

Dreams of Cold Fusion **The First**

Cold, biting cold – he'd forgotten how he'd ended up here, remembering faintly his relief that his friends were cleanly away, but that relief had been subsumed by the cold and the darkness. He'd always wondered if the prophecy meant that he couldn't be killed by anyone other than Voldemort. Ron had joked about it once, saying that he should try it out with a double-decker bus, but then Hermione had characteristically pointed out that while it might be true that only Voldemort could kill him, being maimed or crippled was not ruled out by the express terms of the prophecy. He was so tired. It was so cold.

How many hours before dawn?

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The body was discovered quite by accident, stiff and cold, with barely a pulse detectable. The senior of the pair realized how valuable he could be, and ordered that he be taken back to their lair for safekeeping. A number of things had to be arranged if they were to capitalize on their good fortune, including finding a Dreamweaver and convincing her to cooperate in the little experiment that was forming in his very orderly mind. He knew where to begin – contacts were contacts.

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When he opened his eyes he was sitting in a comfortable seat in a large auditorium, listening to a stately wizard speaking with an accent – American, Canadian? Something like that. Everyone was wearing Muggle clothing, not robes, which was different, but given the fact that almost everyone had a wand, it was certainly a magical gathering.

“Good afternoon, I'm Coordinator Duquesne and I'd like to welcome the 2001 entering class to the North American Auror Academy. We have students from the tribes and provinces and forty-seven of the fifty states, as well as students from Europe and Asia. Quite a few of you have already made a name for yourselves, and I look forward to getting to know you over the next three years,” the man stated, before droning on with announcements. He then called roll, alphabetically, asking each student to stand and state their area of concentration and where they'd taken their secondary education. Although “Baker, Cassandra,” was a strikingly beautiful girl from the Salem Witches' Institute who reminded him distantly of Fleur, he'd zoned out again, until he heard Duquesne call out “Bulstrode, Millicent,” and a familiar dark-haired girl stood up across the hall, announcing that she was from Hogwarts and looked forward to studying forensics. She caught his eye before she sat down, giving him a wink. He then tried to pay attention to “Carmody, Miguel” but found his mind wandering again. After an interminable time listening to other announcements, the class was dismissed. He waited for the room to thin out a bit before pushing up from his chair, heading towards the door.

“Earth to Harry,” a familiar English voice rang out beside him. He turned.

“I don't know if you remember me or not, but I'm really glad to see an Englishman here,” she said, extending her hand. “I'm Millicent Bulstrode and you are the last person I expected to see here.”

He took her hand, noting her firm, pleasant grip. “I remember you, Millicent,” he said.

“I hope you won't hold it against me,” she said hopefully. “Being a half-blood in Slytherin was hell, I'll have you know.”

“Actions have consequences, Millicent,” he said coolly, letting his hand drop from hers.

“Are you proud of all of the decisions you made between the ages of eleven and seventeen, every one of them?” Millicent asked defiantly.

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His attention slipped away as the cold returned and he was half a world away, in another lifetime.

“I want to go with you,” Ginny said.

“I need you to be safe,” he protested.

“Where's that, Harry?” Ginny asked plaintively.

“Have you taken a good long look at Mum's clock – all the hands are at 'Mortal Peril',” she said softly, her eyes beginning to well up with unshed tears.

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How he bitterly regretted that day – regretted not staying longer, regretted not giving in, or at least letting her tag along for the rest of the summer.

No, he'd left her at the Burrow, where she'd be safe, idling away the last two weeks of August, including the last fateful night of August when Molly and Ginny were trapped inside the hastily erected wards surrounding the Burrow as it burned down.

His attention slipped back again.

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"I guess not," he said. He extended his hand. "Harry Potter, glad to meet you, Miss Bulstrode, it's good to see an Englishwoman on this side of the pond."

Millicent gave his hand a firm shake, her eyes showing some amusement at this repeated ritual.

"Have you moved in yet?" she asked.

"I dropped by the flat the student office suggested – but I thought I'd let the rats breed in peace there, so I'll have to find something else – I just got in this morning," Harry replied.

"There's a flat in the building next to mine – if you don't mind a window that looks down onto a swimming pool, it's not too bad," Millicent volunteered.

"Lead on," Harry said.

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The first month of classes was a blur. The academic portion of Auror training was worse than N.E.W.T. level classes, with massive assigned reading loads for every class, and a truly fiendishly difficult Practicum at the end of the week. To his relief, he recognized the booby-trap guarding the locked room – it was a variant of the charms protecting the Riddle mansion. He escaped with a slightly numb hand and a word of grudging praise from the instructor, a terse, dark-haired Wizard from the Tribal Guardians in Saskatchewan. He collected his satchel and sat on the steps outside the training centre, soaking up the rays of sunshine. The sun felt good on his cold, numb hand.

"So, how did it go?" a familiar voice asked, bringing him to the here and now. It was Millicent.

"Not too bad," he said.

"I hear you were the only one to pass the Practicum," Millicent said.

"I was lucky – I'd seen that before," Harry said quietly.

"Luck had nothing to do with it – you're a natural," Millicent said.

"How's it with you?" Harry asked politely.

"I can't believe the reading load – my flatmate says that I should just take my pillow to the library and save time," Millicent said, snorting at the suggestion.

"Yeah, I hear you. You eaten yet?" he asked.

"My flatmate is taking me out for sushi – celebrating surviving our first month," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered if you'd like to go eat somewhere, for dinner or something," Harry said, hoping that his face wasn't showing the warmth he felt.

"Are you asking me out for a *date*, Harry Potter?" Millicent asked, a bright smile lighting up her face.

"Yeah, I guess," he replied.

"I'm free Saturday – how about 6:00? Pick me up at my place?"

"Yeah, that'd be great," Harry said, pushing up from the steps. He didn't know what possessed him to ask – on one hand she wasn't the most attractive woman on the planet, but on the other hand, he'd not exactly bowled over the female members of his class, most of whom regarded him as competition, and he missed the simple pleasures of eating and talking with someone who wasn't trying to memorize the vulnerable portions of the human nervous system.

Saturday morning was spent processing laundry and laying in basic foodstuffs for his rather Spartan kitchenette. He'd half-way paid attention to a couple of his classmates' rambling discussions, rating the eateries that catered to students on this side of the town, so he had a notion of where he'd take her, although he hadn't the foggiest notion of what normal people did on -- dates. At least it wasn't Madame Puddifoot's.

He felt a flutter of uncertainty in his stomach when he arrived. He remembered vaguely where her flat was in the building, having walked her home from the training centre once. He heard a soft tinkling of music on the other side of the door. He rapped on it lightly with his knuckles. The door opened, disclosing a short woman with close-cropped hair. He'd seen her before at the training centre, but not among the Aurors.

