

Maskirovat

Maskirova

This year, things had been a blur as Hermione left Hogwarts, perhaps for the last time. It was an hour into the ride home on the Express before she noticed that Harry had slipped out of their car and not returned. She asked Ginny as to his whereabouts and received a terse reply that he wanted to be alone right now, which made sense as much as anything made sense. Nothing had been the same since the night that Dumbledore died.

On platform 9 & ¾, he approached her and initiated a hug before saying his goodbyes. He slipped a piece of paper into her hand before he turned to join the Dursleys, and mouthed to her, "call me." His eyes expressed a small fraction of the emotions she knew roiled inside her best friend. Her observations were sidetracked, however, by what followed.

Ginny and Ron were met on the platform by Arthur and Molly, the rest of the brothers conspicuously absent. Ginny whispered something to Molly before she broke into tears, and clung to Molly for comfort. Ron told his dad that he'd catch up with them, but he wanted to speak to Hermione before they left--alone.

"Hermione?" Ron said, his voice squeaking a bit. Hermione nodded, saying nothing. Ron closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath before he opened them again. "I bungled this year up, big time. I never wanted to be with Lavender, I wanted to be with you, but I never got up the nerve to bring things out so we could talk about them, and given how things are so up in the air with school and the war and Dumbledore and all, I didn't want to wait for the perfect chance, because perfect chances never come, do they?" he gushed.

Hermione steeled herself, hoping that she read the signs correctly this time; she'd been disappointed so many times before. "What are you trying to say, Ron?"

Ron bit his lip, pulling his trunk onto the centre of the luggage trolley. As he walked he was fiddling with the cover on Pigwidgeon's covered cage. "I've fancied you for years, Hermione. You're really an amazing girl, you know. I wondered what you thought of us, the two of us, trying to make a go of it, you know, t-t-together," he stuttered.

Hermione walked for a few steps in silence before she brushed a stray lock of crimson hair from Ron's eyes, the eyes that had captivated her since the first day of school, what seemed like a lifetime ago. She'd rehearsed this moment endlessly, but nothing she'd ever rehearsed seemed fit for the moment; she'd have to improvise. Her hand moved behind his head, pulling him down towards her so she could do this properly. Abandoning her grip on her luggage trolley, Hermione locked her fingers behind his head, holding his head still as she kissed him. The first kiss was the gentlest of kisses, followed by bolder, hungrier expressions. She thrilled at the look in his eyes when he opened them, trying to focus on her.

"Is that a 'yes' then?" he asked hesitantly.

She cocked her head to one side, and looked at him incredulously. "Ronald Weasley, you daft prat!" she exploded. "Of course it's a 'yes!' I'm not in the habit of kissing boys like that when I'm saying no!" she said, pushing at his chest gently before reaching for her luggage trolley. "Can you come to dinner, meet my Mum and Dad properly?" she asked as they pulled their carts down the long causeway leading to the car park.

"Dinner?" he asked, looking stunned at the prospect. "How will I get there?"

"Are you a wizard or not?" she asked rhetorically. She stopped for a moment to write out the Apparation coordinates on the back of an envelope that she folded and tucked into this pocket.

Albert and Monica Granger came around the corner at this moment, stopping in their conversation long enough to process the fact that their daughter was walking hand in hand with one of her classmates--the one she usually fought with the most.

"Mum, Dad, you remember Ron, don't you?"

"Of course," Monica answered as Albert nodded. "We passed your family on the way here and wondered where you were."

Squeezing Hermione's hand gently, Ron looked at them apprehensively. "I was here, right where I belonged all along," he said to Hermione.

"Mum, can Ron come over for dinner this week?" Hermione asked, hoping that she didn't sound too much like a little girl arranging a play date. Monica looked at Albert, who was grinning wryly.

"Friday night should be fine, unless you two had other plans," Albert said gravely. "Would you like any of your other friends over that night?" he asked.

"Uh, no, just Ron would be fine," Hermione said, caught slightly unaware by the question.

"Just Ron it will be then," Monica said cheerfully as they stepped into the car park.

Ron's face had the 'what do I do now' look that he usually wore when defending the goals during a Quidditch match. Hermione rescued him by standing on tip-toe to give him a lingering, but chaste kiss on the lips. She normally didn't favour public displays of affection, but she was willing to make an exception given the remarkable circumstances.

"Oi! Ron! Are you coming or not?" she heard Ginny shout from across the car park where the Weasleys were gathered around a transit van decorated with WWW logos.

"Until Friday," he whispered. He pecked her on the cheek before pulling the trolley behind him at a fast pace, repeatedly looking over his shoulder with a satisfied grin on his face.

"Until Friday," Hermione echoed, purring with satisfaction.

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She discovered the note from Harry in her pocket that night as she got dressed for bed. It was well past the time that even good friends called one another on the telephone, so she promised herself that she'd call him first thing after breakfast. After an eventful evening, during which she gave a more or less accurate account of the year's events--minus a few unimportant details, such as her raging fury over the whole Ron-Lavender mess and other peripheral details--she slept fitfully. When she awoke she tried to convince herself that the kiss on the platform has not been a mirage or a Weasley prank gone bad. The next day was a work day for both of the adult Grangers, Mum to teach at the Uni hospital and Dad to the Surgery on his normal work day. Hermione cleaned up the remains from breakfast, and then unpacked her school trunk. She made a very important annotation on her calendar before rounding up the cordless phone, sitting in her favourite reading spot in her bedroom, and placing the call.

The phone rang an interminably long time before anyone picked it up. The Dursleys, apparently, did not believe in answering machines. The phone was picked up at last.

"Dursley residence," she heard a familiar voice say.

"Hello, Harry, it's me," Hermione said cheerfully.

"Well, aren't you the cheerful one?" he replied. "It wouldn't have anything to do with a certain Weasley screwing his courage to the sticking point yesterday?"

"It might," she replied, smiling broadly.

"Well, congratulations and all that -- may you have more success on that front than I've ever had," he said darkly.

"What do you mean, Harry? You and Ginny are getting along brilliantly," Hermione protested.

"Ginny and I broke up two days ago, Hermione," he said flatly.

"Oh! I didn't know. Harry, that's terrible!" Hermione said.

"Yeah, it is, but I really don't want to talk about it right now." Harry replied before Hermione could rip open fresh, self-inflicted wounds. "So, when can you come see me? I need your help with some projects."

"What sort of projects?" Hermione asked, intrigued.

"Projects that will only succeed if the smartest witch of her year applies her formidable intellect to them," he said.

"Oooh, flattery will get you all sorts of places, Mr. Potter," Hermione said.

"I'd hoped as much. Which is better for you, meeting during the day, say at lunchtime, or during the evening?" he asked.

"During the day, I guess, I'm home for the next two weeks--before I visit the Burrow before the wedding. Let me see if I can borrow Mum's car tomorrow. I'm driving now, you know." She said proudly. "I started over the Christmas hols."

"Yeah, driver's license, Apparation license, you're bound to be going places, Miss Granger," he said somewhat enviously.

"Let's say right now that I'll pick you up for lunch tomorrow -- if I can't get the car, I'll call back and let you know," Hermione offered.

"Sounds like a plan -- but it's not a date, right?" Harry asked.

"No, I've got one of those this Friday night," Hermione said. "This is just lunch."

"I'll look forward to it then," he said, leaving a long silence. "I'm really happy for the two of you -- you deserve some happiness. Well, enough of that -- until tomorrow, eh?"

"Bye, Harry," she said.

"Bye," he said before the line went dead.

"Oh, Harry, what have you done now?" she asked Crookshanks, who was looking at her from his perch on her bed pillow.

Crookshanks didn't answer.

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Mum gave Hermione an odd look as she handed her the keys to her old car, a lovingly restored Cooper Sport. "Hermione," she said, clearing her throat, "Hermione, dear, you are the most responsible girl I know, which is saying a lot."

"Yes, Mum?" Hermione said, looking up over her steaming cup of tea.

"If the terrorists come anywhere near you two when you're out. . ."

"Terrorists?" Hermione asked with a puzzled look on her face.

"The Deadheads, or whatever they're called," Monica said, suddenly flustering.

"Death Eaters, Mum," Hermione corrected.

"If the Death Eaters come anywhere near you when you're out – just get out, don't worry about the car – it's a thing, I can always buy another," Monica said, giving her a healthy squeeze.

"Thanks, Mum," Hermione said, feeling rather choked up herself.

She finished breakfast while reading through *The Times*, followed by the *Daily Prophet*. Knowing what she knew now, she wasn't sure that either paper was shedding as much light as they could on the current events, which was no big surprise. She loaded the dishwasher and changed into respectable, if somewhat worn clothes. She looked carefully at the map of magical England before concentrating on the Burrow's Apparation point. With no small amount of satisfaction, she noted that she Apparated to the Burrow with only a faint *pop*.

The Apparation point was mid-way to the orchard where she'd sat and watched dozens of improvised Quidditch games over the past five summers. Such frivolities seemed alien now, as if they were part of someone else's life. The absurdity of starting a new relationship during the midst of a shooting war was not lost on her. She plodded heavily to the Burrow, and tried to remember why she came to the Burrow in the first place.

"He's not here, you know," Ginny said as she walked behind her.

Hermione startled. "I didn't come here to see *him*, I came to see *you*," she said, trying to catch her breath.

"I'm here," she said, doing a little pirouette while holding the basket of fresh eggs high above her head. She curtsied briefly and then walked into the kitchen; she clattered cupboard doors as she put the groceries away.

"I came to talk," Hermione said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know about you and Harry."

"Yeah, we discussed taking out an advert in the *Daily Prophet*, but in the end we decided against it," Ginny said, refilling the egg bin in the cold pantry.

"So, how do you feel?" Hermione asked.

Ginny said nothing, putting canned goods away into the dry pantry. "How do I feel?" she echoed. "I feel like I've been ripped open and I left half of my insides spread out on the lawn next to Dumbledore's grave. I feel useless; I feel angry; I feel violated! One moment we're humming along and I'm the queen of his world, the next moment I'm out on the kerb like last week's newspapers. Don't ask stupid questions, Hermione, don't ask me how I *feel*," she said, her jaw jutting out as if she dared herself to show the emotions boiling beneath the surface. She ran her fingers through her hair, holding the sides of her head for a moment. "I'm sorry, Hermione, you just caught me at a bad moment. I'm not supposed to take it out on you."

Hermione held her arms open. In an instant they were embracing; Ginny's body shook silently. "I'll get over it and get back to some semblance of normal soon; Phlegm's sister will be here in a week. We're going to become the best of buds, I'm sure. Then we'll have half of magical England here for The Wedding, at which time I'll be the perfect hostess and sister-in-law, living under the same roof with *him* without saying anything, then the three of you will take off to find booby-trapped bits of evil while I wait for my O.W.L. results."

"What do you want?" Hermione asked, moving a skein of scarlet hair away from her face.

"You're kidding, right? I want to stop hurting; I want to know that this is 'on hold' and not 'the end.' I'd like some assurance that he's going to survive; I want to know that he still feels something for me," Ginny said, pulling away from the embrace.

"I'm going to be seeing him today," Hermione said.

"Tell him 'hi' for me, anything else would get way too complex," Ginny said, turning away.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" Hermione asked.

"I'd love to, as long as you don't expect me to say anything."

"You're on," Hermione said, pausing as Ginny scribbled a note for Molly, telling her of her whereabouts.

It was a good walk.

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Motoring to Little Whinging was calming—much more serene than the town driving she'd done in Leeds to prepare for her driving examination. The Surrey countryside blended into suburban estates as she came closer to the repetitive conformity that marked Privet Drive. She parked her car at the kerb in front of Number Four, and unconsciously straightened herself as she got out of the car. As she approached the doorway, she rehearsed the various tacks she could take if Mrs. Dursley became unpleasant. The notion of turning her into a giraffe held great appeal at the moment.

After she pushed the button next to the doorframe, she heard the thunder of feet rushing down the stairs. The door clicked and then pulled open, revealing a slightly breathless Harry.

"Hey," he said, motioning that she should come in. "Would you like to eat or drink anything or use the facilities? How was the drive?"

Hermione laughed. "You sound like me, Harry. No, I don't care to eat or drink anything, but I would love to visit your loo, there wasn't a place to stop on the motorway here," she said. Harry wordlessly led the way to the loo, going upstairs afterward to fetch his notebook and shoes.

