explained.

“You’re of age,” Harry objected.

“True, but irrelevant,” Daphne countered. “It would be common decency to let them know before the house shuts down that I wouldn’t be home. Parents worry, even when their children are of age. You did it with Andi when you spent the night at our estate, I should have done the same.”

“Is this a rule?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay, here I was being responsible and I didn’t even know it,” Harry said with a grin.

Harry closed up Grimmauld Place, and then dual Apparated with Daphne into Diagon Alley.

They were both dressed in every-day robes over Muggle attire, a fashion statement commonly seen in Diagon Alley in their age group.

About a block from Gringotts, Mr. Rufus appeared and began to walk beside them.

“Mister Potter, M’am,” he said with a tip of his hat. “Let me take you through the private entrance.”

They walked into what appeared to be an Apothecary and through a door at the back of the shop. The door opened into a quiet, hushed hallway. As they turned the corner, they recognized that they were in the richly carpeted and paneled hallway that led to Ragnok’s office.

Mr. Rufus stopped before the door.

“Please excuse me while I announce you,” he said, disappearing behind the polished walnut door. Within a short moment, he opened the door again.

“Ragnok will meet you in the conference room.”

“Lead on,” Harry said.

When Mr. Rufus opened the door to the conference room, Ragnok was already seated at the table, a book and folder beside him. The buffet table was again set with tea service and pastries.

“It appears that Mr. Rufus has maligned my coffee, so I will offer you tea,” Ragnok announced.

“Thank you, Director Ragnok,” Daphne said with a minute bob of her head.

Daphne turned to the side table and began preparing cups of tea for everyone.

“Mr. Rufus?”

“Straight,” he said tersely.

“Director?”

“Sugar, three lumps,” Ragnok replied with what might have been a smile.

Once they were seated at table with tea, and in Harry’s case, another doughnut, Harry opened the conversation.

“Director, we came to Gringotts for prior year earnings statements of my holdings, but given that we’re meeting with you in person, I assume that you have business we need to discuss,” Harry said respectfully.

“Not business *per se*,” Ragnok said after sipping his tea and placing the cup back on the saucer. “I believe first that congratulations are in order on your impending nuptials.”

“Thank you, Director,” Harry said.

“Harry, the Goblin Nation is forbidden by treaty from interfering in the internal affairs of Wizarding Britain,” Ragnok began. “The Bank has only slightly greater latitude. A reliable source brought information to my attention.”

He pushed a folder across the table to Harry.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“A draft article, I believe the word is ‘galley’ being written for the Daily Prophet” Ragnok said, curling his lip as he pronounced the title.

“Indeed,” Harry said.

Daphne opened the folder. Inside was a full scale layout of a newspaper page with pictures and notes affixed with Spellotape. The banner headline read “HARRY POTTER TO WED BRIDE OF VOLDEMORT.”

“Well, at least they have the courage to not say ‘you-know-who’ or ‘he-who-must-not-be-named.’” Harry said. “What is Gringotts’ interest in this?”

Ragnok paused, as if composing a diplomatic answer. “Uncertainty is bad for business,” he began. “The old order is gone; the new order is not yet in place. Factions in Wizarding Britain are vying for position and attempting to neutralize other factions. I’m afraid that I cannot say much more than that.”

A chime sounded and Ragnok opened what appeared to be a pocket watch from his waistcoat pocket. “Oh, dear,” he said. “I’m afraid that I must attend to another matter.”

He rose, gave them both an almost imperceptible nod of his head, and left the room. Mr. Rufus followed in his wake.

“Stay as long as you wish, your earnings statements will be brought here in a minute or so,” Mr. Rufus said. “You know your way out.”

“Mr. Rufus?” Daphne called.

“Yes, Mistress Greengrass?” Mr. Rufus responded.

“Do you have a card?”

“Yes, I have a card,” Mr. Rufus said, moving to go out the door.

“May I have one?” Daphne asked.

“Certainly,” the Red Cap said, slipping his hand in a pocket of his suit coat and pulling out an ivory colored card.

“Thank you,” Daphne said.

“You are most welcome, Mistress Greengrass, now, I too must be off.”

Mr. Rufus closed the door behind him.

“What was that about?” Harry asked.

“A hunch, I wanted to see where he fit in the organization,” Daphne said. “The front side is printed in Gobbledygook, the reverse side is printed in English.”

“So, what’s it say?”

“‘Rufus, Director of Field Operations, Red Cap Division, Gringotts,’ is what’s on the English side. The Gobbledygook side has some sort of motto afterwards,” Daphne said, her lips moving silently.

She put her hand to her face and laughed.

“‘When it absolutely, positively has to be dead by dawn,’” she quoted.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” Harry asked.

“That Mr. Rufus is in charge of what we would call special operations,” Daphne said.

“Okay, that’s good to know,” Harry said. “Let’s get back to the article.”

Daphne and Harry read the article together.

“That picture of me is terrible,” Daphne complained. “It’s from our fifth year at Hogwarts.”

“Apparently someone at the Prophet agrees with you, as the note next to it says ‘this is a terrible picture, get something better’,” Harry said.

Harry went back to reading the article, which spread out over two pages. Daphne finished before he did and she began running her fingers through his hair at the back of his head.

“Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“Ragnok left a book on the table,” Daphne said.

“Okay, yeah, he did,” Harry said.

“Harry, hand it to me, please,” Daphne said with mild exasperation.

He handed her the book and she opened it to the page where someone, presumably Ragnok, had left a hammered brass bookmark.

Daphne cleared her throat and began to read.

“Okay, there’s a bunch of legal stuff, which is unremarkable, as it’s a commentary on law. Then there’s this, which is underlined: ‘The fealty owed by vassals to liege lords conquered in individual combat may be deemed an asset of the vanquished liege lord, depending upon the wording of the oath of fealty. The conqueror has a year and a day to claim this fealty, before the oath is deemed extinguished,’” Daphne read. “Subtle, Ragnok, really subtle.”

Turning the book over she read the title page “‘A commentary on the uncommon laws of England,

Scotland and Wales' by some guy named Blackstone," Daphne murmured.

"So, who knows the details about your betrothal to Riddle?" Harry asked.

"You, me, Mum, Father, the midget, the late Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy," Daphne said, ticking off fingers as she recited names.

"Hermione, Andi, Augusta and Neville Longbottom, and Luna," Harry added.

"Well, unless it's the midget, which is bloody unlikely, our most likely source is Lucius," Daphne said.

"I think we might want to visit dear Lucius," Harry said.

"Let's talk to Mum and Father first," Daphne said.

#@#

"Nervous?" Harry asked as they passed through the gate leading to the Greengrass house.

"A bit," Daphne said. "Time to take my medicine like a big girl."

They entered the house through the kitchen. Mimsy was standing on a stool, rolling pastry of some sort. She stopped, turned and pointed a finger at Daphne.

"Mistress is unhappy with Missy," she said seriously. "Welcome back, Missy's Mister," she said, changing her expression.

"Yes, I know, I should have called," Daphne explained. "Where's Mum?"

"Mistress and Master are out by the fountain," Mimsy said. "I am glad that you are safe, Missy."

"Thank you, Mimsy," Daphne said.

Walking back through the house, they walked into the back garden. Harry took Daphne's hand and gave it a squeeze as they approached the fountain.

"Mum?" Daphne said, approaching her parents as they sat together on a bench by the fountain. "I'm sorry, I should have called."

"What happened?" Grace asked.

"I don't think this is the place to discuss it," Daphne said.

"Let us away to my office," Malcolm said.

#@#

“You were in Australia? Pull the other one, it summons the servants,” Grace said.

“She’s telling the truth, Madam Greengrass,” Harry said. “We Apparated there from the shadows.”

“From the shadows, fascinating,” Malcolm said. “You’ve done that before, I take it?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said.

“So, I was in Australia, talking to Hermione, one thing led to another, and I kind of got messed up as to what time it was here versus what time it was there, so I didn’t get back to England until three o’clock this morning,” Daphne said.

“England?” Grace said.

“I couldn’t find home from the shadows,” Daphne explained.

“So how did you get to England?” Malcolm asked.

“I Apparated to Harry,” Daphne said, smiling as she said it.

Malcolm slapped his thigh and laughed heartily. “Well, you don’t do things by halves, do you, daughter?”