She smiled broadly, motioning that he should come in. "Milly, your date's here!" she called over her shoulder. Turning back to Harry, she confided, "I love embarrassing her – she's the sister I never had."

Millicent pushed the bathroom door open, blotting her lipstick with a tissue. Her hair was nicely arranged in a French knot. "Don't scare him away, Esther. Good to see you, Harry, you cleaned up nicely," she said.

"I have to say the same for you," he said, trying to figure out exactly what was different about her.

"I'm not wearing Hogwarts robes, for one thing," she said, guessing his train of thought. "Plus, I've lost about a stone since I got away from the all-the-carbohydrates-you-can-eat diet I was on at school."

She was dressed simply in a long-sleeved linen tunic with matching slacks. The outfit was dressed up with a jade necklace with matching earrings.

"Behave yourself, Esther," she called as she walked out the door.

Once the door was closed, she turned to face him.

"I'll understand if you want to cancel, here and now," she said, trying to look brave.

"Who would I eat dinner with if I did that?" Harry asked sincerely.

"I have a hard time believing that you'd lack for company, here in the city," Millicent said, placing her hand in the crook of his elbow. The familiarity took him by surprise, but it was good, in a way, comforting, perhaps. "Relax, Harry, I don't bite – not on the first date at least."

Harry stiffened a bit.

"It's just dinner with an acquaintance from school, Harry," Millicent said. "You haven't done this much, have you?"

Harry shook his head in reply.

"Well, let me give you an outline: we're going to have dinner, we're going to talk, we'll either run out of things to talk about, which would be awkward, and we'll call it quits as soon as humanly possible, or we'll find something to talk about. If things are going well, I'll probably suggest that we go for a walk on the river front, and then you'll walk me home," Millicent explained.

Harry relaxed as he processed this script of coming events. "Thanks, that helps. I'm not sure what real people do," he said.

"Like Pinocchio?" Millicent said, flashing a smile.

"Yeah, I've been wondering what it's like to be a real boy for years," he said.

"War has a way of doing that," Millicent sighed. "By the way, thanks – for what you did – we all owe you."

"Sure, you're welcome," Harry said, a blush crawling up the back of his neck.

"So, how did you end up here?" Millicent asked, readjusting her grip on his arm as they crossed the street.

Harry explained the convoluted story of how he'd been accepted into the English Auror Training Programme, without ever applying for it, and how he'd ended up being transferred into the Canadian programme as the result of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring.

They'd arrived at the restaurant, had their orders taken, and were receiving their salads when Millicent summarized his story.

"So after the war, Scrimgeour shuffles you off to Toronto to keep you out of the clutches of the British press, because you think he's an idiot?" Millicent asked.

"Well, it's a little more nuanced than that, but yeah, Scrimgeour wanted me to throw my support behind his government, and lacking that, he figured he could either frame me and put me in gaol, or shuffle me off to the new world," Harry said, picking through his salad, lifting bits of onions out of it.

"You don't care for onions?" Millicent asked.

"Not particularly – cooked onions are all right, but raw onions have some unpleasant side effects," he explained.

"Say no more, Da was the same way," she replied, growing suddenly quiet.

"When did you lose your dad?" he asked.

"End of fifth year," she replied quickly, breathing in deeply through her nose, holding her breath for a moment before exhaling. "It made me re-examine my involvement with Malfoy's clique."

"So, how'd you get mixed up with him in the first place?" Harry asked.

"Because you seem like such a normal, non-monstrous person?" Millicent asked rhetorically. "Summer after fifth year I spent a lot of time thinking out the answer to that question." Millicent speared a forkful of salad and chewed.

"When I started at Hogwarts, I was five foot, eight inches tall, a clear head taller than any of my classmates, boys or girls, and flat as a board. Puberty hit with a vengeance right after I started school – I grew three inches in three months and by the Christmas hols I was shopping for new underwear. I was an eleven year old, wearing a C-cup bra, which brought me a lot of attention, most of which I never wanted," Millicent explained, spearing another forkful of salad. "Shortly before the end of first year, one of the sixth-year students, a Slytherin tutor, tried to rape me. Looking

back with hind-sight it was pathetically funny in a black humour sort of way. I had a bit of a crush on the berk, and if he'd been a bit more gentle I'd have gladly *given* him what he wanted, but instead we got into an old-fashioned fight; fists and wands. By the end of the fight, my virtue was intact, but my jaw was broken. I told Madam Pomfrey I fell in the dungeons, which was believable enough – I was a bit of a klutz that year.”

“So, who was the tutor?” Harry asked.

“Edgar Nott – Teddy’s cousin,” Millicent replied, finally bringing the fork of salad to her mouth.

“What happened to him?” he asked.

“Not much,” she replied. “He spread the story that I was a twisted, not-so-little slag who liked it rough. That was probably the cruellest thing he ever did to me. I started dressing as ugly as I could; I packed on a stone or more in weight, trying to look like a blob, not a girl. I turned to Malfoy’s gang for protection. They used me as an enforcer, and the randy sixth and seventh-year Slytherins left me alone. It was a decent arrangement that let a half-blood like me keep a fairly low profile in Slytherin. Everyone assumed that if I were in Malfoy’s clique, that I must be a pure-blood, stars-above, I even got onto Umbridge’s Inquisitorial Squad! We all have our own blind spots. I never got a chance to apologize to Granger – which is one of the things I regret from school.”

“What happened between you and Hermione that you were always at each other’s throats?” he asked.

“We were in Arithmancy in second year together – both of us were taking the class a year early because of our advanced standing – I thought I was entitled to shine in at least one class, but Granger just blew me away. It was galling to always come in second to her marks, no matter how hard I tried. Not very mature of me, I know, but I wasn’t very mature then,” Millicent explained. She looked down for a moment and then began to eat her salad with dispatch.

Harry broke the silence as the waiter took their now-empty salad plates away. “You’re a lot prettier than you were in school,” he said quietly. “You’re a lot nicer too.”

Millicent looked up, catching his eyes directly. “I’ll choose to take that as a compliment, Harry. I was pretty screwed up in school, and I’m still unwinding some of that stuff. A big part of me still feels really ugly inside,” she said.

“You’re not ugly,” Harry said reassuringly.

“You used to think that I looked like a Hag,” Millicent retorted.

“Yeah, well, evidently you were working hard on that look at the time,” Harry countered.

“Yeah, I was, wasn’t I?” Millicent said, calming a bit. “So, let’s change the subject – whatever happened to the rest of the Golden Trio?”

“Ron and Hermione?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, ‘black, red and frizz’ was one of the less-objectionable tags we developed over the years,” Millicent said.