"Funny that you should mention that I sound like you; I was thinking much the same thing – since leaving Hogwarts I've read two books and I'm halfway through the next," he said.

"Oh, what are they?" Hermione asked with enthusiasm.

"Clausewitz book *On War*; a novel called *The Man who never was* and Dumbledore's diary – that's the one I'm halfway through – it's not a small book," he said.

"What's the connection?" Hermione asked, thinking about what she knew about Clausewitz.

"Dumbledore mentioned the books in his diary – evidently he had some involvement in the history behind the second book, and he'd read the first one several times; I'm reading his copy, it's heavily underlined and annotated," he said. "There's no one here but us right now, but I'd like to get out of here; this place gives me the creeps almost as bad as Padfoot's old place."

"So," Hermione said as Harry locked the door, "today's lunch, Magical or Muggle?"

"Muggle," Harry said with a snort. "I plan on ditching my minders once we get off the beaten path."

"You don't trust the Order?" Hermione asked.

"Not that *per se*, I sometimes think that the other side follows some of the less proficient members of the Order, plus I'm tired of the whole minder thing," he said as he opened Hermione's car door.

Hermione twisted the key in the ignition, bringing the Cooper's engine to life. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Go straight, I'll tell you when to turn," Harry said, counting under his breath as they drove. "Turn right at the next junction," he said, continuing to count.

"What are we counting?" Hermione asked, checking her rear and side mirrors.

"Turnings, turn left here!" he said suddenly. Hermione made a swift turn. The road turned into an alleyway between two rows of townhouses. "Now stop," he instructed. Harry stepped away from the car, sweeping his wand in small arcs around the car, and then shaking his wand like he was trying to fling drops of water from the end of the wand. He then motioned for Hermione to get out of the car, swishing his wand in arcs around her before running his wand parallel to the trunk of her body, looking carefully.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he finished.

"Looking for tracking charms," he said. "Tonks showed me how to do this once; it seems that one of Dung's friends, a bit of an odd bird named Crockett placed a tracking charm on my shoe once. Ever since that time, I get beyond the boundaries of the Ministry underage magic detectors and then look for magic that shouldn't be there."

"Very nice," Hermione commented. "Are we clean?"

"As far as I can tell," he said, breaking a smile for the first time that day. "I'm starved, let's get going."

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Lunch was Chinese food in a restaurant where they were the only non-oriental customers. "Another way to give the slip to anyone who's not a Metamorphagus," he said solemnly. They ate their lunch in relative silence, commenting only on what they were eating.

"So, what's the plan I need to inspect?" Hermione asked as she ate a segment of orange that was brought along with the bill. She didn't blink an eye when Harry placed a fifty pound note onto the tray along with the bill.

Harry unzipped the portfolio he'd brought from Dursleys, pushing a paper across the table that bore the title *Maskirovat*.

Hermione looked at the paper and made the humming noises that she made when she corrected Harry's essays. She pulled a biro from her pocket, underlined a phrase or two, and then made extensive notes in the margin. "What do you hope to accomplish, Harry?" she asked earnestly,

hoping that she could persuade him to change some of the details.

Harry answered her question, and then the logical follow-on questions. She didn't like the answers, but she had to admit that the scheme had a certain internal logic; no matter how much she felt that it could go terribly wrong. She made some more comments in the margins.

"What do you need me to do for this grand sham?" she asked after he ran out of explanations.

"Do you speak and write French?" he asked.

"Mais oui," she replied in a neutral Parisian accent.

"Can you translate this letter for me?" he asked, putting another piece of paper on the table.

Hermione read the letter swiftly, goggling when she realized the implications of the letter. "Have you thought this out? This could well kill her and bring the other into danger as well," she said.

"Yeah, I have. I'm not going to go forward unless they approve," he said.

"All right then," she sighed. "When do we start?" she asked.

"Today; we don't have a lot of time," he answered.

"Let's get started then," she replied, appreciating the carefully plotted strategy that went into the letter. "May God help us if we're wrong," she said grimly.

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Phillipe Delacour was a cautious man; one did not rise as far in the security apparatus of the French government as he had unless one had talent, caution and luck: he had a good measure of all three. When the letter came through the channels normally reserved for Order of the Phoenix, he applied the normal charms to verify the integrity of the message and the identity of the sender, only this time he validated a name he'd never seen in this context: Hermione Granger.

He knew who Hermione was, of course; he had kept abreast of events in Magical England ever since his daughter's involvement with the Triwizard Tournament. He knew enough to doubt the stories that he read about her in the popular press, but he also knew that if anyone was close to that most unusual young wizard he'd met years ago at the Triwizard Tournament, she was the witch. He read the letter carefully, trying to fathom the nuances of its requests. As responding to the content would require a full discussion with Babbette, and eventually with Gabrielle, there was nothing he could do at the moment, so he shoved the letter into his attaché and his worries into a mental box for processing at a later time, returning his attentions to the smuggling ring from Corsica. The smugglers were moving both Muggle contraband and dark artifacts that concerned the French Minister of Justice, who happened to be his superior.

That night, after dinner and a stroll back to their home, he pondered how he would broach the subject. Babbette saved him the trouble.

"Phillippe, what bothers you so? Normally you leave the office troubles at the office," she said, rubbing his shoulders as he sat down at the dinner table.

Phillippe looked at her with gratitude, and summoned his satchel from the front hallway. "Please read this, and then you will know why I am concerned." He pushed the note across the table as she sat down. "The letter is genuine, the translation is accurate. The original is in his hand, the translation is from his friend Hermione," he said.

"The girl who was the hostage of that Krum fellow?" she asked.

"The same," he replied.

Babbette read the letter once, got up to pour two glasses of wine and sat down to read the letter again. When she finished reading the letter for a second time she took a sip of wine and then spoke, carefully. "This will involve us in the English affairs," she said.

"We are marrying into an English family at the heart of the war; it is a bit late to quibble about that, my love," he said, looking at the soft light from the hallway as it played with the highlights in her hair. Even when she was not exercising her powers, she was as breathtakingly beautiful as the first day they'd met.

"What of her security afterwards?" she asked.

"The security at Beauxbatons is superb, the security here is without parallel; the only time she will be beyond my domain, she will be at the Burrow, which is adequate for the moment," he said. "Is that your only concern?"

"If it were not for him, we would have lost both Fleur and Gabrielle to the Merpeople, you know that as well as I," she said wearily. "We owe him; the House of Delacour pays its debts; the daughters of the dawn have a long memory."

"That's it? It is a mere matter of debt and honour?" he asked.

Babbette smiled. "Gabbi knows her own heart, and she has come fully into her powers; I do not doubt that she can do this. " She poured a third glass of wine and then called up the stairs. "Gabbi, please come down!"

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Gabrielle came after being called a second time, closing out the letter she was writing to her sometime suitor and classmate. He was a dear lad, but not the one. She was thirteen, turning fourteen in September shortly after she returned to Beauxbatons. As was the case with Veela-human hybrids, she matured normally until the age of eleven, after which she had a brief, ten month growth spurt combined with a tumultuous pubescence that brought both her womanly form and her Veela powers. She would be returning in the fall for her third year at Beauxbatons, but she was often mistaken for a sixth year student, much to the jealous dismay of her human classmates.

"You called, Mama?" she asked, giving her father a brief flash of Veela attraction, just to keep in practice. Papa was immune, of course, but it still didn't hurt to keep the skills sharp.

"Please read this," Mama said, pushing the note towards her daughter.

Gabrielle read the French translation, the English original and then the French translation again. "Why, yes, of course," she said, looking first at her mother, and then her father while a shy smile played across her lips..

"Have you considered the ramifications?" her father asked.

"I am bound," she said, looking to her mother and father. "No, ~~we~~ we are bound by a great debt. Besides, he is just a boy. What could happen?"

Babbette covered her smile by looking away. "*Just a boy,*" she thought to herself. "*Which explains the album of clippings beside your bed.*"

"I will do what is necessary," Gabrielle said, sitting as straight as she could, which had a comic effect given the fact that she was the shortest member of the household. "Delacours pay their debts and the daughters of the dawn have a long memory."

Babbette retrieved the letters, and kissed Gabrielle on the forehead. "It is settled then?" She looked from her daughter to her husband.

"I will reply tomorrow," Phillippe said.

"Goodnight Papa, Mama," Gabrielle said, kissing each of them on the forehead before alighting the stairs.

Gabrielle appeared serene and composed, but her mind simmered with possibilities. Her father was a spy; her mother was of the Veela; she was certain that she could do this--in fact, she looked forward to it.

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The Delacour family arrived at the Burrow with a bang. Mrs. Delacour was oohing and ahing as Molly led her through the Burrow and around the grounds. Mr. Delacour was much quieter, but he still insisted on reviewing all of the arrangements; he took care to personally test the wards surrounding the house and the grounds.

Ginny almost failed to notice the short blonde girl dressed in jeans and an oversized tee-shirt who was trying hard to stay out of the way. Ginny was working on yet another wedding related chore, rolling a seemingly endless mountain of coloured linen serviettes into tight little cylinders. The blonde girl sat down wordlessly across from her and after carefully watching how it was done, began to roll serviettes as well. She compared her own effort to those that Ginny had already completed. They worked together in silence until the newcomer startled Ginny by speaking.

"My name is Gabrielle, you must be Ginevra," she said in neutral tones almost without accent.

Ginny smiled. "Call me Ginny," she said.

"Gabbi," the blonde girl replied.

"I beg your pardon," Ginny said.

"You may call me Gabbi – only my Professors and my lunatic sister call me by my given name," she said.

"Hello, Gabbi, welcome to the Burrow," Ginny said.

"We have a farm in the country and an apartment in Paris; the Burrow is much like our farm. Fleur does not admit to knowing how to do anything on the farm, but I can assure you that she can pluck chickens."

Ginny chuckled. "She's been making out like she's never left Paris," she said.

"I'm not surprised. She's normally easy to get along with, but she's become a lunatic with these nuptials. My friends call her 'Bridezilla,'" Gabbi said, miming a stiff-legged monster.

"I've been calling her Phlegm," Ginny said.

"Phlegm? Oh!" Gabbi said, sniffing loudly before she made an exaggerated throat clearing sound. "That is so funny!" she said, laughing lightly.

"She really is all right," Ginny confided, "she loves Bill with all her heart, which is the important thing."

"Even with the scars, Bill is so 'andsome," Gabbi said.

"That's kind of you to say," Ginny said.

"It is not flattery; he looks like a warrior now. I will be proud to call him my brother-in-law." Gabbi pulled another stack of serviettes onto her lap for folding. The two girls worked together in a silence broken only by a minor key tune that Gabbi hummed under her breath. "Do you fly?" she asked as she finished the last serviette.

"Sure I fly, but Mum isn't going to cut me free from the chores until dinnertime," Ginny replied.

Gabbi smiled, bringing a look of mischief to her face. "You ask your mama if we can go flying; she will say 'yes' for me," she said with a twinkle in her pale blue eyes.

Ginny shook her head as she piled the last of the rolled-up serviettes into a large basket. "I don't think that's going to work," she said, but she carried the basket into the kitchen, where she heard Mum talking to Mrs. Delacour. "Mum, we've finished the serviettes, can I take Gabbi out to fly in the orchard?" she asked, trying to keep any whinging tone out of her voice.

"Why certainly, Ginny," Molly said.

"You are zuch a thoughtful zhild," Mrs. Delacour said, smiling warmly.

Ginny gave a hint of a curtsey and retreated from the kitchen, not believing her luck. She gave Gabbi a thumbs-up sign as she pushed the back door open. Gabbi raced upstairs, returning with a broom-shaped package under her arm as she raced to the broom shed behind Ginny.

The girls flew with abandon in the orchard for an hour until Mrs. Delacour came out to the orchard with a pitcher of iced fruit juice and a pair of glasses.

"Girls," she called in loud voice, "you must stop ze flying to re'aydrate yourselves. Zee sun, she is zo 'ot today."

Gabbi landed first and poured two glasses. She waited until Ginny had landed and grabbed a glass before drinking. "Thank you, Mama. The flying is good; Ginny is an excellent Chaser," she said.

"Is zat so?" Mrs. Delacour asked. "Per'aps she can 'elp you improve your own chazsing."

"Mama, I am well satisfied to play as a reserve," Gabbi said. Mrs. Delacour shook her head in disbelief and then walked back to the house.