“Evidently not,” Daphne said.

“And what was so important to discuss that you had to spend fifteen hours with Hermione?” Grace asked.

“Mum,” Daphne protested.

“I’m waiting,” Grace said.

“We were discussing which one of us should really be marrying Harry,” Daphne said, looking down at her shoes.

“I see,” Grace said. “What was your conclusion?”

“That I would be marrying Harry,” Daphne said. “That took about half an hour; the rest of the time was just girl-talk.”

“I don’t get a vote in this?” Harry asked.

“You already said yes,” Daphne said. “I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t making a colossal blunder. The woman loves you, fervently. I needed to know why she was making it easier for me to get to know you.”

“Well, bypassing that for the moment, we visited Gringotts this morning and received some

interesting news,” Harry said, changing the topic.

#@#

“Conclusions?” Malcolm asked.

“It was written by a committee,” Grace said.

“How so?” asked Harry.

“The story seems to have conflicting lines – you’re the next Dark Lord, you’re a pawn captured by my Dark Daughter, the Greengrass family is slightly lower than families who would sell their daughters into prostitution, the Greengrass family members are noble pureblood heroes, et cetera, et cetera,” Grace said. “One writer wants to make Daphne a femme fatale who manipulates the Dark Lord, another paints her as a homely girl who can only snag a man by magic.”

“Hey, I resent some of that,” Daphne said.

“Which parts?” Harry asked.

Daphne made the sign against evil and thrust her hand in Harry’s direction.

“If it’s any comfort, I think they’re looking for a picture where you look hot, because that would sell more newspapers,” Harry said.

“Not helping, Harry,” Daphne said.

“Obviously it’s coming from Malfoy, he’s the only one left who has knowledge of the betrothal and some motivation to cut Harry down to size,” Malcolm said.

“Why not the goblins?” Harry asked.

“What’s their benefit?” Grace asked.

“Hard to tell what motivates them, but Ragnok said that there were competing factions within the Goblin nation, some of whom would like to see my head on a pike,” Harry said.

“I don’t buy it,” Grace said. “The motive of this article is to neutralize you politically, that’s something humans would worry about, not goblins.”

“Maybe,” Harry said. “Look, there’s no love lost between me and any of the Malfoys, but I’m willing to consider alternatives.”

“That’s fair,” Grace said.

“I’d love to know how Ragnok got the story,” Malcolm said. “He doesn’t miss much; he has a better intelligence service than many nations.”

Daphne handed Mr. Rufus' card to Malcolm.

"Okay and we now know who's in charge of special operations," Malcolm said.

"What's the significance of the legal commentary?" Grace asked.

"It means that if I want, I own the surviving Death Eaters," Harry said.

"Quite appropriate, as that's how Riddle got many of them in the first place," Malcolm said.

"How so?" Harry asked.

"During Grindelwald's rise in Germany, there was an affiliated cult in Britain that called themselves the Knights of Walpurgis. After Grindelwald was defeated, they more or less disbanded, except for the die-hard true believers. Riddle challenged their leader in individual combat, and became the new leader. It gave him an instant organization and power base. From there he did selective recruiting and years later we fought the war of his first rising," Malcolm said.

"Not a lot of Death Eaters left now," Grace observed.

"Only one of interest at the moment," Harry said. "I think I need to study some more of Riddle's papers."

"Mum, are we having dinner together tonight?" Daphne asked.

"Your father is taking me to the symphony," Grace said.

"What about the midget?" Daphne queried.

"She's going too, but she's taking one of her school chums," Grace said.

"Pick me up for dinner tonight?" Daphne asked Harry.

"I think that can be arranged," Harry said. "C'mon, walk me out."

Daphne fell in step with Harry placing her hand in the crook of his elbow.

Once they were out of the room, Grace asked "Malcolm, can *you* Apparate to a person?"

Malcolm looked thoughtful. "I don't know, I've never tried; it's supposed to be fiendishly tricky, but that may just be the conventional wisdom of lazy minds. I guess I'm going to have to find out."

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"Let me know when I get too clingy," Daphne said. "I don't like being apart from you."

“Just a few more days, my queen,” Harry said.

Daphne smiled and pecked him on the lips. Harry then faded from sight.

#@#

Queenie’s Diary – June 1998 - enciphered entry

There are days that I truly resent my Mum’s questions. Today is one of those days. It was a day that started with Harry sitting on my bed, caressing my breast as he shed tears because the vision of me nursing our child was so beautiful.

It ended, of course, with an interrogation over pizza in which Harry was insinuating that Hermione and I were rolling dice to see who got to claim him. That wasn’t how I’d planned on the day ending. I wanted to show him that I did indeed own a seven-button winter weight white nightgown and a dark blue dressing gown. Both of them are hanging in my wardrobe right now. He’s already seen the summer weight nightgown (apparently he approves) and the summer dressing gown (apparently he doesn’t care).

Harry met me at the gate and we dual Apparated into London where he knew of an “authentic pizza joint.” I had a Mexican beer; he had some fizzy stuff, ginger beer maybe. We negotiated the toppings and settled on a pizza that was half pineapple and bacon with the other half topped by sausage, peppers and mushrooms. Once our order was placed, he pierced me with those emerald eyes.

“Now exactly why were you talking to Hermione?” He asked.

So I pulled the cork and let spill about how I feared that he was marrying me out of duty and how he obviously loved Hermione and she loved him.

He laughed at me.

“I spent a year on the run with her, living in a tent. Don’t you think that if I loved Hermione in that fashion that I’d have told her by now?”

“But you do love Hermione,” I protested.

“Yeah, but not like that.”

“Not the sweaty kind of love?” I said, not bothering to suppress a smile.

“Nope,” Harry said. “What were you going to do if Hermione said that she loved me and wanted to be Mrs. Potter?”

“I was going to break the betrothal so you could be with her,” I confessed.

“You twit.”

I blanched at that.

“You’re putting me in a box, Daphne, anything I say or do you’re liable to interpret as me being dutiful. I thought I was supposed to be the one with loathing and self doubt. Do you trust me?”

“Last time you asked me that you then asked me to let go of a broom at an altitude of one hundred feet.”

“Yeah, and what happened?”

“You taught me how to fly.”

“I really do want to marry you, Daphne; it’s not a matter of rescuing a damsel or doing my duty. You’re going to have to decide that you trust me on this.”

Then our pizza arrived.

If I was to be fair to the pizza, I’d write a couple of pages here about it, as it was really, really good, but frankly, it was just a pizza, not a transcendental experience, so I won’t.

After we each had a slice, I started the conversation again.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?” he asked.

“For not trusting you, for going behind your back.”

“Daphne, that’s Hermione’s mistake, thinking that she knows best, that’s why she’s in such hot water with her mum and dad.”

“From you that’s high praise,” I said.

“Being compared to Hermione?”

“Yes,” I said, hoping that I was defusing this bomb I’d cobbled together.

“Don’t kid yourself. For being a book-smart girl, she can do some really bone-headed things, usually because she thinks she knows better. For her the problem is most of the time she really does know better, but the fact remains that God didn’t go on vacation and leave her in charge.”

He picked up another slice.

“I appreciate that you were trying to put my interests ahead of yours. What I don’t appreciate is that you took the decision out of my hands. I called it quits with Ginny because I thought I knew what was best for her, and I didn’t even give her a chance to discuss it. I know now that was stupid, really stupid. You’re smarter than that.”

He bit into the slice, rather savagely.

“You know what? I’m not betrothed to Hermione; let’s not talk about her anymore.”

And so the topic closed.

Harry’s like that – he has it out, lets me know where I’ve screwed up, and then – bam – the subject is closed.

At least that’s how it looks right now. Maybe he’ll bring it up again in the future and rub my nose in it, but somehow, I don’t think so.

After that we talked about a lot of things – wedding plans, our future, where we’d be in five years, things like that. We talked about the midget and Mum and Father. I told him the very condensed version of how Grace became my mum.

He told me more about living in the cupboard under the stairs and learning the contents of the prophecy. He told me about how for years he didn’t expect to live to see his eighteenth birthday, much less twenty-one.

I said something silly about how I’d have to make his eighteenth birthday special.

Yeah, right, maybe I’ll dig deep into my hidden femme fatale, but somehow I imagine I just get up early that day and make cinnamon buns, assuming of course, that Mum will teach me how.