“Well, Red and Frizz finally sorted themselves out the summer after sixth year, after Dumbledore died,” Harry began. “That was another reason I accepted Scrimgeour’s offer – I thought they needed some time to work things out without having me underfoot. They married just before I left – Ron’s working for the Ministry, regulating the Quidditch League, and Hermione’s doing something with a Charms mastery – I wouldn’t be surprised if she replaces Flitwick some day. They’re about the only thing I miss in England.”

“What about the Weasley girl?” Millicent asked. “Weren’t you two an item?”

“She was a casualty in the war,” Harry said quietly.

Millicent twisted up her napkin and bit it, obviously embarrassed. “Blimey, I’m sorry – do you just want to hit me now and we can call this night a loss?”

“Actually, I’m not into hitting girls, Millicent. As difficult as this may be to believe, I’ve been enjoying your company, until now, and I’m still hungry,” Harry answered, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

“Well, by all means, let’s finish dinner then,” Millicent said, untwisting her napkin and placing it in her lap again.

The rest of the evening progressed pleasantly. Harry was pleasantly surprised by Millicent’s ready wit. She was a good story-teller, and an attentive listener, pulling him out of his usual moody, brooding silence. They talked about their respective course loads, the more flamboyant personalities among the students and staff, and their hopes for a normal life beyond school. Although Millicent was enrolled in the Forensic programme, her heart was really set on getting into the Healer programme afterwards. Harry admitted that he had little stomach for returning to England as an Auror, but might consider taking a job in one of the western provinces, assuming that he ever finished the programme.

“So, you’re not going back?” Millicent asked.

“To England?” Harry replied. “Maybe – to visit, I guess. I’d like to see Ron and Hermione again, but no, I’m not terribly eager to live there.”

“Pudding?” she asked, looking at the tray the waiter had just deposited at the table next to theirs.

“Nothing looks very good,” he said, disappointment evident in his voice.

Do you fancy some ice-cream and then a walk to settle our digestion?" she asked. There's a really nice shop about a block from here."

"Sure."

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The ice-cream rivalled Florean Fortescue's at his best, bringing a smile to Harry's face. They took their cones into the now dark streets, winding their way to the river-walk, meandering for an hour or more, talking about everything and nothing.

"Can I walk you home?" he asked.

"I'd be miffed if you didn't," Millicent replied.

"Well, I wouldn't want to displease a lady," Harry said gallantly.

They left the river-walk and wound their way through various districts, returning to the district where they both had flats.

"Your brief didn't say what happened at the end of the date," Harry said.

"A slovenly oversight on my part, I'm sure," Millicent replied with a smile. "Well, if the evening has gone well, the lady usually lets the gentleman know that she wouldn't mind a kiss goodnight."

"Oh, and how does the lady manage to communicate this?" Harry asked.

"You *really* don't get out much, do you?" Millicent said.

"Nope," Harry replied. "Pretend that I was raised by Trolls, it's not far from the truth."

"Well, if the lady's been comfortable with the gentleman, and seems to be enjoying herself, that's a good sign," Millicent began.

"Go on," he said.

"And there's been lots of laughing, and the lady hasn't manufactured any crises to bail out of the date, and still has her hand in the crook of the gentleman's arm at the end of the evening, that's a good sign too," Millicent said.

Harry looked down at his own elbow, where Millicent's hand had been since she'd dispatched her ice-cream cone.

"You're not supposed to look down," Millicent chided.

"Oh, okay," Harry said with a grin.

"And if the gentleman is really thick and isn't picking up on any of the other signs, the lady may just stop in front of her door," Millicent said, backing up until her bum was resting against the door, "and place her arms on the gentleman's shoulders and say 'I had a really nice time,' which is a devious, secret girly code for 'one kiss, no tongues.'"

Harry, not being totally obtuse, rose up on his toes to kiss Millicent. As kisses go, it was nice. The second kiss was even nicer. When they broke to catch their breath, Harry smirked and said "I thought you said no tongues."

"Well," Millicent drawled, "that's the problem with these devious codes, Harry, they're so easy to misinterpret," she concluded, giving him a wink. "I really *did* enjoy the evening." She fiddled with the doorknob, cursing under her breath when she found it locked.

Harry opened it with magic, wandlessly and silently while she was fumbling with her purse.

"Thanks, you're handy to have around," she said, darting inside and closing the door in one smooth motion.

Harry stared at the now-closed door. He hadn't planned on the evening going like this; in fact, he hadn't planned on asking Millicent out to dinner in the first place. But having done so, he was glad that he had.

As he walked back to his own flat, he was whistling a tune from another life.

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Nothing, I repeat, nothing is as it seems in this story – bear with me a few more chapters, it will become more and less clear.

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Dreams of Cold Fusion

Chapter the Second

Waking up held that moment of dissonance between one reality and the next – which was doubly so when the witch waking up was an Apprentice Dreamweaver. The room was dimly lit, which was helpful. The clients were sitting in the next room, whether they'd been waiting there the whole time, or just happened to be sitting there when she'd finished, she'd never know.

"Well?" the older one drawled. She'd never liked him, and this engagement hadn't improved that at all.

She stretched in the doorway before moving to a seat opposite the clients. She noted with amusement and annoyance where the younger one was looking whilst she stretched. He hadn't changed any either.

"I was able to reach his mind. He's within normal parameters. I was able to start and shape the dream, he saw me as I wanted to be seen, and he's now in a dreamless state; he'll stay that way until I can return for the next session," she said, accepting the cup and saucer offered by the older one.

"Next session?" the younger one yelped.

The older one sniffed derisively. "Yes, next session, it's not like breaking into someone's bedroom and reading their diary," he said in a patronizing tone. "Am I correct on that?"

"Yes, especially when the subject is already under a layer of protective magic," the Dreamweaver replied.

"Do you have any notion what that magic is?" the older one asked.

"Storm-shield, most likely, or some variation thereof – it protects both the body and the soul; the Norse wizards used them in the third century against the first Dementors," the Dreamweaver said.

"I never read anything about that when I was studying Dementors," the younger one protested.

"Well, it's not a terribly useful spell, insofar as it leaves the subject in something resembling a coma, which, of course, is why I'm here. I'm fairly certain that it *was* the enchantment used in the story of Sleeping Beauty, though," the Dreamweaver opined.

"When will you be back?" the older one asked.

"Tomorrow after dinner all right? I need to eat and sleep myself, it's a rather tiring bit of magic," the Dreamweaver said, smiling when the older one nodded his head.

She rose quickly and pulled her cloak over her shoulders. "Well, until then, adieu," she said.

"Goodnight, Gretel," the older one said.

The Dreamweaver smiled. "Goodnight, Severus."