"You play on the Beauxbatons team?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, but only as a reserve. Things are different at Beauxbatons, and there are many who believe that girls should not play Quidditch. Mama thinks that I should have used my allure to get a spot on the regular team, rather than settling for the reserves," Gabbi said with a slight measure of disdain.

"So why didn't you?" Ginny asked.

"I wanted to earn the spot, and my flying was not so good last year when I tried out. We cannot fly in the city, only at the farm, and I had spent the summer before the tryouts at the city. I got what I deserved, no more, no less," Gabbi said. "Mama thinks too much like a Veela at times."

"Gabbi, can I ask a question without seeming rude?" Ginny asked.

"Certainly."

"Why is it that you speak without much of an accent while your sister and Mum speak with such heavy accents?" Ginny asked.

"I guess the first explanation is that I listen more than either of them," Gabbi said with a smile. "But the real reason is that I just worked harder, starting two years ago," Gabbi said.

"After the Triwizard tournament?" Ginny said.

"Yes, that was my first visit to England, and I couldn't speak much more than 'hello' and 'good-bye,'" Gabbi said, pouring another glass of juice. "I convinced myself that I would learn to speak fluently, so I would not sound comic like my sister."

"It's part of her allure," Ginny said snidely.

"Phlegm thinks too much like a Veela also," Gabbi said dismissively. "It is one of our running arguments."

"What's it like?" Ginny asked, moving into the shade to sit down.

"It is a gift and it is a curse," Gabbi said. "How much do you know about Veela?"

"I'd never seen any until the World Cup in 1994. I know that they are beautiful and that men will do foolish things to please them," Ginny said.

"Pureblooded Veela are shape changers – their native form is birdlike, but they can assume a mammal form, which has benefited the Veela for centuries in dealing with Wizardkind. Among the Veela flocks women outnumber men by about five to four. Veela are monogamous," Gabbi said, "they are also short-lived."

"Which means that some of the girls have to find mates outside the flock," Ginny said.

"Exactly, which presents a bit of a problem: a pureblooded Veela female mated to a Veela male will live for about forty to fifty years; ten years to

mature, they mate at ten, will raise their brood the next fifteen years or so, and then if they are lucky, will live long enough to see their grandchildren.

"A Veela who mates with a mammal lives much longer – we don't know why – a lifespan approximately as long as a healthy Muggle, eighty or ninety years. Their union produces only daughters; no matter how hard Bill tries, Fleur will bear only girls, if she bears at all. The Human-Veela offspring are known as the daughters of the dawn, which relates to a Veela legend that is too tedious to repeat right now. Because of our influence on the larger, more powerful human culture and our longer life-spans, we do a lot to improve the lot of the Veela flock."

"What about your powers?" Ginny asked.

"That does not come until puberty," Gabbi replied. "It hits with a vengeance, much worse than for the human girls. The summer after the Triwizard tournament I grew four inches and curved out. It was hell, I tell you; I was constantly tripping over everything, crying at the drop of a hat and facing the consequences when I'd use my power on unsuspecting men. The allure is a two-way street – not only do I look good to them, but unfortunately they begin to look good to me. It takes a while to learn how to use it judiciously. When you are first learning about these powers you end up kissing a lot of strange men if you are not careful. My human classmates are jealous of my looks, which are only ordinary, and my allure, which is not. The funny thing is that all Veela believe in the power of love, so we try to find men who are immune to our allure and then see if they can learn to love us without it. Fleur was so excited when she first met Bill; he is almost totally immune to her powers," she said.

"So she didn't bewitch him?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"No, quite the opposite in fact, Fleur would write me these long pathetic letters about how smitten she was with Bill and how he was oblivious to her existence," Gabbi said with a laugh.

"I don't think that Bill was oblivious, I remember watching him watch her at the Triwizard tournament," Ginny protested.

"Ah yes, I watched that too, but you see Bill was not putty in her hands, which was difficult for Fleur to comprehend. She did not find many men immune to her allure until she came to England," Gabbi said, refilling her glass.

"So who else is immune?" Ginny asked.

"A few of your faculty members, the funny little Charms professor comes to mind, your father, and your friend Harry Potter," Gabbi replied.

"Harry's immune?" Ginny asked incredulously. "I don't believe it – I saw him almost fall out of the box at the World Cup when the Veela were performing."

Gabbi laughed. "That was a flock of pureblooded Veela, with enough numbers any human male will feel some pull. No, Fleur tried to overcome his resistance many times last year; she wrote me at length, describing the extent to which she could bend the will of the men she'd met in England. Your father is absolutely immune; Bill is immune most of the time, and Harry, he walks away when Fleur pours on the charm – she finds it most frustrating."

"Well, that explains a few things," Ginny said.

~+~

Hermione had mixed emotions when she received a reply to her letter, which was written in polite, very educated French. She sat down and translated the letter into English and then placed a phone call to Number Four Privet Drive. She needed to meet with Harry to get the plan into motion.

~+~

"Okay," Hermione said, "your grasp on Wizarding etiquette is fine; perhaps you can get some of that to rub off on Ron," she said with a grin.

"It's different for Ron," Harry protested. "He's born knowing this. People expect me to know it, but I was raised by Muggles who hate me, so there's a lot of stuff, Muggle and Wizard that I'm clueless about. If a woman extends her hand to me with her thumb pointing up, I'm supposed to shake her hand, but if her palm is pointing to the ground, I'm supposed to kiss the back of her hand, taking care to lower my head to her hand, not raise it to my lips – crimeny, when was I supposed to learn that? Aunt Petunia just wanted me out of sight, and Aunt Marge would have caned me if I'd ever attempted to kiss her hand."

"Yeah, I understand, but you've answered every question I've asked about the wedding protocol, you'll act like a high-born pureblood, which is good. Now, about the dancing," Hermione said.

"I never learned how," Harry said with embarrassment.

"But you danced at the Yule Ball," Hermione protested.

"One dance, and Parvati was leading like crazy. I was such a little berk at that Ball, it's a wonder that she doesn't hate me," Harry said.

"I think she cut you a lot of slack because you're famous, but she was miffed that you didn't fall in love with her," Hermione confided.

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

"Nope, Parvati had this fantasy that you'd fall in love with her on the dance floor, marry into her family, and spend the rest of your days playing Quidditch, importing spices from the Orient and dandling beautiful black-haired children on your knee," Hermione said, making a gagging motion in

reply to Harry's shocked expression. "Look, Harry, girls have a lot of princess fantasies that involve ballroom dancing. I would have never kissed Krum if I hadn't spent the night pressed up against him in the fanciest clothes I'd ever worn in my life. Maybe it's pheromones or something, but ballroom dancing starts a girl's mind travelling in certain paths."

"So if you were to teach me how to dance?" Harry began.

"I'd start feeling things for you that go beyond friendship – yes, Harry, don't look so shocked. I am a girl, remember? Stir into this mix the fact that I'm exploring a relationship with our mutual best friend, and you can see how complex it gets," Hermione said.

"So dance lessons are out?" Harry said, looking relieved.

"No, I *am* going to teach you how to dance. Who else is going to do it? Mrs. Figg can barely walk straight these days. I'm just not going to entertain fantasies that dancing practice for Bill's wedding is going to lead to my own wedding, and you can be sure that at the wedding I'm going to dance as much as I can with my favourite Weasley. Which leads to another fact: you're going to have to dance with Ginny, you know," Hermione said, fixing him with a steely glare.

"I know, one dance, after Bill and Fleur hit the dance floor," Harry said.

"Can you keep that one distant?" Hermione asked.

"Can I or do I want to?" Harry asked.

"Can you?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, I can. It's not going to be easy, though," Harry sighed.

"Right then, well, let's get on over to Mrs. Figg's parlour. You have some waltz steps to learn, and then we'll work on Samba and Tango," Hermione said.

~+~

After several admonitions to settle down from Mrs. Weasley, the girls were finally in bed with the lights out. Ginny thought that Gabbi had dropped off to sleep until she broke the silence from across the room.

"Ginny?"

"Yeah?"

"I really enjoyed today – the chores, the flying, and the talking. It's been nice," Gabbi said.

"Thanks, I liked it too. It seems I was wrong about Phlegm marrying into the family," Ginny said with a little snort.

"Ginny?"

"Hmm?"

"Why do you never talk about Harry? Every time his name comes up you either go silent or you try to change the subject," Gabbi observed.

"It's that obvious, eh?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Things are complicated with Harry," Ginny said.

"How complicated could they be?" Gabbi asked.

"I don't have enough time to go into it without spending the night crying again, and I've done too much of that to go back to it again," Ginny protested.

"He saved my life you know," Gabbi volunteered.

Ginny chuckled. "You mean the Triwizard Tournament? Hermione says that the hostages were never at risk."

Gabbi clucked her tongue in the dark. "Hermione is a very clever girl, but there are many things about the magical world that are not found in books."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, her curiosity piqued.

"The tasks for the Triwizard tournament were set in advance before any of the champions were chosen by the Goblet of Fire," Gabbi said.

"Of course, everyone knows that," Ginny said.

"When the Merpeople agreed to participate in the second task, the participants and the hostages were to be returned unharmed," Gabbi said, winding up into storytelling mode. "The Merpeople hate my father, it comes from something that happened before I was born. I suspect that he

caught them in some shady dealing, but that's speculation on my part. When the contestants and the hostages were chosen, the Merpeople altered the task so that all the champions and hostages would return unharmed, except for Phillippe Delacour's daughters – they would be the victims of an unfortunate accident."

"And Harry interfered with that plan?"

"Exactly," Gabbi replied.

"So what does that mean to you?" Ginny asked, being very glad that her expression could not be seen in the darkness.

"I'm not in love with him, if that's what you're getting at. I doubt that he remembers me at all – I was just a little girl then. I do owe him a great debt, however. I doubt that I'll ever get a chance to repay that," Gabbi said, sniffing a bit.

"I owe him a great debt too," Ginny said.

"Yes, and your feelings for him are still quite strong."

"I am so not going to discuss that with you tonight. Goodnight daughter of the dawn," Ginny said, rolling to her side.

"Goodnight witch," Gabbi replied.

~+~

"Okay, Harry, you're making good progress. I can't believe how far you've come in three lessons," Hermione said.

"I hear a 'but' coming," Harry said.

"You need to get the hang of the tango – you need to keep eye contact all the way through the second and third movements, and you need to – to kiss me at the end," Hermione said, flinching a little as she mentioned the last bit.

"You're having me on, right? No offence, Hermione, but kissing you is so wrong in so many ways," Harry complained.

"I know, Harry. I'm never going to tell Ron about this, and I wouldn't even do it if it wasn't so important," Hermione said in a matter of fact way.

"You make it sound like I'm repugnant or something," Harry said, smiling for the first time.

"Not in the least – if I felt nothing at all for you, this would be way easier, Harry, but I'm trying to stay within the just-friends boundary," Hermione said.

"Friends who dance the tango and kiss each other," Harry said.

"Exactly," Hermione said cueing the music. "Just keep your tongue out of my mouth and we'll do fine."

"Right then," Harry said, "grip, dip, slide, shimmy, but no tongue."

"You owe me, Harry, there aren't many people I'd do this for," she whispered in his ear as the music began.

"Yeah, right," Harry said, concentrating on the rhythm. "You're living out every witch's dream and you know it," he said before the music began to pick up in pace. He knew he could do this with Hermione, but still wasn't sure he could carry it off with a stranger at the wedding sufficient to convince the Wizarding world.

Hermione broke character for a moment, stepping away from him to stick her tongue out at him.

"Hey," Harry complained, "you said no tongues!"

Hermione stopped the music and burst into a fit of giggles which lasted through a shared bottle of Butterbeer. With the bottle drained and the giggles released, they resumed their positions, and began the music again.

~+~

Ginny awoke to the sound of clucking, a deep throaty sound from across the room that was followed by a string of curses: French, English, Italian and something that sounded like German. Gabbi was obviously peeved about something.

"What's the matter, Gabbi?" Ginny asked.

"My mother," was the hissed reply.

"What about her?" Ginny asked, pushing herself into a sitting position, covers draped over her legs.

"My mother is trying to dress me as a *courtesan*!" Gabbi exclaimed, dropping the towel she had wrapped around her still damp body. In a flash, she pulled on the oversized tee-shirt she'd worn yesterday as she pulled open the drawers of her bureau, looking at through the clothing her mother had unpacked yesterday when she had been out flying. Gabbi held up a wispy patch of string and lace. "Look!" she exclaimed.