He took me home and kissed me at the gate and then faded away.

Tomorrow’s another day.

End of entry – Checksum 7147

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Queenie’s Diary – June 1998 - enciphered entry

The next day started as most do, with a trip to the loo followed by breakfast. Mimsy handed me a note in Harry’s sloppy handwriting (it truly is wretched) “Come by my place before noon if you want to see the Longbottoms after the procedure.”

I reckoned that win, lose or draw, Harry wanted me there, so there I’d be.

I met Harry at Grimmauld Place and then we dual Apparated to the travel point outside St. Mungo’s. I’m fully capable of doing it solo, but I enjoy his embrace as we fold through space. He doesn’t seem to mind either.

The staff at St. Mungo’s seemed to be expecting us, as there were pre-printed badges with our names at the reception desk. The witch running the desk seemed a bit shocked when she read the

badge that she was handing Harry, but she recovered nicely.

Rather than going upstairs to the Thickey ward, we went into the basement, and then down a sloping hallway that ended in a doorway marked "Ritual Room."

Once inside, the Ritual Room seemed to be indirectly lit – there were no ceiling fixtures or wall sconces, but it was somehow fairly bright. We were behind a transparent barrier – kind of a room surrounding an inner room.

An older man, Frank Longbottom I presumed, was suspended vertically above a containment circle in the inner room. Rune covered stones were sitting on the perimeter of the circle, each of them glowing a different shade of light. One by one they started to go dark. A man in a green Healer robe handed the stones to an older woman in a white robe who weighed each stone and recorded the weight in a notebook. When there were finally no more stones left, the Healer broke the containment circle and gently floated Mr. Longbottom into a wheelchair that just moments earlier hadn't been there. Mr. Longbottom's face was slack and then it assumed a more normal expression, that of a sleeping man. He then started squirming and opened his eyes.

"Who are you?" he rasped to the healer.

"I'm Healer Hodge," the healer replied. Healer Hodge had a broad smile on his face.

"Do you know who you are?" Hodge asked.

"What a stupid question, I'm Frank Longbottom. Where's Alice?"

"She's undergoing treatment right now; you'll be able to see her in about a half hour."

"Are we at St. Mungo's?"

"Yes Mister Longbottom," Hodge answered. "It's 1998, you've been out of things for about sixteen years."

"What the hell happened to me?" Longbottom asked.

"We'll get to that – there are some people who'd like to see you."

"Okay."

Neville came into the inner room, as Harry and I came in through a different entry.

"James?" Frank Longbottom asked, looking at Harry.

"James was my dad," Harry said. "I'm told that I look like him."

"Was?" Frank asked.

“He’s been dead since I was very young.”

Frank Longbottom pointed to me. “You look like Fiona, you her granddaughter?”

“Daughter,” I said.

Then he pointed to Neville. “You look familiar, but I don’t know why.”

“Hi, Dad,” Neville said.

“Neville?”

I can’t say a lot about what happened after that. Neville and his dad embraced and we quietly excused ourselves.

When we were alone again, I told Harry that I was very proud of him.

Circumstances forced my hand on starting a relationship with Harry, but I don’t regret it one bit; I’m certain that I couldn’t select a better man if I had all the time in the world, but then my objectivity is a little impaired right now.

End of Entry – Checksum 1317

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Queenie’s Diary – June 1998 - enciphered entry

Needless to say, I didn’t see much of Neville after that day. He did, however, send over some severely pruned ‘Rosa Mundi’ bushes that he’d ripped out of an old garden he was replacing on the grounds of Longbottom Hall. It’s an old, old rose variety named, if memory serves me correctly, for a mistress of Henry II of England. It’s hearty enough that it grows in the public gardens in Aberdeen, so I reckoned that it would do well in the back garden of Grimmauld Place. I don’t have time to do proper gardening anywhere this summer, but Harry’s okay with me ripping a few things out (most of which are completely dead) and planting a few specimens here and there. I planted two of the roses at Grimmauld Place and then two more at our little house in Aberdeen.

I’m getting cranky (crankier?) about being apart from Harry. This wedding business is for the birds – several times a day I just say to heck with it, we should elope, but Harry remains adamant.

On the plus side, he no longer flinches when I get close to him, and he’s quite affectionate.

We try to eat at least one meal a day together, some days it’s lunch with Andi and Teddy, other days it’s dinner with my family, but most days it’s breakfast.

This morning we filled out the survey that Fr. Backer will be using for our counseling. I handed Harry his copy and suggested that he just get it over with, filling it out at the kitchen table and putting it back into the envelope. He did so, using a pencil to fill in the blanks, check multiple

choice answers and write a sentence or two for the open ended questions. I filled mine out at the same time, folded it, put it in the “Daphne” envelope and sealed it. Minutes later Harry finished his, put it in the “Harry” envelope, and handed it to me. I put both envelopes together in the big envelope that Fr. Backer had originally sent to us and made a mental note that I should ask Father where I address the envelope for return service.

“Daphne?”

“Yes?”

“Question twenty-four?”

“What one’s that, Harry?”

“What’s our approach to contraception?” he asked, trying to not look embarrassed.

“Well, Harry,” I drawled. “Abstinence is one hundred percent effective.”

“Very funny,” he replied.

“Under the terms of the betrothal there’s a ritual that I’ll perform the first time we come together,” I said, feeling my own face get a bit warm. “Because of the ritual, we won’t be using anything at all the first time; after that...” my mouth was open, but I couldn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry, Harry, apparently I really can’t talk about that.”

“Damn grimoire magic,” he said.

“It’s not going to be a problem,” I said, surprised that I could say that much.

Later that day we had a working lunch with Luna. She rather thoroughly interviewed us for almost three hours in preparation for our preemptive article that is scheduled to appear the Monday after the first reading of the banns. I was hoping for the hat trick and wanted to invite Harry for dinner that evening, but he said he needed to talk to the midget about some ‘fiddly magic’ and he’d see me tomorrow – for breakfast.

End of entry – Checksum 1549

#@#

Breakfast was at the Greengrass estate, so Harry Apparated to the gate and walked in, noticing as usual that the gate closed behind him. He figured that someday he’d ask how that worked, but it never became important enough to spend more than a moment thinking of it.

Daphne met him at the door and held her arms out.

“You have to pay the toll,” she said ominously.

“The troll?” Harry said.

“That would be the midget, give me a hug, mister,” she said.

They embraced, and then they kissed. It was a slow, thorough kiss and Daphne ended up with her back against the door frame.

“You’re getting better,” she said.

“Thanks, you’re not bad either,” he replied.

She fell in step with him.

“After breakfast Moppet needs to measure you,” Daphne said.

“For what?” Harry asked.

“For your suit coat and kilt,” Daphne answered.

“My what?” Harry asked.

“Harry, we already went over this,” Daphne protested.

“I must have not been listening. I’m wearing a kilt?”

“It’s not a horse, it’s not an elephant, it’s not a pink tuxedo,” Daphne said.

“Oh, okay, I guess,” Harry said. “Do I have to go traditional?”

“That’s up to you,” she said with a smirk.

“Call me Sassenach if you want, but I always felt that I shouldn’t have a breeze down there,” Harry said.

“My gown is blue, and I’ll be wearing a sash with our family tartan, which has blue and green in it,” Daphne explained. “You’ll be wearing a black suit coat and a kilt – the kilt will be in the Gordon tartan.”

“Gordon? I’m a Potter,” Harry objected.

“You are Peverell of House Peverell, remember?” Daphne chided. “Peverell is a minor branch of Clan Gordon, so you’re entitled to wear the tartan.”

“What’s the Gordon tartan look like?” Harry asked.

“Ever seen the Black Watch?” Daphne asked. “It’s like that – blue, green and black with little yellow lines. Thankfully, we won’t clash, although that’s more of an issue for the midget than it is for me.”

“Astoria?”

“She’s really particular about colors – won’t wear pink on a dare, and gets really, really snooty about what colors she thinks go together, or not.”

Breakfast was eaten and then Harry was given an efficient measuring by Moppet, the other Greengrass house elf.

“What’s your day look like, Daphne?” Harry asked.

“Pretty open, what do you have in mind?” Daphne asked.

“I think it’s time that we pay a visit to one of my relatives,” Harry said.