She Disapparated with a hissing crack, taking care to make just a short hop to a safe location where she could check herself for tracking charms and the like; although she'd accepted the engagement, and the payment for her services, she didn't trust her clients in the least. The discovery of a tracking charm on her cloak confirmed her suspicions. She contemplated sending the cloak to Gringotts or to the Auror office in the Ministry of Magic building, but as amusing as that might be; she was bone tired and eager to collapse in her own bed. She cancelled the charm and then Disapparated again, appearing at the Apparation point outside of her mentor's house. If she managed to pull this job off successfully, perhaps she'd consider the apprenticeship completed, although how they'd convene the necessary number of Dreamweavers for a guild meeting posed a problem – but that was the mentor's problem, not hers.

She entered the house, noisily slurped down a bowl of cereal, as she didn't want to bother with cooking anything, and after removing her shoes, fell into a deep, dreamless sleep as soon as she was horizontal. Even Dreamweavers have to rest.

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He woke with a start, stretching his arms as he blinked at the late morning sun filtering in through his window. He began to rehearse what all he had to pull together before heading off to the training centre before realizing that it was Sunday and he didn't have to go anywhere, or do anything, which in turn meant that yesterday was Saturday.

The day he took Millicent "I-am-the-Slytherin-enforcer" Bulstrode on a date.

The day he'd snogged her – and enjoyed it thoroughly.

"I did *not* snog her," he said, arguing with his own conclusions. "One kiss does not a snog make."

He stripped off his t-shirt and headed into his shower. "Yeah, right," he said to himself as he turned the water on in the shower.

Many minutes later, after completing his ablutions, he discovered, notwithstanding his errands on Saturday to re-supply his modest larder, he was out of toilet paper. There were certain types of shopping that he enjoyed (iron mongers and Quidditch shops) some upon which he was neutral

(book stores) and others that he loathed (grocers and American style big-box stores). The latter category, he had concluded one day, was because it reminded him that he was well into his adult life and alone.

And so, without a lot of deep thought or reflection, he found himself knocking quietly on the door to Millicent's flat. The short-haired woman swung the door open suddenly, breaking into a smile as she recognized him.

"So, back for some more, are you?" she asked.

"Good morning, Esther," he said, pleased that he remembered her name.

"Coffee?" she asked, gesturing to a nearby kitchen island with stools.

"Sure," he replied.

"Millie is in the shower, but she should be out soon," Esther said. She poured two mugs of coffee with the practiced air of a barista. "Look, I don't know you from Adam, but I'll say two things: one, when she came home last night, she was happier than she's been since I first met her, and two, if you break her heart, there's no place in Toronto that you can hide from me."

Wanna bet? Harry said, silently to himself. He knew a lot about hiding. "I'm kinda surprised that we hit it off last night – we had some negative history when we were in school," he said.

"Evidently you grew up some," Esther said. "Millie's one of the sweetest girls I know. Look, do you want toast or anything?"

"No, I'm good," he replied.

"Ah, the shower's stopped," she said. "Hey, Milli! There's a man looking for you, should I send him on back, or do you want to get dressed first?"

There was no verbal reply to this question, but the sound of a door slamming resonated through the flat. Minutes later Millicent appeared, dressed in flip-flops and a tan coloured bathrobe. Her hair was combed out, but still dripping pearls of water onto her shoulders.

"Hi," she said, making eye contact with Harry before smiling. "I didn't expect to see you this morning."

"Yeah, well, it's kind of unexpected for me, too. I discovered that I'm out of stuff and wondered if you needed anything from the big box store," Harry said.

"What sort of stuff?" Millicent asked.

"Toilet paper," Harry said, trying to keep a straight face.

"Ah yes," Esther said. "When you gotta go, you gotta go."

"Let me get dressed and I'll go with you, if that's okay," Millicent said.

Harry nodded.

Esther spent the time while Millicent was dressing, opening and shutting cupboard doors, writing up a quick list, which Millicent tucked into her pocket, along with her own.

"Be good, kids," Esther called out as they left the flat.

"Yes, Mum," Harry replied.

They walked down the stairs to street level.

"Well, where's your car?" Millicent asked.

"Car?" Harry replied.

"Yeah, how else are you going to get there? Not to mention hauling it all back?" Millicent asked.

"Magic, I'm a wizard, you see; I thought we'd Apparate."

"Uh, Harry, I've never been there," Millicent said hesitantly.

"I have the coordinates," Harry countered.

"I'm pants at Apparating to somewhere I've never been, and I never could get the hang of doing it by coordinates," Millicent said.

"Not to worry, I'll take you," Harry said, reaching both arms around her.

Millicent, apparently misinterpreting his actions, closed her eyes and kissed him. When she opened her eyes, she was standing alongside Queen Elizabeth Boulevard in front of the big-box store.

"That was different," she said, getting her bearings as she looked about.

"I'll say," Harry said with a smirk. "Never let it be said that Harry Potter can't show a girl a nice time on a Sunday afternoon."

After showing his card to the clerk at the door, they grasped a cart and began to stroll through the store, stopping to examine, play with, and upon occasion, ridicule various items on display in the warehouse.

"C'mon," Harry said, "who really needs 800 coffee filters? That's more than a two year supply."

"Not if you're a restaurant, or you're my Great-Uncle John," Millicent countered.

"Oh?"

"He owned a small restaurant – went into the place in the wee hours of the morning to open up, and by lunch time he'd personally consumed at least twelve cups of coffee," Millicent explained.

"That can't have been good for him," Harry mused.

"It wasn't – he had a stroke before he turned fifty and died a month after that," Millicent said.

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

"You didn't do it to him," she replied.

"I can still be sorry," he said with a huff.

They continued winding their way through the store, gradually filling up their cart as they went, including the oh-so-important bale of toilet paper rolls. They agreed to split the bale between their two flats after finishing their supply run. Finally, after turning the corner of the last aisle, they reached the checkout. Harry began to fidget as they waited in the line closest to the exit. Millicent watched the situation for a moment and then began to rub his back. Harry closed his eyes for a moment before turning to her.

"Why are you doing that?" he asked.

"You're tensing up," she answered. "I'll stop if you'd like."

"I just feel so naked, waiting here in line – it's a lousy tactical situation," he explained.

"I'll skip the naked part for now," Millicent said, flashing a quick grin. "What's wrong with the situation, there's plenty of cover – scads of people to hide behind."

"I'm not going to hide behind non-combatants, and besides, how do you know who's who?"

"The people who are shooting at you are bad guys, and the ones who aren't, aren't," she offered.

"It's a little more complex than that," Harry retorted.

"Card please," the cashier said.

Harry fished the card from his shirt pocket.

The cashier and her assistant methodically emptied the cart through the pricing scanners and then refilled the cart, presenting Harry with a bill. He presented another card, which was processed for payment.

"You do plastic?" Millicent asked.