"What's that?" Ginny asked in genuine puzzlement. Underwear for the Weasley women was sturdy, mostly white, and cotton.

Knickers,” Gabbi replied with a curled lip.

“What happened to the front of them?” Ginny asked.

“This *is* the front of them,” Gabbi replied. “That,” she added holding the strings over an outstretched finger, “is the back.”

Ginny screwed up her face in an expression of disbelief. “It doesn’t look very comfortable.”

“It’s not, but it shows off well the lines of the derriere, how do you say this in English?” Gabbi asked, placing one hand on her behind.

“Your bum,” Ginny said with a smile.

“The only man I want thinking about my *bum* is my future husband, who, as far as I know, I haven’t met yet!” Gabbi exclaimed. “I packed nice undergarments, not too gaudy, but she repacked my bag before I left.”

“Would borrowing mine help?” Ginny asked.

Gabbi looked at her thoughtfully. “You would do that for me?”

“Sure, we might need to let out here and take in there, but hey, we’re witches, right? We can do that,” Ginny said with a wink and a grin. She pulled open the drawer in her bureau holding her underwear, tossing several bras and panties onto Gabbi’s bed. “Try these on. We’ll see what needs to be tweaked.”

“Tweaked? I do not know that word,” Gabbi said, confusion showing on her face.

“Let in, let out; tweaked,” Ginny explained, making motions with her hands.

“Ahhh,” Gabbi said with understanding. “Tweaked is modified, yes?”

“Exactly,” Ginny replied.

Gabbi snatched a lemon coloured panty from the bed, and slipped it on under her tee-shirt. “Ahh, perfect,” she said, pulling her tee-shirt off as she reached for the matching bra.

“Should I leave?” Ginny asked.

“No, we are just girls,” Gabbi said, reaching behind her to close the clasps of her borrowed bra. “Eeep – this must be tweaked if I am to breathe,” she gasped.

“Hold still” Ginny said; she applied her wand to the straps and gave them a bit more length.

“I need more in the cups too,” Gabbi gasped as she ran her finger under the band.

“Me too,” Ginny replied, rolling her eyes.

Gabbi’s eyes flared. “Your figure is perfect, *mon ami*, I on the other hand, am being squeezed mercilessly.”

Ginny giggled, tracing her wand around the circumference of each cup; she earned a sigh from Gabbi. “I would still like to have that problem,” she said.

“Okay, let me shrink your bras,” Gabbi said mischievously. “I assure you that you will never find a man who will say to you, ‘Oh, Ginny, I would love you if only your breasts were bigger.’--and if you do find such a man, he is an imbecile,” Gabbi said with a dour expression.

“Thanks,” Ginny said.

“So, what are we doing today and how shall we dress?” Gabbi asked.

“Well, we’re going into Diagon Alley to have our final fittings with Madame Malkin, so I guess we can pretty much dress as we like. I’m wearing jeans and a top,” Ginny said.

“Tee-shirt or buttons?” Gabbi asked.

“Buttons,” Ginny replied.

“Blouse or Polo?” Gabbi inquired.

“Polo,” Ginny said with a smile.

“Solid or pattern?”

“Solid.”

“Fine,” Gabbi said, pulling open yet another drawer. “I will wear red because you cannot, you may choose between periwinkle blue, which I do not recommend, and emerald green, which I think would suit you well,” she said, pulling the items from her drawer. “Now, are we wearing our hair

loose, plaited or in a pony tail?"

"Pony tail," Ginny replied. "Are we trying to look like sisters or something?"

"Yes, I am going to ask your mama to adopt me as I am going to disown my mama for repacking my bags," Gabbi said with a wink.

Ginny left for a visit to the loo, and returned to find her clothes for the day laid out on her now made bed. Gabbi was sitting at the dressing table, and brushing her pale, white hair. Ginny slipped into the clothes and pulled her unbrushed mop into a quick pony tail. "Let's go; breakfast awaits," she said.

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Molly Weasley had been busy in the kitchen for hours. Coffee and tea had been brewed and decanted into charmed carafes that kept the liquids at a steady temperature. Mounds of buttered toast and bowls of scrambled eggs sat next to platters heaped high with glistening sausages and rashers of bacon. In deference to the guests, she'd also prepared a large bowl of fresh fruit salad. Ginny and Gabbi swept into the kitchen and greeted Mrs. Weasley according to their stations before grabbing plates, cups and flatware to begin their breakfast.

They were almost done when Madame Delacour came into the kitchen; she sought out the largest mug she could find in the cupboard and filled it with hot, black coffee.

"Molly, zank you zo much for letting me zleep in. I was fatigued," Babbette said.

"You are most welcome," Molly replied.

"Ah, girls, you are up," Babbette said, looking over at the two sitting at the end of the table in animated conversation. "Gabbi – stand up. What are you wearing?" she asked, her voice grave.

Gabbi stood. "I am wearing clothes, mama," she said deferentially.

"And what are you wearing under ze close?" Babbette asked, making a circling motion with her finger.

Gabbi turned in a full circle. "I am wearing underclothes, mama," she answered.

"You deed not weesh to look nize for ar 'osts?" Babbette asked.

"The clothes *I* packed *would* have looked nice," Gabbi answered, glaring at her mother.

"You deed not weesh to look nize for zee wedding guests? You deed not weesh to look nize for 'arry?" Babbette asked, her ire rising.

Gabbi stamped one foot. "Mama, I came to witness my sister's nuptial vows. As to Harry, I wish to renew our acquaintance and express my gratitude, but I did not come here to become his mistress!" she shouted.

"You hear that, Harry?" came Fred's voice from the parlour. "She doesn't *want* to be your mistress."

"Ginny probably told her how moody you can get," George added.

"Hush," Harry said. "You're not making this any better."

Gabbi buried her face in her hands. "*Dieu m'aident!*" she exclaimed, closing her eyes. A gigantic ripping sound was heard, followed by a crack. Gabbi disappeared in a puff of pink smoke.

"Blimey," George said, sticking his head into the kitchen. "She popped the wards."

Ginny ran from the kitchen, hoping to find Gabbi, thankful for once that someone else was making a fool of herself in front of Harry.

"Ah, breakfast," Fred said, brushing away the pink smoke. "C'mon, Harry, let's get a bite before we go into town."

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Out in the Orchard, Ginny found her leaning against one of Ginny's favourite trees; Gabbi held a fistful of tissues in one hand, and her broom in the other.

"Coming or going?" she asked.

"Going. I thought a good fly would make me feel better, but then I decided to cry first," Gabbi said. "It is not every day that you make a complete fool of yourself before family, friends and strangers. I love mama, but she can be such a Veela sometimes. There's more to life than looking pretty and twisting men around your fingers."

"Fingers?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, fingers," Gabbi replied. "So many men, so few fingers," she said with a wiggle of her eyebrows. "So, what did you think?" she asked.

"Of what?"

"Of the scene in the kitchen?" Gabbi asked.

"Honestly? For once I was glad that it was someone else that was making a fool of herself in front of Harry," Ginny replied.

"So, you do not mind so much making yourself a fool in front of your family?"

"No, I'm used to that, I guess," Ginny said. "Would you like company?"

"That would be nice."

"We've only got half an hour, and then we need to be off to Diagon Alley," Ginny said.

"That will suffice. Let me summon your broom. Mama explained your rules about underage magic. These English rules do not apply to me as I am travelling on a passport diplomatique," Gabbi said, pulling her wand from somewhere to call Ginny's Cleansweep to the Orchard.

"Thanks," Ginny said.

"Anything for one who shares in my humiliation," she replied, giving her a solemn wink.

~+~

The fitting at Madame Malkin's was long and tedious. Fleur's dress had been finished for weeks, but she nonetheless dropped by to supervise the fitting, expressing an opinion on every conceivable topic. Gabbi, it turned out, had an amazing talent for talking just loud enough for Ginny to hear her without being heard by Fleur, which was fortunate, as Gabbi was using her mimicry skills to come up with suitable replies to the outlandish and overbearing statements her sister was making during the fitting.

Afterwards, Ginny pulled Gabbi out of the door and down the sidewalk to her brothers' shop. Once inside the store, Ginny disappeared behind the counter leaving Gabbi to peruse the merchandise under the watchful eye of Verity Walker--the only employee of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes who was not a Weasley.

Ginny returned minutes later, smiling sweetly, with a fearful and sweating Fred Weasley in tow. George Weasley remained behind in the stock-room.

"Verity, I'll be nipping down to Fortesque's with this lot. I'll be back in ten," Fred said.

"Is Florian back now?" Verity asked, smiling brightly.

"Not yet. Fabian is running the store while his brother is in rehabilitation. He considers it the least he can do for the cause," Fred said, opening the door.

Along the way to Fortesque's, Fred apologized six or seven times to Gabbi, who was gracious enough accept the apologies. Ginny and Gabbi took a table outside that was flooded with sunshine while Fred ducked into the shop to place their order. Moments later, Fred procured their ice cream, piled high in parfait glasses, and excused himself to return to the shop.

Ginny was lost in the moment. After what turned out to be a dreadful year and another cold, dank, misty summer, it was good to sit, in the sunshine, watching people come and go, spooning bits of delicious confection into her mouth while she listened to her new friend babble in a stream of consciousness. She was more than halfway through her ice cream when she heard voices behind her that she could never mistake: the familiar cadences and timbres of her youngest brother and his best male friend. Her stomach clenched; she wasn't ready for this, not without notice, not yet.

"Hello, Ron! Hello, Harry!" Gabbi called, waving her spoon like a flag.

The two boys walked up to the table. Ginny plastered a smile on and turned. "Hello boys," she said with faux enthusiasm.

Harry looked into her eyes and nodded gravely. She thought the look of pain in his eyes mirrored the pain she was trying to hide. He turned his gaze aside.

"You must be Gabrielle," Harry said. "I'm sorry about this morning. Oddly enough, I'm not in the market for a mistress right now, so I'm not offended in the least."

Ginny nodded, stirring the remains of her ice cream in her glass. He'd delivered the line with such a perfect deadpan that Ginny had to laugh. Soon they were all laughing.

"You guys going to join us?" she asked Ron, thinking it to be a safe question.

"I, uh, have some more shopping to do," Ron said, looking off in the direction of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes. Harry pulled up a chair and sat across the table from Ginny, next to Gabbi. He dug into his pockets and put two small boxes on the table, one black, one blue.

"Ron was hauling me through Firestone's, looking for a trinket for our friend, pulling me along for my valuable advice into the female mind," Harry said, rolling his eyes at the absurdity of his statement. "I thought I'd get you two a little something to show that we aren't all berks."

"Oh, Harry, that is not necessary. Fred has already made his atonement," Gabbi said, touching her parfait glass with her spoon.

Harry thumbed the black box open, exposing a delicate pair of gold hoop earrings; he slid the box towards Gabbi. He then thumbed the blue box open, revealing silvery hoops that shone like bits of frozen lightning.

“Silver and Gold, does that that reveal what you think of us?” Gabbi asked flirtatiously.

“Uh, actually it’s Gold and Platinum,” Harry said. “Ginny doesn’t tolerate silver very well, and the colour goes better with her hair.”

Ginny was struck speechless, and then she began to blush as she remembered a particularly memorable lunch hour when Harry had removed her earrings without using his fingers. “Thanks,” she mumbled as she looked away.

“Harry,” Gabbi said in a husky voice, “be a dear and fetch Ginny another ice cream, and fetch me one while you’re up, please.” Ginny turned to look at Gabbi, who was staring intently at Harry. A silvery aura of light shone behind Gabbi as she spoke.

Harry assumed a dazed look, murmuring “ice cream” as he stood and walked into the shop. Gabbi had a canary eating smile on her face as she sat waiting in the sunshine. Ginny said nothing.

When Harry returned, he placed a large bowl of ice cream in front of Ginny. It was a serving of dark chocolate cake, served with chocolate-cinnamon ice cream, topped with melted dark chocolate, affectionately known in the store as ‘death by chocolate.’ In his other hand, he held a similar serving. He sat down where he’d been sitting before. Gabbi leaned forward, apparently trying to speak, but no words came out of her mouth.

“Did you hex her, Harry?” Ginny asked.

