

CHAPTER 15

A TRIP TO DIAGON ALLEY

Miles away, in the secret room of Grimmauld Place, Harry awoke to the unanticipated view of a half-empty four-poster bed and a room vacant of any sign of life other than his own bleary self. The covers on Hannah's side of the bed had been neatly bowed back and tucked beneath him, her pillow fluffed and nudged straight against the headboard, and her nightclothes strewn over the doorknob of her walk-in wardrobe. The darkness of the night was still set, yet the sounds of birds chirping lively outside the window and the faint sighting of brighter liquid blues bleeding into the sky, like paint flowing down a canvas, told Harry that dawn was fast approaching.

He reached for the nightstand, fingering over its smooth, cool, wooden surface, securing his glasses and the silver timepiece in his right hand, and grunting in objection when he noted the time was nearing five a.m.

Flinging himself wearily backward onto the mattress and tossing the timepiece recklessly aside, he watched the clock as it bounced, spun, and tumbled, ultimately coming to rest face down at the base of Hannah's pillow. The notion of believing he knew precisely where she had spent the night, and the fact that she had not yet returned from her evening jaunt, stirred inside of him a swell of bitterness that made him feel as though he were a ship caught in a treacherous sea. Every time he thought he had made some sort of intimate progress with her, he tended to suffer the sharpening setback of her ever-mounting reticence toward him.

An abrupt, sharp, clicking sound coming from the secret kitchen cupboard above, alerted him to her return. Momentarily, he contemplated rolling over and pretending to be asleep, but he decided he would achieve far greater satisfaction by drilling her for detailed information regarding her whereabouts and watching her squirm as she delivered her response.

"Hey, Potter," said Hannah in a tone clearly overflowing with bother.

"Hey," said Harry, taking great pleasure in the knowledge that she was obviously thoroughly discontented with the outcome of her overnight excursion. Instantly, however minimally, the troubled waters he'd been piloting over the past month in a desperate effort to reach her appeared to be subsiding. "What's with the dismal face?" he added sanguinely.

"Hm," uttered Hannah, turning a meek smile. "Lovers' row."

"Oh, sorry," said Harry insincerely, trying very hard not to allow himself to become overly encouraged by it.

“No worries. It’s nothing *dire*. He and I have seen far worse.”

“Oh,” said Harry, his inner joy swiftly escaping him much like the air departing an overblown tire.

“Oh, I’d nearly forgotten,” started Hannah, reaching to the top of her dresser and plucking a sizable ivory envelope from its surface. “Hedwig dropped this off for you late last night. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Thanks,” said Harry slipping his finger beneath the seal of the envelope and retrieving its contents. “It’s my school supply list. I was wondering when this would arrive. Nothing like waiting ‘til the last minute, eh?”

“Better late than never, I always say,” chuckled Hannah lightly. “By the way, not to spoil the surprise or anything, but Ron and Hermione have some rather exciting news for you.”

Harry perked up.

“Oh, really? What’s that?” he said.

Hannah chuckled.

“I can’t say. They’ve sworn me to secrecy. You’ll have to wait until the morning to find out,” said Hannah.

Harry made a face worthy of slight disappointment, and with a swift change of subject, he inquired hopefully, “So, are you to come with us into Diagon Alley later today when we go to fetch our school supplies? I’ll treat you to some ice cream. I hear Florean Fortescue’s has re-opened. Florean’s sister, Florence, has taken over the space.”

“Thanks, but I think not,” said Hannah with a profound sigh, flinging herself exhaustively onto the bed. “I owled Remus late last night and requested he find a replacement guard for your outing. I sort of figured I’d be out all night and didn’t think it would be appropriate for me to be in charge of your safety and quite possibly fall asleep on the job. Not surprisingly, Remus seemed rather pleased knowing he wouldn’t have to deal with me all day.”

“Oh,” said Harry disappointedly.

“You’re not upset with me, are you?”