"Hermione made sure I was properly set up before I left," he explained. "Unlike a lot of pure-bloods, I don't have any problem using Muggle banks. I don't care for cheque books, and I don't care to carry a great deal of cash on me."

"So, how are we schlepping all of this home?" Millicent asked.

Harry grinned. "Are you a witch, or what?" Grabbing the push-bar of the cart, he pushed the cart into the car park, settling for an area that was light on shoppers. He then cast an aversion charm that would cause all but the most determined observed to look elsewhere, and then shrank the contents of their cart until it could slide easily into Millicent's purse. Next he carefully slid the cart into the cart-return stall, crooking his elbow out for Millicent; a blink and a muted crack later; they were in front of Harry's flat.

"Can I come on up? I've never seen your flat," Millicent asked.

"Sure, it's a bit of a hike, fourth floor, no lift," he said, opening the door for her. Millicent charged on ahead, ascending the stairs.

~+~

"When's your furniture going to arrive?" she asked as he opened the door to his flat.

Harry smiled. "It's all here – I tend to travel pretty light – I'm still at the stage in my life when I can pretty much fit everything into my school trunk."

"This place is bare, Harry!" Millicent exclaimed.

"I don't entertain much," he said, shrugging his shoulders. Millicent emptied their cargo from her purse onto Harry's very small kitchenette table. Harry cancelled the shrinking charm on the items he knew were his, taking care to split the bale of toilet paper in half before shrinking Millicent's share back to its teeny travelling dimensions. "Can I walk you home?" he asked.

"Nah, I have some other errands to run," Millicent said. "I will say that this was the most fun I've had shopping for boring supplies in a long time."

"I was about to say that myself," Harry said.

Millicent leaned in, planting a chaste peck on Harry's cheek. "I'll see you at the training centre, eh?"

"Sure," he replied, opening his cupboard to tuck his purchases away.

"I'll let myself out."

~+~

Monday began a new unit in the Auror programme: tracking and surveillance, most of which was practicum, the class being evenly split between hidiers and seekers. By the end of the week, the only student who'd established a perfect record for both hiding and seeking was Harry, who'd had a wealth of experience doing both during the years he'd been hunting Horcruxes. He made a mental note more than once to remember to thank Tonks for the training she'd provided over the course of a rather rainy week in Liverpool at the end of the summer after Dumbledore died.

Millicent showed up a couple of times that week, once bringing take-out for dinner, and another time to use Harry's living room to study.

"Esther's got a gentleman friend over, and I don't want to watch, or hear, what they're getting up to," she explained.

"Yeah, it's the quiet ones you have to watch out for," Harry said sympathetically.

"They're not too quiet once they get going," Millicent said.

"Trust me, I don't want to know," Harry said.

Millicent spread her stack of books out on Harry's kitchenette table, which he'd courteously enlarged for the occasion. She opened the largest book to a place she'd marked, reading through with a highlighter pen tucked behind one ear and a Muggle biro in her hand, making notes in the margin of the books. Harry lay sprawled across his couch.

"Harry?" Millicent asked.

"Hmm?" he grunted.

"Can I ask two questions without starting a fight?"

"We haven't fought yet," he replied.

"Yeah, I know, that's why I'm asking," Millicent said softly.

"Sure, go ahead," he said, sitting up on the couch.

"Exactly how did Dumbledore die?"

"You don't know?" he asked incredulously.

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking. We knew that Death Eaters attacked, and that he was killed," Millicent replied tartly.

"Draco Malfoy let a squad of Death Eaters into Hogwarts, using a Vanishing Cabinet. He'd promised Voldemort that he'd kill Dumbledore, but didn't have the nerve at the end, so Snape did it for him," Harry said blandly, as if reciting last night's Quodpot results.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"I was there," he said, going back to his book. After a long, long silence he looked up. "What was the second question?"

"What's a Horcrux?" she asked, looking up from her book.

"Why do you want to know?" he said, trying to not look startled.

"The chapter I'm reading for Crime Scene Investigation mentions them as being a particularly dangerous artefact, but then it doesn't say anything about how to identify them or neutralize them," Millicent explained, bringing her book to him.

Harry read the passage and grunted. "Yeah, that's correct. Remember how Dumbledore's hand was burned and withered during our sixth year? He got that way destroying a Horcrux," he said.

Millicent raised her hands in exasperation. "But what's a Horcrux? The field guide says that they're bloody dangerous, but it doesn't tell me how to detect one, or how to defuse it!"

Harry began to rub his temples, sorting through the warnings he'd received from the British Ministry of Magic before leaving the country.

"You're not too likely to find one anytime soon, Millicent," Harry began, wearily. "When you murder someone, you shred your soul a bit. Your soul will mend itself in time, but if you do a certain ritual while the tear is fresh, you can nip off a bit of your soul and seal it into a physical object – it could be anything, a piece of paper, a cup, a spoon – anything; the more durable the better. If you die after making the Horcrux, the Horcrux acts as an anchor; it prevents your soul – or what's left of it – from translating into the next phase, so you're effectively a puny little ghost."

Millicent looked as if she were mulling this notion. "But why would you want to do that?"

"I wouldn't want to, ever," Harry replied.

"You know what I mean," Millicent said, carrying her book back to the table.

"If you had a burning desire to live forever, this would give your disembodied soul an opportunity to possess animals or weak-willed people until someone could cobble together a new body for you," Harry said.

"So that's what Voldemort did, right?" Millicent asked, lowering her voice as she gave a nervous glance around the room.

"He's dead, Millicent, he's not going to jump out of the closet," he said.

"Sorry, but at least I can say his name without flinching, much," she said.

"I'll grant you that."

"So, why is it so dangerous?"

"Well, first off, it takes a tremendous amount of energy to bind the bit of soul to the object, so when you shear that bond, all that energy is released, all at once. Then there's the problem of the little bit of soul – if the soul belongs to a particularly nasty bugger, it will try to possess the nearest possible host, which isn't a pleasant experience by any means," he said, taking his glasses off, polishing the lenses on his tee-shirt. "Voldemort was particularly fond of booby-trapping them too – and he had a particularly fertile imagination where that was concerned."

"How many of them did you destroy?" Millicent asked, moving back to the couch, lying down with her feet in Harry's lap.

"What makes you think that I destroyed any?" Harry said slyly.

"You dropped out of school and went missing for two years before you killed Voldemort," Millicent said. "I don't think you were organizing your stamp collection all that time."

"Dumbledore destroyed one – it cost him his hand and almost cost him his life," Harry began. "Ron, Hermione and I rounded up the rest and destroyed them at the end – it took us a good long while to figure out a way to destroy them without blowing ourselves up, although even then, it was rather touch and go at the end."

"How'd you do it?"