Harry nodded. “Uh-huh,” he answered, spooning a mixture of ice cream and cake into his mouth.

“You un-hex her this instant, she’s a friend of mine,” she whispered loudly.

“Not yet,” he replied, taking another spoonful.

“What did she ever do to you?” Ginny asked.

“You mean aside from trying to bend me to her will using her Veela power? Nothing,” Harry said pleasantly. A high thin noise came from Gabbi’s nose as her eyes flared.

He turned to face Ginny, seemingly at a loss for words.

Ginny looked deep into his eyes. “Are you done being noble yet?” she whispered. He shook his head from side to side, sadness pouring from his eyes. Harry shook himself and then turned to Gabbi, silently releasing the charms holding her in place. Gabbi bounced lightly in her seat and then lunged for Harry’s ice cream, growling as she attacked it with her spoon. “I don’t know what was worse, being stuck to this seat while *silenced*, or watching you eat this,” Gabbi said after she swallowed her first spoonful.

Harry laughed, pushing away from the table. Tipping an imaginary hat to them both he said “Well, I’m off; I need to find Ron. It was good to see you again, Gabbi. I’ll see you both at the wedding.” Then he turned and walked in the direction Ron had taken minutes earlier.

“No luck, huh?” Ginny asked.

“Fleur is right, it *is* most frustrating,” Gabbi replied.

~+~

That night, Ginny took off her new hoop earrings, and put them back in the blue case. When she took the box apart to secure the earring backings, a small piece of parchment fell out of the box. On the parchment was scrawled a simple message in a familiar hand: “G – please trust me – H.” Ginny carefully folded the parchment and secured it beneath the mounting piece when she put the box back together. It was a message, but what did it mean?

~+~

There was one day left before the big day. Dad was home, which was unusual for a work day. He’d borrowed a bevy of magical tents to house some of the out-of-town guests that would soon be arriving. Mr. and Mrs. Delacour opted to move into one of the tents, while Gabbi chose to stay with Ginny. “I’ll be with Mama and Papa for the rest of the summer,” she explained with a smile. “Here, I am an honoured guest; there, they will be checking every day to see whether I am finishing my holiday assignments.”

Whatever Gabbi’s rationale, Ginny was glad for the company. Ron was staying at the Burrow, but Harry had a tent to himself. Ginny was sure that, once Hermione arrived, the trio would use Harry’s tent for their private meetings. Harry was still being noble, the stubborn pillock.

The tents were pitched and secured by lunchtime, which left Bill time to readjust the wards. He explained to Gabbi that, while she’d popped a class-two anti-Apparation ward set on the house, the grounds of the Burrow were surrounded by class-four wards. Gabbi asked him to point out the perimeter of the defensive wards, and questioned whether Apparation was possible inside the perimeter. Bill gave a very thorough and technical answer, but in the end it boiled down to this – Apparation was possible, but not a particularly good idea within the defensive perimeter, but the only way to get through the class-four ward was at the designated Apparation point, which was only activated at set times.

“This one can’t be popped, *mon cher*,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “Mum is good with most household healing charms, but she’s not that

experienced with mending Splinching, so don't try, okay?"

"*Oui, Monsieur Weasley,*" Gabbi replied, bobbing a faint curtsy. "But within the wards it is possible?"

"Doable, but not a good idea. More than a few of our guests tend to be a bit jumpy with unannounced Apparation," he said.

"I understand, *Frère Bill,*" Gabbi said, releasing a burst of Veela allure as she smiled. She bobbed another curtsy and skipped away to find Ginny.

"I wonder," Bill said, dismissing for a moment his pique at her attempt to flash him with her powers, "if she could teach Ginny how to Apparate. It'd be dead useful these days."

~+~

In less than twenty-four hours the wedding would be over. Harry would arrive tomorrow morning, before breakfast; Hermione had arrived just before dinner.

Now that the shoe was on the other foot, Ginny took pains to neither notice nor comment upon the romance that was blossoming before her eyes between Ron and Hermione. Given the abrupt end to her brief *something* with Harry, whatever that something had been, it hurt too much to think about other people's romances. She tried her best to keep busy with work, and when she could, with flying. Thanks to Gabbi, each day's chores were finished in record time, leaving time for the blessed release of flight.

Ginny sealed the last container of potato salad, and then pushed the wheeled cart of containers into the cold pantry while pondering tomorrow's logistics. The wedding proper was taking place at the old Winkler Cathedral, a large stone church in a near-by town of Winkler. The church was easily the oldest thing in town, dating back to before the Norman invasion. The chapel in Ottery St. Catchpole was quaint, but not nearly large enough to hold the guests who had responded to the invitations that Bill and Fleur had sent out. Although the wedding was at the Cathedral, the reception was taking place on the grounds of the Burrow. It was to be a catered affair, over Molly's objections, but she had still made tonnes of food for the guests who would be arriving before, during and after the wedding.

When she saw Ginny coming, Gabbi grabbed their brooms and headed toward the Orchard. Between the activities and the extra layer of security that Bill was installing at sundown, there would be no flying tomorrow. In the two weeks she'd been there, they'd established a pattern to their flying time: agility drills followed by a spirited game of follow-the-leader that had resulted in many near-misses with the trees in the orchard; these were followed by chaser drills in which the girls took turns passing, shooting and defending. When Ron was available, he played Keeper for their drills. He had a healthy respect for their skills.

Today, Gabbi beamed brightly as they got to the clearing. "I have something special, today," she said, pulling a Snitch from her pocket.

Ginny smiled, but then turned away. Seeing the Snitch in Gabbi's hand reminded her of the times she'd walked away with the winning Snitch in *her* pocket. In one flash her Harry-related saga from the last two years came to mind, from snatching the Snitch from Cho at the end of her fourth year, to the boisterous celebration in the Gryffindor Common Room at the end of her fifth year.

"Please play," Gabbi implored. "Charlie says that you are better than he was."

Ginny shook her head no.

"Is it because of him?" Gabbi asked.

Ginny nodded. "I don't know what to say to him tomorrow," she said, the Snitch forgotten for a moment. There was no need to specify which *him* she was talking about.

"Smile brightly and say 'hello,'" Gabbi volunteered.

"It's not as easy as that," Ginny complained. "I don't know what he wants me to be: friend, ex-girlfriend, girlfriend-on-hold – it's all confusing."

"Be yourself – that's who he fell in love with in the first place, no?" Gabbi asked.

"You sound like Hermione," Ginny said, her face brightening a bit.

"She is a clever witch – if you will not listen to me, then you should listen to her," Gabbi said semi-seriously. "Hermione would say 'fly while you can.'"

"Actually, she'd question why I was flying if I hadn't finished my summer homework, but I get the point," Ginny said, reaching for the Snitch.

~+~

Ginny woke early the next day. While she was staring at her reflection in the mirror of the dressing table, Gabbi came from behind, pushing her hair behind her ears.

"You're going to wear them today," Gabbi said, reaching for the blue box.

"And why should I?" Ginny replied.

"Because your fashion advisor said that they would go well with the peasant top that you've been dithering over wearing," Gabbi replied.

"I have not been dithering!" Ginny protested.

"On the shoulder, off the shoulder, perhaps twenty times?" Gabbi replied. "If you want my opinion, wear a strapless bra and wear it off the shoulder. Mama would insist that I wear it without a bra, but then, she is a Veela," Gabbi said with a note of disdain.

"Mum would have a cow if I wore it without a bra," Ginny said, a wicked smile on her face.

"Today is not the day to test that proposition, *mon ami*," Gabbi said sagely.

"Mum will be in a day-long tizzy, she'd never notice," Ginny said conspiratorially.

"If you're going to push the envelope, I'll loan you one of the bras that mama packed – it will be suitable once we fit it to your frame," Gabbi said, reaching into the drawer of her bureau.

"Wow, that's nice," Ginny said, once they'd adjusted her outfit. "I didn't think that I could look this good."

"Yes, and the nice thing is that it doesn't scream out 'I spent all morning trying to look casually beautiful' the way some outfits do," Gabbi said, smiling as she put the almost, but not chosen clothes away. "I believe I owe you breakfast," she said.

"Well yes, you did say best two out of three with the Snitches yesterday," Ginny replied. "I'd like raspberry jam on my toast," she said, flipping her ponytail as she slipped through the doorway.

"*Oui, mademoiselle*."

~+~

He walked in from the Apparation point with Lupin carrying a small suitcase. Ginny saw him through the window as she sipped her morning coffee; she chided her treacherous body for the flush that she felt at the moment. Molly looked through the window and then at her daughter, before deciding that she didn't need to be in the kitchen right now.

When Lupin and Harry came through the door, Ginny hugged them both—a not too unusual greeting. With Harry, she added a brief, chaste kiss on the cheek before she whispered in his ear, "I'm glad you're here. I've missed you."

Harry stepped away from the embrace while looking at her carefully. He smiled when he saw the earrings. "They do look good on you," he said quietly.

"Thanks. I got the message," Ginny whispered back.

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Harry nodded, and then went into the Parlour to greet those family members who were not otherwise occupied.

Breakfast was the usual chaotic Weasley event. Babette Delacour arrived fashionably late and made a production of pouring coffee before she ate a tiny portion of fruit and bread. Ginny noticed a faint silvery glow about the woman as she sat down at the table.

"Why is your mum pouring on the Veela power today?" Ginny whispered to Gabbi.

"She's nervous," Gabbi whispered in reply. "She'll probably be doing it all day."

"And you?" Ginny asked.

"I'll only do it when I'm feeling uncomfortable, which means pretty much all the time once we're in our bridesmaid dresses," Gabbi confided.

"Unless, of course, your brother does something stupid with Hermione, in which case I may blind him just on general principle."

"I think he'll be well behaved," Ginny said.

"Good, then I'll behave too," Gabbi said.

~+~

They travelled by Floo to the school adjoining the Winkler Cathedral, and carried their bags of clothing and makeup to their assigned changing rooms. Fleur was already dressed, looking more dazzling than normal. The only indication that she was at all nervous was her tendency to pace along with intermittent bursts of nervous laughter. The current object of laughter was the wedding photographer, who'd been tasked with taking not only the formal photographs of the wedding party, but candid shots throughout the day. For whatever reason, Fleur found him hysterically funny.

Harry was working as an usher, wearing the same robes as the rest of the male members of the Weasley family. Although Percy had replied to the invitation, he informed the family that he had a "schedule conflict" and was unable to attend. George and Fred spent the morning discussing in loud stage whispers whether the black haired friend of the family should be addressed as "Percy Potter" or "Harry Weasley." Harry nodded and smiled as he asked guests whether they wanted to be seated on the groom's side of the sanctuary or the bride's side. To no one's surprise, the left side of the sanctuary contained a number of beautiful, flaxen haired women chatting happily away in cultured French. The right side of the sanctuary contained a disproportionate number of men with red hair, although for some it had both faded and receded with time.

Once the guests were seated, the organist played a prelude that Harry found pleasant, but he didn't recognize. Likewise when the small string and

woodwind ensemble joined in he reckoned that he could name most of the instruments, but hadn't a clue about the music, other than that it was pleasantly reverberating in the ancient stone church as the coloured light played through the windows. The details of the service were largely lost on Harry. It seemed to more or less follow the shape of the prayer book service. Fleur's dress was breathtakingly beautiful with a light veil and a long train. Harry smiled when he noticed that the aura of silvery light surrounding her was particularly bright today. The minister officiating at the service seemed dazed when he turned to Fleur and asked her the required questions. But with a shake of his head, he pressed forward with the service.

Ginny and Gabbi stood behind the wedding party and held small bouquets of flowers. Their hair was done up in identical styles; Harry noted that, apart from the colour, the girls looked remarkably similar from the back as they were similar enough in build and height. His wandering mind was brought back to earth after the couple finished their exchange of vows. The groom kissed the bride, the couple was announced, and the bridal party recessed down the aisle of the sanctuary.

Ginny caught his eye as she turned, waiting for the bride and groom to pass by. He gave her a discreet wink which earned him the faintest of smiles before he turned away, looking anywhere but there, but it was too late. For the millionth time he questioned why he'd decided to call it quits with her.

As the guests took either Portkeys or the Floo back to the Burrow, the wedding party, including the ushers, posed for a brace of pictures. After the pictures were completed, Ron tugged on Harry's robe.

"C'mon, mate, let's get back to the Burrow and get out of these robes; I'm starving," he said.