“Are we snatching from the shadows?” Daphne said with pleasure.

“That would be yes,” Harry said, with equal pleasure.

#@#

Rebuilding the Malfoy fortune and influence was top priority to Lucius, although truth be told, he was spending more time with Narcissa these days and this investment of time was rekindling the romance that had blossomed briefly before he’d pledged his allegiance to the late Dark Lord.

Voldemort had been very free with the Malfoy money, but he hadn’t had access to all of it, so there was still a respectable amount left, especially after Lucius liquidated a few of his lesser real estate holdings. He had some Muggle rental property and a Muggle hotel that he’d just sold, allowing him to pay off the last of his creditors. He was low on cash, but he was no longer dreading unscheduled Floo calls. Narcissa was off collecting rents from the Wizard tenants, a task that usually took her the full day. Lucius had no idea where Draco might be, and frankly didn’t much care. He took off his shoes and padded off into his study. He never saw the wand appear behind him.

When he was revived, he couldn’t see and he was outside somewhere, the sounds were no longer the sounds of Malfoy manor.

“You can untie him now,” a male voice murmured. He felt long fingers undo the ropes holding his hands behind his back and felt a fabric bag lift from his head.

A man and woman dressed in black sat opposite him at a rude wooden table. It looked like a Muggle park of some sort. His wand sat on the table in front of him.

He looked again at the couple, recognizing them at last. He smiled.

“Hello Lucky,” said Harry Potter.

“If you wished an audience with me in the future, I recommend that you go through my secretary,”

Lucius said stiffly.

“But Lucky, you don’t have a secretary any more, and Narcissa is out taking care of business,” Potter said.

“My name is Lucius,” he said with some pride.

“Your name is whatever I say it is, Lucky,” Potter said.

A round disc of leather lay on the table in front of Potter; it was scratched with various runes.

“Recognize this?” Potter asked.

“Should I?” Lucius asked, feigning indifference.

Potter put one finger down on the disc. A searing flame erupted in Lucius’ left arm. Without thinking he grabbed his arm with his right hand, which did nothing to abate the burning. Potter removed his finger from the disc and the burning ceased.

“Let me tell you a little story, Lucky,” Potter began. “Your father, Abraxas, was a well to do pureblood, he became quite taken with the rabble-rouser Grindelwald when Abraxas was visiting Germany, and when he came back to England, he helped found the Knights of Walpurgis here in England. Sound familiar? I don’t know what he was thinking, but he swore a personal oath of fealty to Cuthbert Waffling, grand chief of the Knights of Walpurgis.

“One fine summer’s day, a stranger came to visit and dueled with Cuthbert, and left him dead on the dueling field, which is how a half-blood named Tom Riddle became the new chief of the Knights of Walpurgis, only Riddle was now calling himself Lord Voldemort, and the Knights become the Death Eaters. Abraxas became a Death Eater because his oath of fealty transferred by Right of Conquest. Stop me if this is getting boring,” Potter said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lucius said.

Potter touched the disc again and a different searing pain swept up Lucius’ spine and out through his arms and legs. Potter took his finger off the disc.

“Yes, it happened,” Lucius said through gritted teeth.

“Poor Abraxas died of the Dragon Pox and his son decided that the new power in Britain was going to be this Voldemort fellow and this son also swore a personal oath of fealty to the pretend Lord. It seems that bad judgment runs in this family, because Abraxas’ grandson swore an identical oath to this pretender too.”

“Yes, but we have learned from our mistakes,” Lucius said.

“Oh, I doubt that,” Potter said, moving his finger to the disc again.

“That won’t be necessary,” Lucius said hurriedly.

“I know, Lucky, I know how the Dark Mark works and what it can do. I know how I can claim the fealty of Riddle’s vassals. This is your lucky day, Lucky, I’ve come to collect.”

“How could you possibly know?” Lucius protested.

“Know that you slipped Riddle’s old diary into Ginny Weasley’s books at the bookstore? Know that you were punished severely when Riddle found out about that unauthorized operation? Know that Riddle took your wand when he took over your manor house? Know that you’re the source for the article the Daily Prophet is writing about me?” Potter asked.

Lucius struck out for his wand. Potter didn’t move at all. Lucius aimed the wand and snarled “Reducto.”

Nothing happened.

“You don’t have any magic left, Lucky, I took it all,” Potter said quietly.

“You bastard,” Lucius growled.

“Oh no, that was Riddle, he’s the one who marked you with that silly tattoo, the one that lets the liege lord tap into the magic of his vassals. Let me use plain words, Lucky,” Potter said, his voice just a hair louder.

“I am Harry James Potter, I defeated your liege lord Tom Marvolo Riddle in individual combat, and by Right of Conquest, I am claiming the fealty you once owed Tom Marvolo Riddle,” Harry said.

“What do you want?” Lucius asked, his shoulders slumping.

“Oh, many things, Lucky. I want to change Wizarding Britain, I want to marry this woman and raise my family in peace, and I want to change the world. Meet the new boss, a bit different from the old boss, but still *your* boss,” Potter said, smiling for the first time.

“I’m of no use to you without magic,” Lucius said, a spark coming to his eyes.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Potter said. “I’m giving you two tasks, Lucky. The first task is to insure that article doesn’t run in the Daily Prophet until after the Solstice.”

“And the second?”

Potter dug into a pocket and rolled a smooth black glass orb across the table. “You’re going to record every crime you’ve committed on that recording orb,” Potter said with a smirk.

“And then return it to you, no doubt,” Lucius said.

“I don’t need the orb, Lucky, the orb is a reminder for you,” Potter spat. “I walked into the most heavily warded part of your manor, your sanctum sanctorum, and you never knew I was there. I grabbed you today, I can grab you tomorrow. I’m not going to touch Narcissa, not yet, but I have no reason to show any mercy to little Draco.”

“What’s the or-else?” Lucius asked.

“I’ll know if you fill up the orb, and I’ll know if you leave it blank. If it’s not full by dawn, the magic that I’m returning to you at the end of our conversation will leave you again, permanently. It may take a while for you to persuade the Daily Prophet, but I’ll give you all the time you need there, assuming that it doesn’t print before the Solstice.

“Let me make a few ground rules very, very clear. If you touch my friends, you die. If you hire talent to touch my friends, you die. Muggle baiting and Mudblood hunting is out, in fact you aren’t even going to use the word Mudblood, ever again. If you lie to me, I’ll strip your magic. If you fail to come when I call you, I’ll strip your magic. I will, from time to time, ask you to do things, things you’re pretty good at, and if you do them to your utmost ability, you might even recover some of the fortune and influence you squandered on the half-blood Riddle. I am your liege lord now, so I’ll also be watching out for your interests, when they don’t conflict with my own.

“Do you have any questions?”

“How do I reach you?” Lucius asked.

“Well, if you weren’t a troglodyte, you could call me on the phone, but you’re stuck in the Victorian age, so you can just leave a message on the orb, I’ll get it pretty much in real time,” Harry said.

“You are my liege lord,” Lucius said bitterly.

“What is your name?” Potter asked.

“My name is Lucky.”

“Very good,” Potter said, and he then faded from sight.

Lucius felt a surge of power course through his body. He picked up his wand again and waved it in a lazy circle. A sparrow appeared on the table, looked at him, and then flew away.

“Damn you Potter,” Lucius spat.

“You don’t have to love me, Lucky, you just have to do as I say,” said Potter, although he was nowhere to be seen.

Lucius silently cast the revealing charm – nothing happened.

“That one doesn’t work, Lucky, but do keep trying. Toodles.”

#@#

The penultimate Sunday of Harry’s single life found him seated at the back of the sanctuary of the Alford Parish Church, known to all simply as “the Kirk.” The minister paused before pronouncing the benediction.

“It is my privilege to announce the banns of marriage for Daphne Isabella Greengrass and Harry James Potter, who will come together in holy matrimony next week, here at the Kirk at one o’clock in the afternoon. A reception will follow afterwards at the pub,” the minister said, nodding as he saw varied responses to the announcement on the faces in the congregation, especially the part about the pub.

He then said the benediction and dismissed the congregation.

“Seven days,” Harry said, blending into the crowd leaving the Kirk.