"Without giving too much away, we split the objects and then fed the residual bits to Dementors," Harry said. "It's not too pleasant to be in the middle of a Dementor feeding frenzy; it was the coldest night of my life."

Millicent nodded sagely.

"As far as detecting them goes, the standard Dark Magic spells work just fine, once you get close enough, so it shouldn't pose too much problem in the field," Harry said. "Just treat every Dark artefact as cursed and you should be all right."

Millicent started as an electronic warbling rang out from Harry's bedroom.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Mobile phone," he said, pushing her feet off of his lap. He padded off to his bedroom, returning a moment later with a sour expression on his face. "Wrong number," he said, slipping under her feet to sit down on the couch again.

"You're such a Muggle at times," she said.

"I'm not too fond of Floo, and this is something left over from the war," he explained.

"You used mobile phones?" she asked incredulously.

"The Death Eaters weren't too technology savvy, plus, Hermione wanted to be able to talk to her mum from time to time. It helped keep us sane when we were out in the field," he said.

"Does she still have one?" Millicent asked.

Harry smiled. "Yup," he replied, rattling off a number. "One of many useless bits of information inside my skull, including the combination to my locker in primary school."

Millicent slipped off her shoes, which was her not-so-subtle sign that she wanted her feet rubbed. Within minutes she was squirming a bit,

murmuring with pleasure.

“Did I ever tell you that I’m thankful for all the hell you went through?” Millicent asked.

“At least once,” he replied.

“You’re really special, Harry,” Millicent said with a sniffle.

Harry didn’t say anything more for the next hour.

~+~

Waking was a bit more difficult this time – which was to be expected, as this dream was longer, deeper and more detailed. The room was dark, with only a faint bit of light coming from under the closed door. The Dreamweaver did her usual stretches and then made her way to said door, blinking as she entered the light of the next room. A cup of tea was waiting for her, kept warm, no doubt, by a warming charm.

“Well, *Gretel*, what’s your report?” the younger one asked.

“Where’s your boss?”

“He’s not my boss, and he’s gone for the night on matters that don’t concern you,” he replied.

The Dreamweaver sat down primly, crossing her legs and then sipped at her tea.

“Well?” he asked imperiously.

“He trusts my character, in fact, I think he might fancy me a bit,” she began.

“Oh, puh-lease!” the younger one said, pulling a very sour face.

“In interrogations, you gain far more through trust and friendship than you do through fear and brute force – it’s the same in my field,” the Dreamweaver said. “He admits to knowing something about the objects, but we didn’t discuss any specifics. I’ll probably get to that next session. I thought it would take a week or more, so you’re getting a bargain here.”

“Oh, of course, every Brewster and Spinster tells you what a bargain you’re getting whilst peddling trash,” he said loftily.

“I’m not the one with a price on my head,” she replied.

“I shall make an effort to remember that when I’m ruling at his side,” he said, trying to look dignified.

The Dreamweaver laughed. “You’re not going to rule, he’s going to use you and then toss you aside when you’re no longer useful.”

His face coloured quickly. “You ignorant slut!” he screamed, looking straight into her eyes. “You know nothing of these matters!”

She held her tongue – it would not do to display too much knowledge. “Yes, m’lord,” she said, dropping a curtsy. “And on that note, I’ll take my leave.” She Disapparated as soon as she was past the door, reckoning the risk of Splinching was lower than being cursed whilst her back was turned. She made the usual check for tracking and tracing charms, and then Apparated to a Muggle village, breaking the fifty pound note she kept in reserve for such occasions, buying a dreadful meal at a fast-food store, which lifted her blood sugar enough for the next task.

Looking around carefully, she stepped into the booth, casting a number of charms to insure that she would not be seen or overheard.

She dialled the number carefully, speaking as few words as possible.

“I know where he is, where can I meet you?” she asked.

The other party was equally terse in reply, which was good, as the booth was not that comfortable.

Placing the handset back in the cradle, she smiled a bit and then looked at her watch. It was a pity she wasn’t going to get a nap before the meeting, but time was not on her side.

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Dreams of Cold Fusion

Chapter the Third

She'd never given any thought to Puddifoot's when she was in school; the boys who thought that she was a girl at all didn't think that she was the sort of girl to take to Puddifoot's – instead, they believed the stories that she was the sort of girl who'd kneel before them in dark corners in the castle, whilst their trousers were bunched around their ankles. More than one of *those* boys received hexings or a savage pummelling at her hands. She'd heard about Puddifoot's, of course, the lace, the confetti, the cherubs, and the doilies. Grandmum was nutters about doilies, but personally, she regarded them as a waste of handwork. Still, the hot chocolate *was* good, elevating her blood sugar along with her mood as she waited for the swot. She was going to have to work extra hard to be nice today, which was a bit of a struggle, as her body was craving sleep, which was, as always, ironic, given what she did to get so tired in the first place.

She almost didn't recognize her when she came through the door – somewhere along the line the swot had cut her hair into a close, round cut, which, truth be told, was probably much easier to care for, but not particularly flattering. She caught her eye and nodded.

"Hot chocolate?" she offered as the other woman slid into the booth.

Hermione Granger shook her head and then looked at her without speaking for a minute – if she didn't know better; she imagined that the lass was trying to exercise Legilimency or something. Ah, there was the familiar touch on the outer border of her mind.

"It's considered a very hostile act to pry into someone's head uninvited," Millicent said, pushing back with her own powers. Dreamweavers swam in other people's psyches – Occlumency was like breathing or blinking, something she didn't have to think about a whole lot.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione growled.

"What's the trigger to release the Storm Shield?" Millicent countered.

"Why should I tell you?" Hermione spat.

"Because I can get in and release him, whereas you can't get in without fighting your way in – and out," Millicent said calmly.

"How do I know you know where Harry is?" Hermione asked gruffly.

"Look, can we stop with the uber-bitch games? I don't like you, you don't like me, but we have a number of enemies in common, and as an item of faith, I'm asking you to believe that there's nothing I want more than for Harry to be back with the two of you," Millicent said, hoping that she wasn't going to brass off the swot too much. "I don't have any physical evidence – but I do know what you three have been doing. The operative word is *Horcrux* – you've been hunting them down, and sometime within the last fortnight you broke one or more of them, using Dementors to suck up the ugly afterbirth. For some fiendishly brave and noble reason, Harry had to be up-close and personal, so you figured out how to protect him with a Storm Shield. Something happened, and you got separated. When you went back to find him, he was gone. How am I doing so far?"

Hermione smiled slightly. "Adequate," she said curtly.

"Harry was picked up by Snape and Malfoy. The little ferret wanted to turn him over to the Dark Lord, probably hoping that it would atone for his long string of screw-ups. Snape, on the other hand, wanted to know how many Horcruxes you've managed to find and destroy. Why he wants to know this, I don't know, but he's not nearly as eager to turn Harry over to the Dark Lord as his creepy little companion," Millicent explained.