“Na. I just thought it would be fun if you came along, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry, Potter,” said Hannah, kicking off her shoes and snuggling under the covers. “I plan to spend my afternoon reaping the sound benefits of a long awaited sleep.” She

waved her wand at the draperies, causing them to draw and darken the room. “Well, goodnight, Potter.”

“Yeah, goodnight,” he grumbled.

When the late-morning hours arrived, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny headed into Diagon Alley by virtue of the Grimmauld secret corridor, shepherded closely by Mr. Weasley, Tonks, Charlie, and Lupin. They had planned to spend the day shopping for standard school supplies and later retreat for an early supper at the Leaky Cauldron.

Upon entering the mouth of the alleyway, they crossed the empty storefront of Ollivander’s. Harry’s eyes lingered over the cracked, dirt smutted, bat dropping smothered plate-glass storefront and cobweb-covered entryway. The gold lettering on the shop’s signpost that had once so proudly declared the space as *Ollivander’s: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC* was peeling so heavily that the heading was nearly indistinguishable. Harry cringed as he passed the shop, wondering whatever had become of Ollivander since his famed disappearance over a year ago. Most certainly, the storeowner was still alive, as Voldemort and his followers made certain to take every occasion to flaunt the ruthless murders of all their victims.

As he delved deeper into the narrow and crooked streets of Diagon Alley, Harry noted that lengthy string of other wizarding shops succeeding *Ollivander’s* were remarkably active, despite increasing threats to the lives of the storeowners their patrons. Oddly enough, it was almost as though the wizarding public had taken some sort of non-verbal united stand against the Dark Side, parading their unwillingness to cave in to Voldemort’s tiresome threats and exhibiting a show outright stating to refuse to live their lives as his next probable victim.

Harry’s focus was swiftly diverted to Remus, who had begun to address him and the rest of their group.

“We’re to head straight through the alleyway, hitting the stores in a crisscross fashion. Once we reach the last shop, we’ll proceed directly into the Leaky Cauldron for supper and return to Grimmauld afterward. There is no deviating from our arrangement. Try not to forget anything and, most importantly, *stick together!*”

Mr. Weasley, Tonks, Lupin, and Bill took to scouring their surroundings, eyeing over every lump, bump, and living organism for any sign of ominous content.

Harry moved aside, next to Ginny, asking Hermione and Ron, curiously, “So are you lot going to leave me in suspense all day, or are you to tell me about this exciting news of yours?”

Hermione beamed, and standing tall and proudly before him, she replied in a giddy drawling fashion, “Well, Ronald and I have officially been chosen as Hogwarts’ Head Boy and Head Girl!”

Harry was totally unmoved, all the while thinking to himself, *That’s the surprise Hannah was talking about? Big hairy werewolf deal!* However, witnessing the excited expression on Hermione’s face had him struggling to be the supportive best friend who was truly interested and equally as excited for her and Ron.

“That’s... *fantastic*,” he managed to choke out in a manner sufficient enough to seem sincere. He rallied his response with the backing a forced crooked smile.

Ron went pink and said, “Don’t tell Fred and George. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Hermione looked to Ron like he’d just attempted to perform an Unforgivable Curse, and she spouted off crossly, “This is an honor, Ron! Don’t you realize how many students would give their life for this opportunity?!”

Ron looked to Harry and muttered tactlessly, “Yeah, thank goodness I got the post. I had the ledge of the castle from which I was to jump off all picked out in case I was denied the privilege.

Harry sniggered, as did Ginny.

Hermione grimaced.

Harry, feeling a bit more at ease, said, “I hate to disappoint you, mate, but I guarantee you that Fred and George already know.”

“Oh? How do you reckon?” inquired Ron smartly.

“Duh? Your mum,” said Harry.

“Yeah,” said Ginny. “Knowing mum, she probably commissioned Flourish and Blotts Bookstore to send out formal announcements by urgent owl post last night.”