On Monday a special edition of the Quibbler hit the streets containing the first in a series of articles on the inside story of the second rise of the pretender, Tom Riddle. Also included in the article was a two page spread on the upcoming wedding of Daphne Isabella Greengrass to Harry James Potter, complete with photographs showing a happy couple standing by a horse barn.

The Quibbler sold that issue out in less than half an hour, and it was reprinted four times before the end of the day, each printing run being larger than the one before. The Daily Prophet was curiously silent, although the letters to the editor that week discussed things found only in the Quibbler article.

At Neville’s recommendation, Harry had hired a social secretary, Eloise Hopkins (*nee* Midgen) who screened all of Harry’s mail, sorting it into four categories she had nominated as: routine, important, dangerous and outright disgusting.

The latter category included a steady stream of ladies’ garments (and a few from gentlemen) which were routinely laundered and then donated to a women’s shelter in London. Important correspondence was delivered twice a day, routine correspondence twice a week, and the dangerous correspondence was usually binned.

By Tuesday personal letters began to arrive from people Harry actually knew, congratulating him on his impending wedding. Harry had sent out very few wedding invitations: the surviving faculty of Hogwarts, the Weasley family, Ollivander and Susan Bones.

Daphne’s invitation list was primarily family (all abroad) and a handful of classmates from school. The people of Alford, of course, presumed that they’d all been invited, so the assumption was that the wedding would be predominantly mundane, which was mentioned in the invitations sent out to magical guests.

Daphne fetched Hermione from Australia on Wednesday and she quickly became a fixture at the Greengrass estate, staying in the other, less colorful guest room. Hermione tried very hard to not give opinions on any of the logistics or arrangements, and spent much of her time picking Grace's brain on Wizarding culture and customs.

After a somewhat confusing discussion over dinner, it was agreed that Neville was serving more or less as the best man, Hermione as the Maid of Honor, and Astoria as the too-old-to-be-a-flower-girl-too-young-to-be-the-maid-of-honor, which she actually relished, as she was in the thick of things, but actually had no responsibilities.

Hermione's dress, purchased in Australia, was soundly vetoed by Astoria on the (to her) self-evident principle that the "color was all wrong." After a frustrating afternoon spent shopping in Aberdeen, the coven, as the ladies had taken to calling themselves, descended on Augusta's trove of classic couture and found a dress that fit and flattered Hermione, was somewhat consistent with the bride's dress, but was still deemed by Astoria to be "stupidly wrong in color." Astoria returned to the Greengrass estate by Floo and came back with a palette of acrylic paint, which she dutifully blended until she was satisfied.

"Queenie, make a color blob just like this," Astoria commanded.

Daphne did as she was told and held it up.

"Much better," Astoria decided with a grin. "Now apply it to the dress, let's see what it looks like in this blue rather than that simply awful teal."

Daphne followed the instructions and thankfully the coven pronounced themselves satisfied, and then proceeded to discuss what would be worn Thursday evening for the wedding rehearsal.

Harry met with Neville for breakfast on Thursday morning, where he was regaled with stories of Frank and Alice, who had moved from the Thickey ward to a rehabilitation ward on a different floor of St. Mungo's. Alice had progressed to the point that she was capable of being discharged, but she refused to go home without Frank, which Harry thought was as it should be.

"Is Longbottom Hall ready for them?" Harry asked.

"It will be when it needs to be," Neville said with determination.

"Their original rooms were on the second floor, but I'm moving them down to the first floor, because Dad's still not so good on stairs. He's trying to rebuild sixteen years of muscle tone, and even with potions and magic, he's got a ways to go," Neville said.

"That therapist has been making eyes at you," Harry said, half seriously.

"Yeah, right," Neville said. "It's not like it is with that git Potter, but 'the Longbottom' seems to have its own fan base. I'm in no hurry."

"Well, I wasn't planning on getting married this year either," Harry said.

“Yeah, but, remember, you’re a git, so weird stuff happens to you that the rest of us just wonder about,” Neville said.

“What’s to wonder?”

“Primarily who you pissed on in a prior life that Karma keeps treating you like its own personal chew toy,” Neville said.

“You’ve got to admit that things are looking up,” Harry said.

“Yeah, you hit the jackpot with Daphne,” Neville said. “It could have been so much worse.”

“Bellatrix was already dead by the time Riddle snuffed it,” Harry objected.

“Umbridge?”

“Now, that’s just cruel,” Harry said.

“We set for tonight?” Neville asked.

“Yup, you’re going to love dinner afterwards,” Harry said.

#@#

The now obligatory wedding rehearsal took about forty-five minutes from start to finish, the procession with the pipers being omitted, because Homer assured them that his crew had done more than a dozen weddings in the last two years, so there was nothing to rehearse.

The organist arrived, having spent most of the afternoon pumping various musical compositions through the pipe organ, trying to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the instrument and the acoustics of the church. He pronounced himself satisfied and played two pieces during the rehearsal that Harry found pleasant, but were otherwise unknown to him. Father Backer was there in his grey habit and directed traffic like a metropolitan policeman, and after two run-throughs, pronounced himself satisfied.

The wedding party then proceeded to Aberdeen where Harry had reserved the little Italian restaurant (‘not a pizza joint’) for the evening, much to the delight of Rosa, the proprietress, who was thrilled to hear that Harry had proposed to Daphne after lunch in her restaurant.

Harry reckoned that the real story was way too complicated, and if Rosa wanted to misunderstand what he’d told her, then he was content with her version of the story.

Andi was the first to leave, stating that Teddy needed to be put to bed, but the others continued talking until eleven o’clock, when Rosa pointedly started stacking up chairs on the tables that weren’t in use.

Harry caught Neville’s eye, and the envelope handed to her as they left the restaurant was slightly

thicker and heavier than had originally been negotiated. Rosa hefted the envelope, gave Harry a sharp glance, and then nodded.

Malcolm rather brusquely escorted Astoria and Grace into the house, leaving Harry and Daphne by the fountain.

“Still want to elope?” Harry asked.

“Absolutely,” Daphne said vehemently. “A lot of people would be disappointed, but I don’t want a spectacle wedding, I just want to be married, to you.”

“Soon, my queen,” Harry said soothingly.

“Come on inside,” Daphne said. “I’ve got something to show you.”

Without waiting for Harry to respond, she stood and walked toward the house. Harry caught up quickly.

Passing by the kitchen, Daphne announced, “Mum, I’m taking Harry up to my room to show him something.”

Astoria remarked “I bet!” which was met with shushing sounds from the kitchen.

Harry had never been in Daphne’s room, and was unsurprised to find that it was cluttered with bookshelves, and had one shelf dedicated to a row of equestrian trophies.

“I’ve been meaning to show you this for a while,” Daphne said, opening a wardrobe where two garments hung on hangers.

Without saying anything further, she pulled out a white winter weight nightgown, and ran her fingers over the seven buttons at the neckline. She then pulled out the blue dressing gown and held them both out to Harry with a mischievous expression.

“Seen these before?”

“They’re real?” Harry asked. “They’re really real?”

“Ask Mum if you want, but I got these for Christmas this year,” Daphne said.

“We’re going to have children,” Harry said with a tone of awe.

“Not immediately,” Daphne said, “but eventually, it’s generally considered to be part of the package.”

“I’m speechless,” Harry said.

“Say thank you, and then say good-night,” Daphne said, hanging the garments back up. “C’mon,

get out of my room, there's only so much self-control this girl wants to exercise."

#@#

By agreement, there was no stag party or hen night. Neville took Harry fishing on Saturday on the river Tweed, teaching him the intricacies of how to cast flies, before he agreed with Harry that it was a waste of time, and they relocated to Aberdeen where they paid a heavily stubbled and tattooed man to ferry them around in a powerboat for the afternoon and went exploring on the coast.

"Nervous?" Neville asked in a quiet moment.

"Yes and no," Harry answered. "I'm convinced it's the right thing, I'm convinced that she's the one, I'm worried that I'm going to make a fool of myself Sunday night, and I'm hoping she doesn't wake up next week regretting all of this."

"You'll do fine," Neville said reassuringly. "Andi said she was most thorough with Adam and Eve."

"You know about that?" Harry asked nervously.

"Harry, the whole wedding party knows about that," Neville answered.

"I must not have been paying attention," Harry said.

"Yeah, you were staring at Daphne; you seem to be doing that a lot."