"I thought you were part of Malfoy's little posse," Hermione said.

"I was, but that doesn't mean much. There are worse things in Slytherin than Malfoy's motley mob," Millicent said, enjoying the alliteration.

"So how do you know all of this?" Hermione asked.

"Snape wanted to know what Harry knew, but he didn't dare try to lift the Storm Shield, so he paid me to find out the answers to a few questions," Millicent answered.

"But, how could you get that information – unless – you're not a Dreamweaver, are you? That's how you got my mobile number?"

"You're as clever as people say you are, Miss Granger – or is it *Mrs. Weasley* these days?"

Hermione looked down and blushed a bit.

"Not yet," she answered.

"In Harry's dreams you two are happily married," Millicent said.

"Yeah, well, consider the source," Hermione parried.

"So, while we're on the couple-y topic, whatever happened between Harry and the Weasley girl?" Millicent asked.

"They, uh, had a bit of a falling out when we left school," Hermione said. She poured herself a cup of chocolate, looking hard at Millicent again. "Why do you care? Do you fancy him?"

Millicent laughed – a loud, barking laugh. “I reckon a lot of girls fancy him, yourself included,” Millicent said. “Most of us are going to be disappointed; I have no illusions about where I stand with Harry.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Hermione asked, a curious smile playing on her lips.

Millicent leaned forward, drawing on the tabletop with her finger as she spoke.

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It had been a long day of practicum, a day when Harry had almost been caught, due to a wandering attention span prompted by fatigue. Millicent had stayed at his flat studying later than usual last night – she wanted to make sure that whatever Esther and her new boyfriend were up to, they wouldn’t *still* be at it by the time she came home.

Millicent’s behaviour kept him a bit off-base – when they’d cross paths at the Auror Training Centre, she’d nod and smile – everyone at the Centre assumed that they’d been friends at Hogwarts. They assumed wrong, of course. Off campus she was sometimes the flirty woman he’d taken on that first date, and sometimes just a friend who used him as a ready, sympathetic ear. On rare occasions they’d be friends who’d snog while standing up, usually at the end of a social evening together.

Whatever shortcomings Millicent might have, the girl knew how to kiss.

He had the sense, at times, that she was waiting for him to take the move. If so, she was going to be waiting for a while. He still wasn’t over Ginny, and knew that he would be pants at anything resembling a real relationship until it no longer hurt when he thought of her, or of how he’d hashed up the last day they’d spent together.

He shook himself – he didn’t want to relive that moment right now.

Too late . . .

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He’d replayed this scene a thousand times.

~+~

“Why are you doing this?” Ginny cried. “It’s either on or it’s off, Harry. You can’t come sneaking back into my life only to disappear again.”

“I want you to be safe,” he protested.

“Then why did you come back?”

He wasn’t sure he knew the answer himself – perhaps it was to see her one last time before leaving on a long, long journey.

“Take me with you,” she said, the fierce look he knew all too well blazing on her face.

“I – I can’t,” he stammered.

“Then don’t expect me to be waiting for you *if* you return,” she said coldly. “I’m not a bauble to be locked away for safety.”

“But, Ginny, we’ve been over this before,” he protested.

“Make a choice, Harry. I’m in your life, or I’m not. If I’m in your life, I’m going with you,” she said fiercely.

“You’re not,” he said, dreading the explosion he knew would come.

It never did – at least as far as he could see. Instead, there was only stillness.

“Good-bye, Harry,” she said simply, turning away from him.

The door clicked as he pulled it shut behind himself; the sound of that click, in retrospect, was deafening.

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When he looked up again, he was back in his neighbourhood – the walk back from the training centre having been consumed by his memories of that terrible night. His head hurt – perhaps it was a storm front moving in. Once in his flat, he kicked off his shoes and then put the teakettle on the burner. A cuppa would be good right now.

~+~

He must have turned the kettle off, but here it was screaming again – or was that Mum, screaming as she did when he’d re-live the last moments of her life when the Dementors would come near?

~+~

It was cold – so very cold. How long before the dawn would come?

~+~

He felt a gentle touch on his eyelids, fingertips running from the bridge of his nose to the corner of his eyes.

“I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good,” a voice said.

Harry opened his eyes, looking into Millicent’s. “I didn’t hear you come in,” he said.

“Listen, Harry, we haven’t much time,” she whispered with some urgency. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course, you’re my friend,” he said.

Millicent squeezed her eyes shut, briefly, as if pained. “I hope you still feel that way when all of this is over,” she said as she opened her eyes. “Listen carefully.”

“Okay.”

“About a week ago, you destroyed some Horcruxes,” Millicent murmured. “You were using the Storm Shield charm to protect yourself from the Dementors.”

“It was cold - dark and cold,” he replied, nodding.

“You got separated from your friends, and they couldn’t pick you up in time. Snape and Malfoy found you; you’re in Wales,” Millicent said. “Malfoy wanted to turn you over to the Dark Lord, but Snape wanted to know how far along you were in destroying the Horcruxes. Your Storm Shield prevented him from using Legilimency, so he hired a Dreamweaver to find out what you know about Horcruxes.”

“So I’m not in Toronto? What about Ginny?” Harry asked, his brow knit with worry.

“Like I said, you’re in Wales. Ginny’s alive – and I don’t think she meant it,” Millicent said.

“Why not?” Harry asked.

“Because she’s not the type to give up,” Millicent said. “Squeeze your right hand. What do you feel?”

“My wand,” he replied.

“Good – in a minute or two, you’re going to hear some explosions. You need to Apparate out of here,” Millicent said.

“Can’t, I feel the wards,” Harry said.

Millicent looked surprised for a moment. “The wards will come down when you hear the explosions,” she assured him.

“Where should I go?”

“Somewhere safe,” she answered.

“Are you coming with me?” he asked.

Millicent shook her head. “I have business with Snape,” she replied.

“So do I,” he said, his grin turning into a look of stern resolve.

Their conversation was cut short by a chattering series of pops, which, in turn, were interrupted by a room-shaking explosion on the left and then another on the right.

Harry clenched his fist, savouring the feel of his wand again. He could feel Millicent beside him – they were on some sort of mattress on the floor. In an instant he was in a crouch, facing a door as it began to open into the room. Taking careful aim, he silently banished the doorknob, forcefully, which sent the door crashing shut, snapping someone’s wrist with a sickening crunch, followed by a high, piercing scream.

~+~

Hermione was fidgeting. When her hair was longer, she’d chew on her hair at times like this, but living on the run for two years meant giving up a lot of things, including long hair. Ron didn’t seem to mind, though.