"When aren't you thinking about food, Ron?" Harry asked.

"I wasn't thinking about food during the service," Ron said with a smile.

"No, thinking about another wedding – one with a different bride and groom, perhaps?" Harry teased.

"Bit early for that," Ron said, pushing Harry towards the school building next to the cathedral.

"I'm not taking the Floo," Harry said.

"So how do you intend to get back?" Ron asked.

"Sidealong Apparation," he replied.

"But I don't know how," Ron protested.

"Not you, me. It can't be detected by the Ministry, and anyone seeing it will assume that I'm along for the ride," Harry explained.

"You know, you've gotten awfully Slytherin this summer," Ron said, giving him a semi-serious sideways glance.

"It takes one to catch one," Harry said as they walked to the Apparation point in the flower garden beside the Cathedral.

~+~

Molly surveyed the crowd, and watched with some interest as the catering company kept the bowls and platters on the table stocked with fruit, vegetables and pastries. Everyone was where they should be--every son and daughter, except one.

"What eez wrong, Moll-ee?" Babbette asked, sipping delicately on a champagne flute.

"We need to start the meal, but Harry is nowhere to be found. He's part of the bridal party and should be seated at the head table," she explained.

"Gabbi!" Babbette called. Gabbi turned around abruptly and made her way to the two mothers.

"Yes, mama?" she asked.

"Moll-ee weeshes to start zee meal, but 'aree is not 'eere. I believe 'e is in 'eez tente," Babbette said quietly.

"You wish that I should fetch him, mama?" Gabbi asked, a slight silvery glow erupting around her brow.

"*Oui.*"

"Yes, mama," Gabbi said, giving a light curtsy.

~+~

"Harry?" Gabbi called as she flicked her finger against the tent flap. The dome tent shivered slightly, but there was no answer. The door was unzipped, so Gabbi moved the flap aside and stepped gingerly into the tent. The inside of the tent was nothing like the outside of the tent. The door flap opened into a sunlit foyer. All the rooms were dark except for what she presumed was the master bedroom. Although she couldn't hear anything, she sensed movement within that room. Padding silently down the hall, she found him bent over the sink in the lavatory attached to the bedroom; he was washing his face.

"Harry?" she called, "Are you all right?"

"Oh, spiffing," Harry replied. "No offence Gabbi, but my stomach isn't wild about what we're about to do."

“Do you wish to call it off?” she asked.

“No, that would be worse,” he said, standing up straight and turning around. “You’re glowing. Why are you cranking out the Veela power? It doesn’t work on me, you know.”

“Not everything is about you, Harry,” Gabbi said.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I love her too, not as you do, but as a sister,” she explained. “The allure is a two way street. If the allure is working, it allows me to do what I must do today. Without it, I would be bending over the sink just as you have been.”

She moved closer to him, reaching up tentatively to push his hair up from his eyes. “I cannot control you with my allure, but if you give in, just a little, we can do what we both must do,” she said, almost closing her eyes.

“It’s wrong,” he protested.

“Is it wrong to protect what you love? Would it be wrong if my eyes were brown, my hair were red and beneath my breast beat the heart that loved you?” she asked in a breathy voice.

Harry felt a cool breeze move across him as she spoke. When she opened her eyes a part of him noted that they were no longer pale blue.

“Hold me,” she said, burrowing into his chest as he folded his arms across her back.

She was warm and soft and curved and wonderful, but she was the wrong girl. As the silvery glow spread over him he found that he didn’t care any more. He felt his worrying fade away, the knot in his chest begin to unravel. It would work out – what he was about to do was *necessary*. It had to be done. He felt her give his chest a squeeze before she pushed back from him.

“Better?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Come on, let’s get going. Lunch is ready and we have a show to put on,” she said, flicking her hair behind her as she turned to the door.

Harry took a deep breath, gave his hair one last pat in an attempt to get it to lie down, and followed her into the sunshine.

~+~

Row upon row of linen covered tables sat in the meadow beneath canopies that floated in the air without poles. A horizontal stripe on one of the canopies spelled out witty phrases, the most common one being, “What’s taking them so long? We want to eat.” The members of the wedding party, along with their significant others, were seated at the head table, which was interpreted as a sign by the remaining guests to take their places and await the arrival of the bride and groom.

Ron caught Hermione’s eye and pointed to the open seat beside him at the bridal party table. She picked up her champagne flute and walked serenely from where she’d first sat down to join Ron; she was smiling and blushing as she sat down.

“This table is for the bridal party, Hermione,” Harry said, his eyes twinkling.

“Actually, Harry, this table is for the bridal party and significant others,” Hermione said, taking a demure sip from her glass.

“Is that what you are? A significant other?” he asked.

“Very significant,” Ron said, slipping his arm loosely around her. Hermione leaned into him briefly before sitting up straight again.

Gabbi was seated across the table from Harry. Ginny moved from her spot at the far end of the table where she’d been talking to Granny Prewitt, and made a small face when she saw that there were no seats open next to Harry. She settled for a seat next to Hermione.

“So, where are Mister and Missus Weasley?” Hermione asked Ginny.

“Missus Weasley is having a snit in the parlour,” Ginny confided conspiratorially. “She wishes to change into ‘danzing close’ but her ‘muzzer-in-law’ is insisting that the bridal *dance* occur when the bride is still wearing the bridal *gown* .”

“Won’t it be hard to dance with that lengthy train?” Hermione asked.

“Well, yes, but hey, she’s a witch. There are several charms that can be used to make the train follow after her and not get tangled or dirty,” Ginny explained.

“When Fleur was my age, she charmed the train of our cousin’s wedding dress. It wagged like a dog’s tail throughout the reception,” Gabbi said drolly. “She did it on a dare.”

“Oh?” asked Ginny. “Who dared her into such a prank?”

“It might have been me, but the details are a bit fuzzy now – I was only seven at the time,” Gabbi said, smiling impishly.

"Don't mention that too loudly," Ron said, nodding his head in the direction of the Twins, who were carrying on a loud conversation in passable French with Mr. Delacour.

Arthur Weasley stood up tapping his knife on his water glass. The back door of the Burrow opened, revealing a laughing Fleur Weasley, visibly glowing in the direct sunshine, followed by a jovial Bill Weasley. As they walked to the head table there was polite applause. Fleur smiled and waved and blew kisses to various guests seated at the tables. Hermione noticed that Fleur's train was floating an inch or two above the ground without ever twisting or wrinkling.

After winding their way through the guest tables, Bill seated Fleur with a flourish, and kissed her soundly before standing behind his own seat. "Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests, friends and family, thank you for joining us today. Let's eat!" he said, which was answered with mild applause.

Plates appeared before those seated at the bridal table, and then they appeared at the guest tables. Having seen this at Hogwarts, Hermione did not think it odd, but she did wonder who was doing the magic, as there wasn't a massive kitchen one floor below them staffed with house elves, but the thought quickly passed from her mind as she began to eat, responding to Ginny's banter and joining in the conversation around her. Midway through the first course she startled briefly when a hand appeared on her thigh. She moved her left hand down to join the interloper and ate the rest of the meal with one hand, thankful that most things could be cut with the edge of her fork.

"I notice that you have very long fingers, Harry," Gabbi said during a quiet moment in the meal.

Harry looked down at his hand and stretched his fingers. "Hmm, never thought about it, really," he said, looking up with a smile.

"Do they help when you're seeking the Snitch?" she asked, giving him a dazzling smile.

"I guess," Harry replied, shifting on his seat a bit.

"You are such a slow eater," Gabbi observed a moment later.

"When the food is good, I like to savour it," he replied.

"Some things are meant to be savoured and not rushed through," Gabbi said, her eyes open wide as she made contact with Harry's gaze.

"Blimey," Ron whispered to Hermione, "she's flirting with him."

"She's a Veela," Hermione whispered in return. "She's probably doing it just to keep in practice. Harry's immune, you know, unlike other people I know."

"I can't help it, Hermione. I'm no good throwing off the Imperius either," Ron whinged.

"Well, I'll see if I can keep you away from dark wizards and Veelas today, how's that?" she asked, giving his hand a squeeze.

"Promise?" Ron asked.

"I promise," Hermione said, hoping that she could keep close to Ron throughout the reception.

Pudding was a favourite of Hermione's: a disk of cake covered with blackberries and whipped cream, garnished with shavings of chocolate. Ron's disappeared in a trice and he began to look up and down the table to see if anyone was passing up their dessert. "Blimey, he really is slow," he whispered to Hermione as he looked over to Harry, who was laughing at the end of a story that Gabbi had been telling. Harry's pudding was half-finished while almost everyone else's, including Gabbi's was gone. Hermione's attention switched back to a question Ginny asked until she felt Ron bristle. "*He's* flirting with *her* now," Ron hissed, tilting his head towards Harry, who was spooning a blackberry into Gabbi's mouth.

"Looks like fun," Hermione whispered, "would you be objecting if her hair were red?"

"That's not the point," Ron whispered savagely.

"No?" Hermione countered. She squeezed his hand and then moved her hand to his back, rubbing between his shoulders. She marvelled at how he responded to her touch by calming as she moved her hand. "Harry's a big boy, Ron, don't make a scene," she murmured into his ear and brushed it lightly with her lips. A delicious warmth filled her middle as he craned his neck and rolled his head towards her.

Arthur Weasley stood again, clinking his knife against his water glass. Where serving tables had stood previously, there was now a wooden dance floor. A magical canopy unfurled itself over the dance floor as the musicians left their table and assembled on an elevated stand next to the dance floor. Bill stood, extending his hand to Fleur. Hermione couldn't hear the question, but he'd obviously just asked her to dance. Ron leaned over to her. "Uh, Hermione?" he stumbled.

"Of course I'll dance with you Ron, but let your brother and his bride get out onto the floor first," she replied.

She noted with some fascination that the train to Fleur's dress was still floating above the ground and following her movements, but never tangling with her ankles. Bill bowed low, Fleur curtsied in reply. The music began, a sprightly tune that soon had Bill and Fleur circling on the floor, looking for the entire world like they had no notion that hundreds of people were watching them. They were together, very much in love, and dancing, which was sufficient for the moment.

Hermione watched the process of couples joining the dance floor: the Delacours stepped out, looking regal, followed by Arthur and Molly Weasley,

who were both surprisingly light on their feet. Charlie Weasley joined the dance floor with a girl that Hermione knew to be an Auror friend of Tonks, but not one of the many girlfriends she'd heard about in the past. Harry followed onto the floor with Ginny, she noted with a slight pang. He seemed awkward, as if he didn't quite know what he was doing.

"Shall we?" Ron asked, bringing her attention back to the here and now.

"Of course," she said, beaming at him, trying hard to compartmentalize the pleasure she was feeling at the moment. The next few minutes were a blur for Hermione as she stepped lightly in time to the music. The longer they danced, the more relaxed Ron became until she was nestled up against him, and leaning her cheek into his shoulder. She'd never danced with Ron, but it felt like something she remembered, like she was returning to a favourite place where she belonged. She looked up briefly to spot Ginny similarly nestled into Harry, and then Gabbi dancing with one of the twins. The music drew to a close and they stopped; the sound of Ron's pulse murmuring in her ear.

"Again?" he asked.

"Pardon me?" she replied.

"Would you like to dance again?" Ron asked, speaking a little louder.

"Try to stop me," Hermione said, laughing as they launched into a dance with a quick tempo. The next two dances were a blur for Hermione as they danced on the now crowded dance floor.

"Where's Bill?" Ron asked, breaking Hermione's attention, which had been wandering in most un-Hermione like directions.

"Oh, he's probably changing – Fleur wanted to get into 'danzing close' if you recall," Hermione said, her eyes sweeping the dance floor.

"Blimey, he's dancing with the wrong girl," Ron muttered, his back tensing as he spoke.

A warning clicked in Hermione's mind. She had to head this off before it spun out of control.

"Ron, can we get off the dance floor?" Hermione asked. "I need a drink, and I need to talk to you in private."

"Sure," Ron said, taking her by the hand as they made their way through the twirling couples. A moment later they both had champagne flutes.

"This is my last, Ron, I don't have your tolerance," Hermione warned after taking a deep draw of the bubbling drink. Ron nudged her towards the orchard. Although they could still hear the music and the sound of the crowd, it was likely that they would not be overheard. Hermione pondered the best approach. Pulling her wand from a pocket in her gown, she suspended her glass in mid-air, leaving her hands free. "Ron," she said as she moved her hands up his chest, "you need to promise me that no matter what happens with Harry tonight that you're not going to lose your temper."