“Fantastic,” said Ron glumly. “And we’re to visit their shop today.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders apathetically. Then, looking off into the distance, he spotted a rather lofty man sporting a dark heavy beard and long wiry hair.

“Hey; there’s Hagrid!” he said.

“And look!” gasped Hermione, having caught sight of Hagrid’s grand and unruly companion. “Is that —”

“Grawp,” finished Harry knowingly, remembering the first time he had met the temperamental giant in the Forbidden Forest a few years back.

Grawp’s height far exceeded that of the roof peaks of all the storefronts. He was nearly *triple* the size of Hagrid, who Harry always deemed as large enough to require his own postal code. Grawp, on the other hand, was large enough to qualify as a vast mountainous land mass, perhaps even a small country. Grawp’s short-knotted hair was the color of bracken and his heavy-lidded eyes were a funny shade of messy brown. He looked dirty and disheveled. His tan animal skin fabric apparel was shabbily stitched together with a thread the breadth of a jump rope, which gave slightly at the seams under his cave-worthy armpits.

“I can’t believe the Ministry’s approved of *him* being *here* in Diagon Alley!” said Hermione in outrage.

“I don’t think the Ministry is too particular about pushing off the only giant they have on their side, thanks to Cornelius Fudge refusing to appeal to their lot when he had the chance,” said Harry in all seriousness.

“He looks awfully mean,” whimpered Ginny, moving closer to Harry, who felt a slight rush of uncomfortable tingles dance over his skin when Ginny’s arm brushed against his.

He subtly scooted aside to allow for the space between them to grow, and in an attempt at clearing his air of discomfort, he called out instantly to Hagrid, “Hey, Hagrid!”

“Hi, Harry!” shouted Hagrid, waving from across the alleyway. “Hermione, Ron, Ginny!”

“Hey, Hagrid!” they replied intermittently.

Harry stood by, watching in amusement as Hagrid attempted to coax his isle-sized brother along with him by tossing the giant being biscuit after biscuit from a large silver bin. Grawp swatted at the canister, sending biscuits soaring across the alleyway. Harry and Ron laughed. Ginny and Hermione, however, looked even more frightened than ever and consequently found themselves clinging tightly to Harry and Ron, respectively.

“Alright, you lot,” interrupted Lupin with an amused snigger of his own. He watched on in virtual hysterics as Hagrid scrambled to recover the biscuits, while Grawp lumbered about, scarfing down the treats, knocking over several street peddlers, and sending their displays of loose bottom caldrons and shoddily made wands spilling across the pavement. “We’re to head for Flourish and Blotts Bookstore. Tonks needs some supplies.”

“That’s righ’, Tonks,” chimed Hagrid proudly, taking a temporary reprieve from salvaging the tasty treats to address her directly. “Yer got ther Defense Against ther Dark Arts Post, yer did.”

“She *what?*” exclaimed Harry, meeting Tonks with an element of shock in his expression.

“Aw, Hagrid! That was to be a surprise!” said Tonks with a disappointed click of her tongue.

“Oh. Sorry,” muttered Hagrid, snagging Grawp by his collar in an attempt to keep the ill-disciplined giant from sniffing rudely at a young woman passing by.

The nostrils of Grawp’s enormous nose, which Harry thought were large enough to house a family of birds, flared erratically as Grawp fought to inhale the woman’s illustrious scent. Grawp grunted. His long hairy arms and beach-ball sized hands swung wildly about as he fought to grab hold of the woman to pull her closer. The defenseless young lady let out a frightened scream and took off running down the alley in the opposite direction.

Suddenly, Grawp spoke in a deep, yet childlike, demanding tenor, “Grawp want ice cream! Grawp want ice cream!” His large clumsy feet pounded the ground with a *thunderous* approach. “Grawp want ice cream!” he shouted again and again.

“Oh, would yer look at tha,” said Hagrid sappily. “Grawp likes his ice cream, he does.”