Ron was across the valley at the eastern site – they’d borrowed a lorry-load of equipment from the twins. Ron didn’t give it any thought at all, given the twins’ history with fireworks, but Hermione had recognized the tubes at once, even before wiping the grime from the plate that identified it as an M2 mortar. The anti-Apparation ward had been brought down by a soft rain of almost-conventional fireworks that substituted elemental iron for the usual pyrotechnic charge; then came the mortars. According to plan, they were using high-explosive rounds aimed to detonate close enough to the house to rattle the teeth of the occupants, but not enough to bring down the walls – at least that was the plan.

She peered through the Omniculars, looking for any sign of movement within the house. Harry and Millicent were supposed to Disapparate as soon as the wards were brought down, but she’d doubted whether Harry would be cooperative. She heard a scream – not Harry’s and not Millicent’s - and then saw a series of flashes. Time to switch to Plan B. She clicked a button on her mobile, receiving a quick message in reply.

Ron's mortar boomed first, the noise from the launch of the round being quickly followed by the detonation of the round on the eastern side of the house. The small grove of trees would be suitable for planting as an herb garden by the time they were done, no doubt. They fed rounds into the mortars, twiddling with the cranks and knobs from time to time to vary the impact points. As diversions went, it was reasonably effective. There was another scream from the house, and then a spray of yellow sparks from what was left of the front door.

Millicent came through the door first, followed closely by a reedy, weed-thin figure she'd recognize under any circumstances. Millicent pointed out her position to him, and then gestured to the other side of the valley. Harry gave a hand signal and then Disapparated. Hermione let out the breath she'd been holding and then pulled the plugs from her ears, giving the proper counter-sign in reply before she shrank the mortar and rounds to the size of doll-house furniture, treating the rounds with respect. The gnawing mix of fear and hopelessness was gone – it was time to see Harry again.

~+~

Hermione Apparated through a short chain of safe spots, knowing that she'd probably not see either of the men of her life until she reached the end of the chain. Apparating into Grimmauld Place was nothing like it had been in the past. The portrait of Walburga Black was mercifully missing, and decades of grime and decay had been removed and replaced, thanks to the labour of a number of house-elves, under the direction of Dobby. Harry was standing close to Millicent. He caught her eye as she approached them, and then gestured towards the kitchen. Whatever he was saying to her, it was obviously for her ears alone; they were surrounded by the familiar dead zone that was evidence of a privacy charm. She nodded in reply, pushing open the kitchen door where she was welcomed, enthusiastically, by Dobby and then Ron. Once she was in Ron's arms, she didn't care what Harry and Millicent were up to; it could wait.

~+~

"You were brilliant, love," Ron exclaimed loudly after they broke their embrace.

"Ron, you've still got your plugs in," she chided gently.

"What? Oh, so I do," he said, grinning broadly. He pulled the plugs from his ears and then pitched them into the fireplace. "It's a marvel my brothers aren't deaf by now, playing with fireworks and motors all the time."

"It's *mortars*, Ron," Hermione corrected, giving his shoulder a playful shove when she realized he'd mispronounced the word on purpose.

Dobby took their hats and coats with genteel efficiency, indicating a laver on a side table where they could wash the grime from their hands and faces. Ron, of course, insisted on washing up at the same time, which was his excuse for standing close and splashing water on her. That led to her discovery of a smudge on his face that needed cleaning, which led to another, longer embrace next to the laver.

"Dancing Dragons! Get a room already," Harry boomed as he pushed the kitchen door open.

Ron pushed away from Hermione, slowly. "So, is the hag gone?" he asked.

"Ron!" Hermione scolded. "If it wasn't for Millicent, we'd still be looking for Harry."

Harry didn't say anything, pulling up a chair at the table, taking the cup of tea proffered by Dobby.

"Good to have you back, mate," Ron said.

"Good to be back," he said in reply.

"Is that lipstick on the corner of your mouth?" Ron asked, a broad grin playing across his face.

Harry took another sip of tea. "It might be," he said.

"What about my sister?" Ron asked, his face going dark in an instant.

"Your sister, if I might remind you, Ron, told me in no uncertain terms that we were through," Harry said with a weary tone.

"She didn't mean it – she was just brassed off," Ron said quickly.

"Yeah, that's what Millie said too," Harry said, putting his feet up on the table. "She said I needed to work things out with Ginny if I could, and if I couldn't ..."

Ron sat down, slack-jawed. "Millie?"

"So, what do you say we eat dinner, get a good night's sleep, and then go to the Burrow tomorrow?" Harry asked, smiling for the first time since he'd arrived.

"Harry, not that I'm not thrilled with your suggestion, but what about Snape and Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"They won't be much of a threat," Harry said blandly.

"And why not?" Hermione asked.

"Well, after a bit of a tussle, Severus and I had a heart to heart chat in which he was trussed up like a Christmas goose, and I had my wand under his chin, ripping everything he knew out of his mind through Legilimency as to where Voldemort is hiding these days. After that, I Obliviated him –

he won't remember anything from the last month or so, I reckon. And Malfoy? I broke his wrist, you might have heard him scream," Harry said with a smirk.

"I heard him scream *twice*," Hermione added.

"Ahh - the second scream would be when Millie put all she had into kicking him in the stones," Harry said, giving Hermione a surreptitious wink.

"After that, *he* was Obliviated too. If they ever wake up, they'll figure that something really bad happened, given the debris inside and out."

"I thought she liked him," Ron said.

"Millie? No, she couldn't stand him, but being a part of his little gang was useful, so she put up with him; typical Slytherin reasoning," Harry observed.

"But Harry, why was Snape keeping you?" Hermione asked.

"We can talk about that over dinner, but if it's all the same to you, I'd rather talk about something else," Harry answered, reaching for a basket of rolls. Dobby's rolls were one of his favourites.

"Right," Hermione replied. "But I want the full story tomorrow."

"Of course," Harry said.

Ron was already piling his plate with roast beef.

It was good to be back together again – it was even better that they would be at the Burrow tomorrow.

And the day after that?

They'd deal with that day when it came.

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Thus ends our little story. Going back and re-reading it carefully, you can tell, perhaps, what was real and what was not. Gretel is Millicent Bulstrode's given name – a name she shares with her late mother. Millicent is her *middle* name. Growing up, it was too confusing to address two people by the same name, so Gretel adopted her middle name as her common name, a habit she continued when she enrolled at Hogwarts.

Millicent is the Dreamweaver, a somewhat rare magical skill that tends to run in families. After Dumbledore's death, Millicent chose to end her formal education and spent the two years when the trio was engaged in the Horcrux hunt as an apprentice with her great-Aunt. After finishing the apprenticeship, she hopes to enrol in a Healer program, depending upon how the war goes in England, but that's another story, along with what happens the next day when the trio arrives at the Burrow.