"I think I'm done being a chew toy, Neville," Harry said seriously.

"I think you're right," Neville agreed.

"Let's head in."

#@#

Sunday began as most days do, the sun appeared on the horizon, children awoke, mothers and fathers made breakfast, the day began. For some it was a day to get dressed and go to church, for others it was a day to recover from the excesses of the night before, and for yet others it was just another day.

With some grumbling, Kreacher had made changes to the suite on the third floor, somehow expanding both Harry and Daphne's room. Two wardrobes were moved into the master bedroom while one remained in "Mistress' room" which Harry found somewhat amusing, as Daphne hadn't managed to move any clothes over to Grimmauld Place; all the wardrobes were empty.

Kreacher had polished Harry's sturdy shoes to a high sheen and otherwise cleaned and pressed what Harry dubbed his "wedding costume" with every button buffed. The costume was waiting

upstairs, Harry knew, but for some reason he dawdled in the kitchen. He went outside to the garden. They'd cleared the majority of the dead and overgrown plants from the garden, but even by Privet Drive standards, it was pretty bleak.

Daphne had planted roses by either side of the door, but the plants had been severely cut back prior to transplanting, so it looked more like a cluster of thorn sticks with an odd leaf or two than something that would provide beauty to the garden.

“Not time for everything,” Harry mused.

He finished the last of his coffee and went back into the kitchen, washing and rinsing the cup, leaving it on the counter to dry. When he next returned to the kitchen, it would be dried and back in the cupboard; it was hard to remember to leave something for Kreacher to do.

He looked at the clock once again and decided that he'd procrastinated enough. He walked the stairs to the second story, showered, shaved and then put “the costume” on, fussing with his socks to make some effort to having the ribs be more or less straight.

Kilt, shirt, waistcoat, suit coat, all were donned, adjusted, inspected, and with a sigh, he reckoned he'd done what he could. His sporran, which he called a “furry purse”, was lined with mokeskin, allowing him to store more than would normally be fit into the small space.

He tucked his wallet, keys, and Riddle's old wand into the sporran, tucking his own wand into the scabbard he wore more or less without any thought on his left arm. He closed up Grimmauld Place and walked out into the back garden. When next he stepped through that doorway he'd be married.

#@#

The bridal party had assembled at the north end of town, waiting for the last of the congregation to disperse from the service at the Kirk. The groom's party was at the south end of town: Harry, Neville and Andi with Teddy in a stroller. At the appointed time the first piper began to play and after the first tune concluded, the bridal party began its slow procession southward to the Kirk.

Harry found it odd that an instrument he associated with marching armies would also be used to bring his bride to her wedding, but he chalked that up as just another thing that didn't make sense to a Sassenach groom.

As the bridal party crossed the first intersection, they were joined by another piper, and then another until at last four pipers led the bridal party to the steps of the Kirk. Upon entering the Kirk, Harry noticed two men dressed in black with black kilts on the groom's side of the sanctuary. On their left arm each man carried a black bowler adorned with a blood red hatband. Gazing over to the bride's side of the sanctuary, he saw two more men in black suit coats and black kilts. They too were cradling black bowlers in their arms.

The groom's party entered the church and as he turned and watched out the open front doors, he saw Mr. Rufus standing outside, dressed identically to the men Harry had noticed inside the

church. Mr. Rufus caught his eye, tipped his hat, and then moved back into the crowd that was milling outside the steps of the church.

The pipers crossed the threshold of the church and two of the pipers went silent, the four marching slowly up the aisle, dividing when they reached the front, two silent pipers moving to the groom's side, one newly silent piper moving to the bride's side, and Homer, beaming proudly as he played, piping the bride into the church.

Harry didn't remember much of the details after that point. The bridal party assembled, Homer's pipe wheezed into silence and the pipers moved to the back of the church. Father Backer began the service. He spoke briefly about Harry and Daphne and about the purpose of marriage, and then vows were exchanged and rings were given and received. Harry heard it all, but processed very little of it until the time came that a beaming Daphne was standing before him, holding both of his hands. He bent his head, kissed her ringed hand, and then kissed his wife.

Homer began to play again and the pipers led the newly married Harry and Daphne Potter to the pub.

Harry decided to never mention the fact that the only thing he could clearly remember from the whole wedding was the feeling of a single drop of sweat slowly rolling down his back.

#@#

The pub was larger than Harry remembered from the times he'd been there previously. If anyone else noticed that it had tripled in size, they failed to mention it. The bar was open and the Baron was picking up the tab.

The pipers played several tunes, leading the crowd in dancing and a few songs while Harry and Daphne worked the crowd, moving from group to group, shaking hands, receiving congratulations and blessings, and kissing far more strangers than Harry ever thought possible.

They'd decided against a receiving line, opting for this more mobile approach instead. When people began to queue up, forming an impromptu line, polite young men in black suits and black kilts moved them back into the crowd without anyone ever noticing this most subtle of crowd controls.

Harry danced a slow waltz with his new bride, a round of toasts were made, and he then made sure that he had at least one dance each with Astoria, Hermione, Grace and Andi before returning to working the floor. Neville kept handing him bits of food and drink, which he consumed before moving to the next person waiting for his attention.

Daphne came up to him as another waltz played. By now Astoria was playing on an upright piano next to the bar and doing a commendable job being heard above the din of the crowd.

"I would like one more dance with my husband, and then we need to get out of here, Harry, before I go mad and start cursing everyone in sight," Daphne said sweetly into his ear.

Harry took her hand and began to dance on the somewhat crowded dance floor. "Feeling eager?" he teased, whispering in her ear.

"Feeling claustrophobic," Daphne replied. "The eager will come later when I'm not being smothered by all these people."

"They all seem happy to see you," Harry said.

"If I wasn't the Baron's daughter, I suspect they'd be a little more reserved," Daphne said.

"Such is the price of fame," Harry said sagely. "Most of the people here haven't a clue who I am apart from the lucky bloke who's marrying you."

"Yes, you are a lucky man," Daphne said with a smirk.

They finished the waltz and then made their way off the dance floor, Daphne pausing to change shoes before leaving the pub.

"Are you sober?" she asked Harry.

"I haven't had anything all night, Neville's made sure of it," Harry replied.

Daphne wrapped her arms around Harry, nuzzling into his neck. "Take me home, husband, and make me yours."

The couple faded from sight as the party carried on without them.

Astoria looked up from the piano and noticed that Daphne was gone. She then noticed that Daphne's valise was still by the door. She got up from the piano and made her way to Grace.

"Mum, Daphne and Harry are gone, but she left her valise," she said with some concern.

Grace looked around and smiled. "I don't think that will be a problem, dear."

"But that's where her pretty stuff is, Mum," Astoria objected.

Grace laughed. "Astoria, believe me, she really doesn't need it, not tonight."

#@#

They Apparated to the garden behind Grimmauld Place from the shadows and then entered the house through the kitchen door.

"I loved the music and the dancing, and really, some of my favorite people in the world were there, but being the center of attention for hours is not what I crave," Daphne said, taking off her veil. "Hold me, my husband."

They embraced and then walked into the parlor where Daphne collapsed onto a couch and took off her shoes. “Ohh, that’s nice,” she moaned.

“Weren’t you supposed to bring a bag?” Harry asked.

“Hang the bag, I’m not going back,” Daphne said. “You got a spare toothbrush?”

“I think I can manage that,” Harry said. “Do you want me to just throw a blanket over you and let you snooze here? You look cream-crackered.”

“You’re not going to get out of your marital duties that easily, Potter!” Daphne exclaimed. “I’ll catch my breath soon. Not only am I intrinsically interested in going to bed with you, but I can’t wait to get this *thing* out of my head.”

“You’d said something about a ritual?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, oh blast, all my stuff’s in the valise! Harry, I’ll need a felt-tip pen and a scribe – it can be anything, really, preferably steel,” Daphne said.

“That’s different,” Harry said, going to his office to retrieve a felt-tip pen and the scribe he used for communication mirrors.

While Harry was in the office, Daphne ascended the stairs. “Come join me in the master’s bedroom,” she called from the stairwell.

Harry returned in a moment with the pen and scribe. Daphne had turned down the sheets and was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Come here, I need your shirt off,” Daphne said.

“Aren’t you supposed to buy me a drink first?” Harry quipped.