"Why, what's he going to do, shag that little French tart out on the dance floor?" Ron asked lightly.

"Gabbi is a very nice girl," Hermione protested.

"Nice or not, she's putting out the Veela power so hard that you could read by the light she's putting off," Ron snarled.

Hermione moved so that Ron's back was to the dance floor, and then pulled his head down for a kiss. It was an odd kiss, starting out with anger that quickly transformed into something else. The only time she'd felt this out of control before was when she'd been flying on the back of a Hippogriff. They broke apart with a light smack. Ron had the most pleasant expression on his face.

"I wasn't expecting that," he said, looking at her in amazement.

"I wanted to get your attention," Hermione explained, feeling a most unwelcome blush come to her cheeks.

"I'm not stupid, Hermione. What's going on? Gabbi and Ginny have been like blood sisters the past two weeks and tonight Gabbi's tearing into Harry like she hasn't had a meal in two days," Ron asked.

It would have to be a food metaphor, Hermione thought with some irony. She leaned close to him and whispered the answer into his ear, trailing a string of kisses from his ear down his chin when she'd finished.

"Blimey, I hope he knows what he's doing," Ron said after kissing her deeply. He then turned, looking from the dance floor to Hermione. "You planned this, didn't you?" he asked.

"I helped," Hermione said, hoping that Ron's temper wouldn't flare up against her.

"I feel much better then," Ron said, slipping his hand into hers as he plucked her champagne flute from its invisible shelf. "C'mon, I've got three years of dancing to catch up on," he said.

Hermione's heart was soaring.

~+~

The sun was getting low in the sky, but the dancing and the food were still going strong. To Hermione's surprise, Ron spent most of his time dancing, with a few breaks for fluid and food. Fleur was back on the dance floor in a spectacular dress that shimmered in the waning light. The skirt was full enough that it twirled nicely. It was indeed made for dancing. Harry had been dancing more or less non-stop with Gabbi, taking

breaks to escort her to the fountain of champagne, refilling her glass. Ginny was nowhere to be seen. Hermione considered going into the Burrow to look for her when she saw a familiar silhouette peering out onto the grounds from Ginny's bedroom window.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you please," called the music conductor. "At the bride's request, we're going to play some Samba tunes followed by a couple of Tangos." Oohs and aahs came from the assembled crowd as the dance floor cleared out. There were five couples on the floor when the music began: Babbette and Phillippe Delacour; Bill and Fleur Weasley; Charlie Weasley and his date of the evening; Molly and Arthur Weasley; and Harry and Gabbi. The first tune started fast and ended faster. Molly and Arthur left the floor--still panting from the pace.

"Oh, Arthur," Molly exclaimed. "I haven't had that much fun in years!" Arthur whispered something in her ear that earned him a quick kiss and a hearty laugh. "True, how true!" she exclaimed.

Hermione was wandering through the crowd with Ron in tow, trying to find a good vantage point to watch both the dancers and the spectators. Once she found that point, she listened to the conversations around her.

"I thought he fancied the Weasley girl," she heard an older wizard say.

"No, Arlo, he hasn't missed a dance with that Veela," she heard a witch say in reply. Hermione smiled in the darkness.

Charlie and his date dropped out when the tango began, leaving three couples on the dance floor. All of the women were bathed in a silvery glow, although the brightest light was coming from the youngest Veela.

"Blimey," Hermione heard George Weasley say to his twin, "that's not dancing."

"That's foreplay," Fred replied sombrely.

Harry had eyes only for Gabbi. They made a striking couple, his lean frame topped with messy glistening black hair in striking contrast to her platinum tresses. As the dance ended, they were in the centre of the dance floor, Harry holding Gabbi in his arms as she leaned back, almost limp. She had a hungry look in her eyes as he pulled her forward. They embraced and then kissed. An eerie silence came over the dance floor; the light surrounding Gabbi began to pulse as the air became charged with magical energy. As they broke apart, the sounding of shattering glass broke the quiet, followed by the tinkling of glass as it fell. Gabbi looked about, seemingly aware for the first time that they were the centre of attention.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she gasped, hiding her face in Harry's chest. The couple disappeared in cloud of pink smoke.

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They reappeared outside Harry's tent. Gabbi pulled him inside and cast a hasty locking and silencing charm on the door. She pushed him towards the couch and fell onto him in a frenzy: kissing, stroking, biting, unbuttoning. Harry found himself unbuttoned from the waist up, with Gabbi's hand fumbling with his belt buckle.

"Gabbi, we need to stop," Harry moaned.

"*Non, non!* Make me yours," she protested, her eyes half closed.

"Gabbi," Harry said, cradling her face with his hands, "listen to me, we *have* to stop."

Gabbi froze, her eyes opening wide. "*Mon Dieu,*" she gasped, burying her head again upon his now naked chest. She lay still, her hair covering her face. "Please forgive me, Harry. Never before have I been lost in my magic like this," she whispered before the tears came. Like a summer storm, the tears came suddenly, and equally suddenly were gone. "Thank you, thank you for stopping me," she gasped. She laid her head quietly upon him, relaxing at last before she silently got up and went to lock herself in the loo.

When she returned, her hair was once again in place, her clothes were straightened and she'd plastered a smile on her face. She looked briefly at the clock. "Would you like to play exploding snap?" she asked pleasantly.

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The last of the guests had left the grounds of the Burrow. Gabbi wearily climbed the stairs to make her way to Ginny's room and hoped against hope that she would be asleep. The light showing beneath the door dashed that hope. She knocked gently at the door.

"It's open, come on in," Ginny said from inside the room.

Gabbi opened the door carefully.

"I need to get my nightgown," Gabbi said.

Ginny was bent over her desk and writing in a journal with a Muggle ink pen. Next to the journal were several loose pages covered with large handwriting. "Take one of mine, you don't seem to have any problems helping yourself to things that don't belong to you," Ginny said. "Are you sleeping here tonight?"

"No, I'll be with my parents. They thought it would be best," Gabbi said, wringing her hands.

"Why not spend the night with Harry? He's got plenty of room. He doesn't seem to mind your company."

"Harry doesn't care for me that way," Gabbi said.

"It certainly didn't look that way tonight," Ginny said. A bristling silence filled the room. "Tell me something, Gabbi," she said, looking up from her writing for the first time. "What we've shared the past two weeks, was it all a lie?"

Gabbi didn't speak for a moment. "I've told you the truth about everything. The only lie tonight was between me and Harry. He doesn't fancy me; he still loves you," she said wearily. "Are you are writing letters?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, I am," Ginny said smugly.

"If you ever had any regard for me, please don't send those letters out tonight. Promise me that you won't, Ginny."

Ginny nodded, shoving the loose papers into her writing desk.

Gabbi opened her bureau drawer; she extracted fresh underwear and a cotton print nightgown. After closing the drawer, she faced Ginny, looking as if she were going to say something before she turned, walking out of the room without a further word.

Ginny heard a faint pop and saw a wisp of pink smoke come in from the hallway. Pulling a sour face, she opened her journal again and resumed writing. It was going to be a long night.

~+~

Sleep did not come for Ginny until almost dawn, and then only for an hour or so. She heard the familiar house noises that came with her mother's rising: water running in the upstairs sink followed by the slow, deliberate plod down the stairs--with a stop at each door for a moment as she listened for sounds within--then the muffled noise of kettles being filled and the stove being lit. This morning called for coffee, black and sweet, in the largest mug possible. She pulled a robe on over her summer pyjamas, slipped into her favourite threadbare pair of slippers and walked downstairs.

To her utter surprise, Ron was awake with a steaming mug of coffee in front of him as he read the newspaper. Molly attempted to close up the paper, but Ron waved her away.

"You're not going to be able to wish it away, Mum, what's done is done," he said with a great weariness. Seemingly reading her mind, he got up from his seat and poured a large mug of coffee, dropping three lumps of sugar into the mug with enough force to make a plunking sound, but gently enough to not splash any coffee out of the cup. He put the mug in front of her and then turned the newspaper around so she could read it. It was the Style section of the Daily Prophet, front page, above the fold, complete with Wizard photographs taken from yesterday's wedding reception at the Burrow.

The Chosen One Chooses Another
Daily Prophet Exclusive
By H. Watson

The wedding reception for the Weasley – Delacour wedding (see article on page C-7) provided an opportunity to spot the ever-elusive Boy-Who-Lived, accompanied at all times by the glamorous sister of the bride, Gabrielle Delacour, a student at Beauxbatons in France. Having cut a wide swath through the eligible English girls at Hogwarts, Harry Potter seems to have adopted a new interest with a decided continental flavour. Gabrielle, daughter of General Philippe Delacour of the French Security Service seems to have caught his eye for the evening. "It seems they danced every chance they got tonight," reports Prudence Goodbody, a co-worker of the Groom. As noted by photographs obtained from the event, the pair made a smashingly photogenic couple.

Harry Potter's dalliances in the past have all been short-lived. His name has been linked with the Muggleborn Hermione Granger, who apparently abandoned him for the attentions of Durmstrang Champion, Victor Krum; Parvati Patil, now general manager at Patil Imports Ltd.; Cho Chang, who recently finished her studies at Hogwarts before accepting an internship at the Osborne Institute; Romilda Vane, heiress to the Vane fortune; and Ginevra Weasley, sister of the Groom and fellow Quidditch player at Hogwarts.

During the course of the reception, the couple disappeared for a sizable amount of time, only to be discovered coming back to the party, having spent that time un-chaperoned in Mr. Potter's guest house on the grounds of the Burrow. (See picture on page C-2.) Mademoiselle Delacour is certainly the envy of the hearts of England's eligible ladies, and probably the envy of France's ladies as well. Efforts to reach Mr. Potter and Miss Delacour were unsuccessful. This correspondent will labour diligently to obtain an interview at the earliest opportunity.

Ginny turned the page, her stomach clenching as though squeezed by a giant fist. There was Harry dancing with Gabbi, another of the two of them drinking champagne and laughing together, another of the searing kiss at the end of the Tango, the kiss that had triggered her burst of accidental magic, which had shattered several wine glasses that night. There was also a picture of the 'happy couple' walking hand in hand as they left Harry's tent. Ginny buried her face in her hands.

"How, Ron? How did this happen?" Ginny gasped. "It was bad enough to see this, to be humiliated in front of my family, but now all of England knows as well! We had security – the Order was watching everything!"

"Not everything is as it seems," Molly said darkly, pulling the basket of eggs from the cold pantry. She daubed at her eyes with her handkerchief and then blew her nose soundly. "The Delacours left at dawn," she said with a sniff. "Gabbi left a note for you."

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Harry looked down for the twentieth time that hour at his watch. It was 11:55 p.m. on July 30th, 1997. It was time to move out. In honour of Dumbledore's memory he'd promised himself that he'd stay at the Dursley's house to take advantage of the protection afforded by the blood magic, but that blood magic expired in five minutes, and he had no intention of finding out what happened when it did. He left a note on the kitchen table for Aunt Petunia. It wasn't much, but then again, she hadn't done much over the past sixteen years either. Shutting the door behind him, he concentrated on his destination and Disapparated.

They'd agreed to meet at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place on his birthday. It was still a creepy old house, but it was *his* creepy old house now. He reckoned that Sirius would get a kick out of the notion that in addition to still being used as the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, it would also serve as his own base of operations as he plotted Voldemort's demise.

The screaming portrait of Mrs. Black was gone now, so he didn't need to be overly quiet when he came in, but years of living with people who would scream at him for making any noise at all left habits that were hard to break. Kreacher was gone as well, having expired the day that the portrait came down. Whether it was the stress of watching "Mistress" come down, or old age, or a broken heart, he was never sure. After consulting with Dobby as to the correct protocol, he'd arranged to construct a small funeral pyre using the broken up picture frame as the kindling. Hermione had stood as silent witness to Kreacher's last act of devotion to the House of Black.

Harry set his backpack down on the kitchen table and wondered if he'd find anything in the pantry to eat. After the wedding, he'd held hurried meetings with Hermione--the longest one being the session when they'd arranged a new Fidelus charm for Number Twelve Grimmauld Place--but he'd not spent any time at his property since then. In the days after the wedding, he fully expected to get a Howler or two from Missus Weasley, or from Miss Weasley, but other than a few odd pieces of fan mail from witches who sent him pictures (and worse), his life had been quiet, almost monastic. His waking hours were spent reading through Dumbledore's journal, consulting maps and reference books, and making an ever longer list of questions.