“Very funny, but Father already paid for an open bar, if you didn’t take advantage of it, it’s hardly my fault,” Daphne retorted.

Harry shucked his jacket, setting it on the back of a chair, and then began unbuttoning his shirt. Daphne watched with rapt interest.

“Enjoying this?”

“Immensely,” she replied. “You’ll get your turn, this dress has about a hundred buttons going down the back, and I can’t reach most of them.”

Harry laid his shirt down on top of his jacket, and then removed his undershirt.

Daphne made a throaty noise as she ran her palm across his abdomen.

Taking a deep breath, she uncapped the felt tip pen and began drawing three lines of rune above his navel.

“What do they say?” Harry asked, trying to decipher the runes which from his vantage were upside down.

“It’s not terribly important, I could write ‘I belong to Daphne’ in English and it would probably work, but this is the ritual that’s in that book,” Daphne said. “The pen is just to tell me where to make the scratches.”

“What scratches?” Harry asked.

“The ones I’m going to draw on top of the runes,” Daphne said, laying down the felt tip pen and picking up the scribe. Harry winced at the first scratch, but Daphne’s touch was lighter after that. “Done.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “Uh, Daphne, why is there powder on the sheets?”

“Ask me tomorrow,” Daphne said, hoping her tone communicated her meaning. “Right now, I need help getting out of this dress.”

As it turned out, the dress had ninety-nine buttons, starting at the neckline and traveling down the back of the dress to the waist.

“This is better than Christmas,” Harry exclaimed.

“Well, I’m glad you think so,” Daphne said, shivering as Harry kissed her back as he undid the buttons. “Unhook me.”

“Uh, sure, I’m not really good at that,” Harry said.

“Somehow, that’s comforting to hear,” Daphne said.

He unclipped the bra strap and peeled the dress forward, leaving her in knickers and stockings.

Daphne turned to face Harry. “Finish unwrapping the present, husband, I’m yours.”

#@#

Daphne awoke at first light, stretching in bed and then leaving quietly as to not wake Harry. Padding naked to the wardrobe she pulled out an antique nightgown she presumed had once belonged to Dorea Black before she became a Potter. As she put the nightgown on, she smiled at the thought, and then put on a dressing gown. She made her way down the stairs to the kitchen.

Kreacher appeared, bobbed and said in a croaking voice “Does Mistress desire tea or breakfast?”

“Thank you, Kreacher, but no, I just wanted to sit in the garden for a moment before I go back to

bed,” Daphne said quietly, hoping that the sound wouldn’t travel.

She felt a thrum of magic as she opened the door; the garden was humming with energy. The Rosa Mundi bush was now three feet high and full of leaves and buds that were opening before her eyes. As she touched a waxy leaf she could hear magic in the plant, it was singing a thin, faint tune. Listening carefully she picked out elements in the music, including a strong bass note that – that felt like Harry!

She sat down on the ground, startled that she could hear magic in the grass too. She began to laugh until she started coughing.

“I’ve won, I’ve won it all,” she said, tears streaming down her face.

#@#

An hour after daybreak, Daphne was finishing a cup of tea and contemplating going back to bed; goodness knows she needed some more sleep. Her head turned as she heard a key in the door, which then pushed open.

“Hello,” Grace called softly.

“I’m in here, Mum,” Daphne replied.

“What are you doing here?” Grace asked.

“This is my home, Mum, I am the mistress of this house,” Daphne said.

“I know that, what I was wondering was why you were in the kitchen, and not in bed,” Grace said.

“I needed to see the garden,” Daphne said. “It’s a lot greener than it was yesterday. I can hear the magic in the plants and in the dirt.”

Grace put her hands in front of her mouth. “Oh, my!” she exclaimed softly.

“I can hear Harry’s magic in the plants,” Daphne said.

“Harry’s magic?”

“He loves me, Mum, he really loves me,” Daphne said.

Grace came along side Daphne and hugged her, kneeling beside her chair.

“So, why are you here, Mum?” Daphne asked.

“I came to make some cinnamon rolls,” Grace said with a broad smile. “How was last night?”

“I owe Andi,” Daphne said. “The first time was clumsy, but very nice. The times after that were a

lot better. I'm sore, I didn't get much sleep, but as much as I'd like to learn how you make those rolls, I think I'm going back to bed."

"Good night, dear, I'll let myself out after the rolls are done," Grace said.

"Thanks, Mum."

#@#

Daphne slipped into the room and dug under the covers, spooning up against her husband. She let out a contented sigh and let the soft noise of his breathing lull her to sleep.

When she next awoke she had reversed positions and Harry was spooned against her backside. She felt a hand slide up her thigh, which she intercepted with her own hand.

"Playground's very temporarily closed for routine maintenance, my husband," she said, grinning as she spoke.

She received a garbled reply.

She rolled over and gave her husband a kiss.

"You awake?" she asked.

"I am now," Harry replied.

"Mum's downstairs, I think we have cinnamon rolls waiting for us," Daphne said.

#@#

Grace was pulling the last pan of rolls from the oven as they entered the kitchen.

"What am I supposed to call you now?" Harry asked.

Grace pondered that. "What do you want to call me?"

"Can I call you 'Mum'?" Harry asked.

"If you like, it'll make me feel old, but I think I'm ready for that," Grace said. "I suggest you let them cool for ten minutes before eating them."

"Can you stay?" Daphne asked.

Grace looked to Harry.

"I'm fine with having an honored guest our first morning of married life," Harry said.

He went to the cool pantry and pulled a basket of eggs.

“Bacon and eggs okay?” Harry asked.

“If there’s coffee,” Grace replied.

Harry pointed to a brass urn on a side table.

“Kreacher has made great strides in producing drinkable coffee,” Harry said, moving to pull saucers and cups from the cupboard.

Grace and Daphne poured coffee for themselves and then Daphne prepared a cup for Harry as he worked the stove, scrambling eggs and frying bacon, while a six pieces of bread toasted themselves under the grill. Once he’d turned the bacon and bread, he picked up the cup, took a sip and made an appreciative groan.

“Best cup of the day,” he said.

When he’d finished with the eggs and bacon, he loaded the now buttered toast on a plate each, added some bacon and the topped with the scrambled eggs.

“Dig in, ladies,” Harry said as he took the seat opposite his new wife.

When they have finished, Daphne narrowly beat Harry in grabbing a cinnamon roll “Grace, I want to learn how to make these,” Harry said.

“Your wife already has a request in for a tutorial,” Grace said.

“This isn’t witch magic that can’t be divulged to mere wizards?” Harry said playfully.

“No,” Grace replied.

“It should be,” Daphne said.

“Speaking of which,” Grace said, “I think it’s time for me to tell you a story.”

Harry looked to Daphne, who nodded.

“Legally, Daphne is now a Potter,” Grace began “but magically, you, Harry are now a Greengrass.

“When the founders established Hogwarts quite some time ago, they really revolutionized the study and teaching of magic. Rather than sending your children to apprentice with this witch or that wizard and get in depth tuition in a narrow field of magic, a broad education was provided in the basic fields that could be taught.

“Before the school was established, family magic was recorded in grimoires, many of which contained endless variations on spells every wizard and witch now learns in the first four years at Hogwarts. Beyond quirky little spells and charms, a few of the grimoires dealt with hereditary magic.”

“Isn’t all magic hereditary?” Harry asked. “I’m magical because my parents were magical.”

“In a certain sense, yes,” Grace replied. “But some things are passed on only in family lines. Parseltongue, for one, can’t be taught, it has to be inherited.

“There is a whole body of magic pertaining to life, known categorically as earth magic, practiced by earth witches,” Grace said.

“Not earth wizards?” Harry asked.

“A few,” Grace replied. “They were quite rare.”

“A folk custom almost worldwide is for farmers to make love to their wives in their fields, hoping to improve the fertility of the earth, or in some instances, the fertility of the couple. The basis for this custom is a variety of earth magic, in which earth witches would bless the fields, imbuing them with magic.” Grace explained.

Harry looked at Daphne. She nodded in reply.

“You put *dirt* in our bed?” Harry asked.

Daphne nodded, smiling broadly. “I sterilized it in the oven first, but yes, it was topsoil from the back garden.”

“So now we have happy plants?” Harry asked.

“We’ll get to that,” Daphne said.