When he ran into Lupin, he assumed that his friend and mentor would be in residence at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place when he arrived, but Lupin coloured when he told him the date. It seemed that whatever arguments Lupin had with Tonks over the last year, they'd resolved their issues, and planned on getting married quietly, with a quick honeymoon that would end in time for the newly married couple to show up for Harry's birthday.

The dry pantry was stocked with the basics, which was good. Harry prepared a platter of crackers and cheese, snagged a bottle of butterbeer from the cold pantry and moved into the parlour; he ignited a small fire in the fireplace. Notwithstanding the fact that it was the middle of summer, there was a perpetual chill in the air. Looking at his wristwatch he chuckled, thinking that this was his first meal as an adult in the magical world.

"Happy birthday to me," he said flatly, staring in to the fire and rehearsing the list of questions in his mind. He didn't intend to fall asleep watching the fire, but that's where he was when the morning light filtered in through the recently cleaned windows.

He woke to the sounds and smells of breakfast preparation in the kitchen: the opening and closing of doors, pans being clattered on the stovetop, the aroma of fresh brewed coffee, the smell of frying and toasting. Part of him knew that he needed to be on his guard, but as he'd never been attacked by toast, he entered the kitchen alert, but not on edge. When he pushed the door open he wondered if this was a very elaborate, very detailed dream. Of all the people he expected to see cooking in his kitchen, he didn't expect to find Ginny Weasley. He leaned against the doorframe and watched her work. Coming or going, she was pleasant to watch. His decision to call it quits with her made the watching a bittersweet pleasure.

She twiddled a knob on the stove, and then twirled to face him, wand drawn.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's you."

"Hey," Harry said, feeling an odd mixture of emotions.

"Hey, yourself," she replied, shoving her wand into a pocket in her apron. "Make yourself useful and set the table, will you?" she asked.

"Bossing me about in my own house?" he asked, opening the drawer in the buffet table that held the everyday flatware.

She smiled and opened the stove, then pulled a tray of scones from the oven. "Yeah, I am, but I made breakfast too, so it all evens out."

"How many for breakfast?" he asked.

"Just you and me, Mum's at home baking your cake," she replied.

"Why is she baking me a cake?" Harry asked incredulously.

Ginny peered at him as if he'd declared his undying love for Dolores Umbridge. "It's your birthday, stupid."

"Yeah, but," Harry started.

"Yeah, but what? You thought we wouldn't figure it out? Weasley women are smart in everything but the affairs of their heart, don't ever forget that," Ginny said, wagging her finger at him before she swished her pony tail off of her shoulder.

"So you know?" Harry asked.

"You left me a big enough clue," Ginny said, pointing to the platinum earrings he'd bought her before the wedding.

"Oh," Harry said.

"Oh, indeed," Ginny said, her eyes flaring. "I thought about slitting your throat when I came in this morning and found you asleep in the parlour, but mum always taught me to be polite when I was visiting in other people's houses." She hadn't raised her voice at all, but Harry thought she was downright scary. He wished that she'd yell at him or try to smack him. "The night of the wedding I wrote you an eight page Howler, which was twice as long as the Howler mum wrote. It would have been longer, but I kept breaking the nib on my quill, so I switched to a Muggle pen. The last thing Gabbi asked of me was to not send out any letters until the next day. Funny, but seeing it all in the paper on the next day was worse than living through it. The articles in the Daily Prophet floored me, but they got me to thinking," she said, lifting the scones off of the baking sheet and into a

basket. Harry pulled two mugs down from the cupboard and hoped that he remembered how she took her breakfast coffee.

"So how did you figure it out?" Harry asked.

"Aside from knowing that you can't stand Romilda Vane? Simple, I know you," she said, giving him a wink and a smile. "Fact, you might be attracted to a girl, but you take forever to act on it," she said, ticking off the fingers of one hand. "Fact, you're practically immune to Veela power. Fact, you might be clueless or thoughtless, but you're not cruel. You're not the type of bloke who chats up a girl at a wedding reception and then shags her brains out that evening, but that's what everything looked like, so I started thinking that maybe things aren't as they appear. Why would you ask me to trust you unless I had reason to think terrible things about you? The first time that I caught Hermione alone after that she confirmed that 'H. Watson' is her pen-name. It's her mum's maiden name, actually, the Watson part, not the H part."

"Very good," Harry said, pushing a mug of coffee across the table.

"Actually, that was only the beginning – that explained the what, but not the why. As pranks go, I learned from the best when I was just a wee girl. I've got to say that I admire all the detail," Ginny said.

"I had help," Harry said.

"I can only guess about the why, because we never got the chance to talk about a tonne of things: what there is between us, why we're not still together, what you're going to be doing, what happens after all of that." Ginny's mask of composure slipped for a moment. "Sit down and eat before it gets cold. Wait, did I just say that? I'm sounding like mum!"

Ginny poured glasses of juice and served up two plates with scones and eggs; then, she carefully opened her serviette and placed it in her lap. Ginny bit the corner off of a scone, looking at Harry.

"What?" he asked after swallowing a bite of eggs.

"It's okay to talk while you eat, provided you don't mimic my brother and try to talk with your mouth full," she said.

"I don't know where to start," Harry said.

"Fair enough," Ginny replied. "How did you feel when we were together?"

Harry chuckled, taking a bite of scone. "That's easy. I felt complete," he said.

"Complete?" Ginny asked quizzically.

"Yeah, complete. All my life I've been on the outside, even when I discovered that I was magical. I never had any real friends until I came to Hogwarts. The Dursleys made sure of that, but even with Ron and Hermione, it was like there was something missing inside of me. Then we got together – it was like stepping into the light after growing up in the darkness," Harry said, his voice drifting off into silence.

"Hermione told me about the Horcruxes," Ginny said.

Harry started to speak, but was stopped by a small hand that reached across the table.

"If it's so blooming dangerous, why are they coming?" Ginny asked.

"You're not going to like the answer to that question," Harry said.

"Try me."

"I don't think I could stop them – I joked to the two of them that apart from molesting Hermione at the breakfast table while Ron watched, there's nothing I could do to keep them away," Harry said.

"That's a lovely thought," Ginny said.

"Yeah, well, Hermione said I was being sexist, that if I molested Ron at the breakfast table, that would dissuade her too," Harry said wryly.

"Ewww, that's sick," Ginny protested.

"Don't worry, Ron's safe. He's not the Weasley I find attractive," Harry confided. "Seriously, I need Hermione – I'm not smart enough to do this, I never have been. Hermione needs Ron; they're just figuring that out."

"And me?"

"I want you to be safe," he said.

"What if I don't care?" Ginny asked.

"This year, I'm going to do things that frankly terrify me."

"Think I'd just get in the way?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't bear the idea of losing you. Back in the Chamber, I held you once, thinking that you were dead. I can't go there again now that I have real feelings for you," Harry said.

"What sort of feelings?" Ginny asked.

"Don't be daft," Harry said, "you know how I feel about you."

"I'm a girl, Harry, I need to hear it. I need to know where I stand, okay?" Ginny pleaded.

Harry looked down at the table, thinking that he'd rather be anywhere than here, that he was standing on the edge. On one side of the edge was safety and everything he knew, on the other side, possible destruction. He had a hunch he was about to jump off the edge.

"I – uh, I'm fairly certain that I love you," he mumbled.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Harry could hear the tick of a clock in the hallway. This was worse than falling from a broom.

"You idiot!" Ginny said, breaking the silence.

Harry looked up at her.

"Most people think that's a good thing," Ginny added.

"Most people have way more experience in this than I do," Harry confided.

"Finish your meal," Ginny said, picking at her eggs.

Harry looked up at her, one eyebrow raised.

"If you finish up, we can go sit down in the parlour where it's more *comfortable*. I have it on good authority that we're going to be alone until after lunchtime," Ginny said with the slyest of smiles

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Hours later, after Harry and Ginny had hastily assembled and eaten their lunch, Molly pushed her way through the front door of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, whistling a merry tune. Her arms were burdened by a number of containers and packages, all shrunk and lightened by magic. The door to the parlour was open as she passed by, so she hazarded a glance inside. Harry was sitting in the large overstuffed armchair next to the garden window. Happily ensconced on his lap was her only daughter. Although they appeared to be happily chatting away, her hair *was* mussed up a bit and his glasses *were* lying on the floor. She smiled and sighed with contentment.

Maybe she wouldn't have to castrate him after all.

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Dinner was a subdued affair, Molly and Arthur, Ron, Ginny, Harry and Hermione, joined half-way through by Remus and Tonks. It wasn't an official birthday party, although Harry did have the traditional red plate used by Weasleys on their birthdays, there was a sumptuous chocolate cake, and during the course of the meal a number of Weasleys and almost Weasleys dropped in, depositing wrapped packages on a buffet table next to the dining table. By the time coffee was served with the chocolate cake, Bill, Fleur, Charlie and the Twins had made their appearances and exits.

"So, Harry," Arthur said sombrely as he put his coffee cup down, "we can't dissuade you from this mission?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," he replied.

"Whatever you need, if it is something that this family or the Order can supply, it is yours," Arthur said, looking to Remus who nodded.

"Thanks," Harry said, looking at Ginny, who was sitting across from him.

"Harry, love, you've got a year and ten days," Ginny said, making eye contact.

"And then what?" Harry asked.

"And then I'll be of age. If you haven't destroyed all his bits by then, I'm going to come and join you, wherever you are," she said seriously.

Harry looked at the senior Weasleys. Evidently this wasn't news to them. "Fair enough," Harry said, recognizing the silent looks being exchanged between the senior Weasleys. He knew when he'd been outflanked.

"And there's another thing," Ginny said, pulling an envelope from her pocket. "You're going to need to continue your little misinformation project."

"Come again?" Harry asked.

"Gabbi sent me several locks of her hair. Babette is brewing me a large cauldron of Polyjuice for my birthday. You're going to be seen several times this year taking different women out in public, but they're all going to be me," Ginny said with satisfaction.

Remus and Tonks began to laugh.

"I think I can live with that," Harry said.

"Molly, I think it's time we leave the adventurers to their meeting. I sense a conspiracy is underway," Arthur said. As he held the door open, Remus and Tonks ducked through.

Molly clucked her tongue, but threw on her light summer weight cloak to follow him out the door. "Ginny? We'll close the Floo connection at midnight; think you can manage to find your way home by then?"

"Mum! I'm not an infant and I *do* know how to tell time," Ginny protested.

"I'll make sure that she's home on time, Missus Weasley," Hermione called from the kitchen.

"Thanks to you all, children, and Harry, Happy Birthday," she said as the door closed.

"Thanks, it's been one of the best," Harry said to no one in particular. "One of the very best."

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Kokopelli20878@yahoo.com - write to me, I write back

Author's notes: My initial response to Half Blood Prince (see my Live Journal for elaborated thoughts) was that there was no way that I was going to write Fan Fiction based upon the new canon. That being said; the early Burrow scene in which Fleur was talking about how Gabrielle kept asking and talking about Harry prompted a minor plot-rodent to start gnawing certain wrinkles of my brain. Add to this the masterful plot device developed by Jeconais in his story *Hope*, some deep thought on the life of synthetic women who are more attractive than real women, borrowed from Norman Spinrad's short story, *Child of Mind*, stir well and let simmer for 20,000 words while finishing another story.

A Maskirova(t) is a Russian word meaning camouflage or deception. When the commies ruled the USSR, they were great at putting on little (and big) deceptions that kept their opponents off-balance as to their capabilities and intentions. One good criticism from my pre-Beta readers is that this plot is awfully Slytherin, and thus far Harry hasn't shown much of that in Canon. Fine, assume that the original plot was less devious and effective, and Hermione edited it to its present state. Happy now?

This story marks the end of an era, being the first story to be betaed by anyone other than my original Gryffindor Tower beta, the incomparable Lissa. Many thanks to PirateGinny for her efforts to improve my writing. Thanks as always to Mr.Intel and Art Mulder and the peanut gallery from my LJ.

I suspect that this story will be the last that we'll see of Gabbi, but I could be wrong about that. Thanks also to Mr. Hoff for catching several nits.