“Family names – they can be place names, or son-of names, or occupational names like Potter, Smith, Brewer, Baker, Chandler,” Grace said. “What do you think Greengrass means?”

“Someone who has really green grass?” Harry said with a grin. “Malcolm said something about the fields being ‘magically green.’ Are you an earth witch?” Harry asked Grace.

“No, Malcolm’s first wife was an earth witch,” Grace said.

“But she wasn’t a Greengrass,” Harry quibbled.

“Not by birth, but by magic, just like you’re a Greengrass now,” Grace said.

“It’s a very odd gift – it occurs primarily among the women in the bloodline, but the wizards can bring wives into the bloodline, and if the witch is powerful enough, they make thumping good earth witches. There’s a catch, though, the wizards can only do that once, with their first wife.”

“So you can’t be an earth witch?” Harry asked.

“Not unless it was a gift in my family’s blood line,” Grace said.

“Fiona Greengrass was the last earth witch in Great Britain. Daphne’s sister emigrated to Canada years ago. When Daphne was born, it was hoped that she’d be an earth witch too, if she was married to a sufficiently powerful wizard,” Grace explained.

“You played Riddle,” Harry said. “You were hoping that Daphne would become an earth witch.”

“We were hoping many things, Harry, but yes, that was one of the considerations,” Grace said.

“It takes marriage to a powerful wizard to get the gift to manifest,” Grace continued. “But if the wizard loves the witch, and the witch loves the wizard in return, a bit of his magic is infused in hers, and subsequently in the earth magic.”

“And now comes the part that I have to explain,” Daphne said. “Please join me outside, husband.” She extended her hand to Harry.

Harry took the hand and they walked out into the back garden.

“When I touch the plant, you should sense what I sense from the plant,” Daphne explained, gesturing to the Rosa Mundi bushes.

“Wow,” Harry exclaimed. “Those plants were sticks yesterday.”

The Rosa Mundi bush shivered and produced seven blossoms that opened simultaneously.

“That’s not normal,” Harry said.

“No, it’s quite magical. Every time we came together last night, magic was infused into the soil,” Daphne explained. She then placed her hand around a bud.

“Music,” Harry said in wonder.

“That’s how I hear it too. The top notes, the reedy ones, that’s the native magic in the plant itself. The middle notes, the ones that have the busy melody, that’s my magic,” Daphne said.

“And the ‘boom-boom-boom’ at the bottom?” Harry said.

“That, my loving husband is my husband’s magic,” Daphne said. “Which is why I am the happiest witch in all Britain this morning.”

“I *told* you to trust me,” Harry said.

“And I did,” Daphne said, letting go of the plant to cradle Harry’s face with her hand.

“I played Riddle, but I won you,” she said before giving him a tender kiss.

Grace went back into the kitchen and quietly closed the door.

She figured she'd leave through the front door after she covered up the cinnamon rolls with a clean towel.

#@#

Epilogue

Weeks later, Harry and Daphne traveled to the standing stones, intending to visit the rocking stone.

Harry and Daphne placed their hands on the stone. They both felt a surge of magic that hit their hands and then receded.

The promise is kept, why are you here?

“We’re here to talk to you, spirit. Have you a name?” Harry asked.

I have no name, but I am the binder of promises.

“Do you wish to be released from the stone?” Daphne asked.

I have been here a long time.

Harry and Daphne stood silent. Elementals, as all spirits, had a different sense of time than mortals.

I wish to return to the earth.

Daphne smiled at Harry. He'd hypothesized that the spirit was an elemental, conscripted into service by wizards unknown in a prior age.

Daphne poured heat into the stone, which began to glow after some time. At the proper time, Harry pulsed power into the stone. The stone glowed brighter, and then dissolved to dust.

Thanksgiving.

Harry and Daphne exchanged glances. In a way, this brought closure to the whole nightmare of being betrothed to Riddle and then being possessed by an ancient spirit as promise binder.

Bless me now, earth witch.

Harry gave Daphne a quizzical look.

“Hey, it’s a tough job, but somebody’s got to do it,” Daphne said with a smirk.

“Oh, the sacrifices I make for Scotland,” Harry said, bringing his hand to cup Daphne’s cheek.

He kissed her tenderly; she kissed him back.

#@#

Postscript

Thus ends the tale *By Right of Conquest*.

I'd originally envisioned this as a six or seven chapter story, of approximately 60,000 words. It grew to a seven chapter story of 81,896 words; so much for my abilities as an estimator.

All stories start with a plot device, or a character, or a concept that proves to be sufficiently entertaining that a story gets written. My hook began with a contemplation of just what all would convey through *Right of Conquest*. (By training, I'm a lawyer, I think about weird things.)

For those who will quibble with the notion that oaths of fealty would transfer to the conqueror, I would point out that the Grand Armée of Napoleon was largely made up of conscripts (officers and enlisted) from nations conquered by Napoleon's France including 300,000 Frenchmen, Rhineland Germans, and Dutchmen, 95,000 Poles, 35,000 Austrians, 30,000 Italians, 24,000 Bavarians, 20,000 Saxons, 20,000 Prussians, 17,000 Westphalians, 15,000 Swiss, 4,000 Portuguese and 3,500 Croats.

The world of *By Right of Conquest* builds upon JKR's greatest construction, the world of Magical Britain, which has served as such a great playground for thousands of fanfic writers, including this one. I introduce a few new characters, flesh out one of the ciphers in canon (Daphne) and break almost all of the fanon conventions about the Slytherin Ice Queen. I also play a bit with magic, as is my privilege as a fanfic author.

The Deathly Hallows epilogue is quite unsatisfactory on many levels, but for me the chief complaint is that really nothing changes in Wizarding Britain.

Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

In fleshing out this story, I borrowed the notion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from real life and spliced it into my subleased universe.

So, what happens afterwards?

Daphne and Harry move to Aberdeen. After private study, they both end up enrolling at the Uni, graduating several years later, Harry with a degree in Finance, Daphne with a degree in soil science. In Daphne's last year at Aberdeen, she gave birth to their first child, Granuaile Hermione Potter, and two years after that, gave birth to twin boys. She has an active practice as an earth witch, and has helped a large number of farmers with the quality of their soil. Granuaile is certain to be an earth witch, so Harry and Daphne are keeping their eyes peeled for a suitable match in the future.

Harry works as a venture capitalist, seeding the formation of a number of mundane and magical businesses, some of which succeed, including a school where Hogwarts graduates can master

enough Muggle subjects that they can subsequently enroll in a mundane University and go on for further study.

Hermione ends up in a long term relationship with Neville, but as of the time I stopped thinking about the story arc, they were not yet married. Frank and Alice start a second family, and Neville plays uncle to two young Longbottoms at Longbottom Hall.

When not playing the piano at the wedding reception, Astoria spent a good deal of time dancing with Mr. Rufus and kept in contact over the years. Upon graduating from Hogwarts, she began apprenticing as an operative in the Red Cap division of Gringotts, the first human to be so employed. She earns a degree in languages at Aberdeen and eventually ends up working for MI-5. As of the time I'm writing this postscript, she's not yet married.

Ron spends about a decade in Macau, and returns to England with a sizable fortune and a part ownership in a casino in Macau. He wrote two popular books on Poker, and is a notorious participant in the international Poker Tournament circuit.

Lucius Malfoy, alone among the surviving Death Eaters, manages to evade a stretch in Azkaban, largely because he was so ineffective as an operative for Riddle during the second rising of the pretender. He is now an operative for Harry Potter, influencing people in Wizarding business and politics. Draco Malfoy tried working as porn star but discovered the only way he was ever going to make money was against his morals (the few that he had) before emigrating to America, where he disappeared somewhere in Los Angeles.

Grace and Malcolm continue to work for the betterment of Marr, and enjoy at long last the pleasure of playing with grandchildren.

I am an American. At one time I anglicized all my spellings for Fan Fiction, as that was the convention on the Sugarquill, one of the first places I was ever archived. I don't do that anymore.

I'm not a Scot, so if I've mangled something in setting this story in Scotland, please forgive me. I am somewhat entitled to wear the Gordon tartan, as on my mother's side we're one of the minor families that are included in that clan, which is as close as you'll ever see me injecting myself into a story.

If you have a question you'd like to ask one of the characters in this story, ask it in a review. They may well answer you.