“So it would seem,” muttered Ron impassively, eyeing Grawp as if he were merely the result of improper breeding rather than a violent and deadly fiend. Harry didn’t seem the slightest bit moved by Grawp either.

Hermione and Ginny, on the other hand, looked terrified and scooted behind Ron and Harry, respectively, shielding themselves behind the shelter of the boys’ sturdy backs.

“So, Tonks,” started Harry concernedly, trying to ignore the awkward realization that Ginny had nestled herself rather intimately against his backside. “You do realize that the DADA position is cursed, don’t you? Voldemort cursed it. No teacher has lasted longer than a year in that post. Every one of them has suffered the fate of an unfriendly departure.”

“No worries, Harry,” said Tonks calmly. “I don’t intend on staying longer than a year, anyway. I’ve been appointed to Hogwarts as per the ministry, you see,” she said.

Harry flashed her a look of extreme distress.

“I’ll be fine, Harry,” stressed Tonks. “I don’t wear a turban; I’m not a fraud, or a werewolf; I have never been able to stomach Polyjuice Potion, and I’m not about to deny the existence of Voldemort to appease the masses; furthermore, I do not intend to deceive my associates by joining forces with the Dark Side. I believe that covers just about all the destructive flaws in your former DADA teachers.”

“I reckon so,” said Harry, still blatantly ill at ease. He tried to loosen Ginny’s concentrated hold on him with a brisk sort of spin-cycle motion, but he only managed to make her cling more tightly to him, her firm grip growing increasingly desperate with his every move.

By this time, Grawp’s tantrum had shifted into overdrive once he had spotted several wizards heading his way indulging in what appeared to be towering, mouth-watering ice cream treats.

“GRAWP WANT ICE CREAM!” howled the giant, his demands ever increasing in volume and desperation at the sight of each patron that passed beneath the rainbow tube-fashioned sign of Fortescue’s Ice cream Parlor.

The storefronts of Diagon Alley trembled amidst Grawp’s booming crows and fanciful fit as he proceeded to stomp his bus-sized feet angrily along the alley walkway. Hordes of witches and wizards scampered in all directions trying to avoid the wrath of the burly fiend.

Arthur immediately stepped forward and proposed, “Hagrid, perhaps you ought to take Grawp to Fortescue’s.”

“Yer got me scheduled fer duty though! I’m ter help yer watch over Harry!” said Hagrid fretfully, cleaving to the tatty hood on Grawp’s fur jumper in a manner suitable for leashing a rabid dog.

Much to Hagrid’s dismay, Grawp lunged forward and managed to loosen himself from Hagrid’s grip, knocking over an enormous display of wizarding caps from an elderly peddler’s sales stand.

“Get that filthy mongrel out of here, or I’m calling on the Ministry!” shouted the gangly old man.

“Hagrid, *please*,” Arthur appealed to him. “We’ll catch up with you later. Harry will be perfectly safe under our charge.”

“Alright, you lot,” interjected Lupin, looking off to his right. “Tonks is to collect all you need from Flourish and Blotts Bookstore. Let’s move on to Fred and George’s shop.”

Harry and Ron marveled at the brilliant scarlet and gold neon sign shimmering outside of the Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes joke shop. It had been ages since they had visited the space, long before Hannah had taken to remodeling it. Something about the colors and the newly renovated bold sparkling lights on the storefront made the already magical depot seem almost mystical.

The curtains on the window of the shop were drawn open wide, allowing the colorful displays to literally scream out at passers by. The space was jam-packed with patrons of

all ages, mostly prospective students, who all seemed anxious to stockpile the necessary school survival supplies for the start of term. The most sought after products were: Puking Pastilles, Nosebleed Nougats, Skiving Snackboxes, and other feigned ill causing supplements invented by the Weasley twins for the sole purpose of guaranteeing any student who used them an easy out of class, should the need arise.

“Well if it isn’t ickle Ronnie Prefect!” shouted Fred teasingly when he caught sight of the top of his brother Ron’s carrot-topped head bobbing along as he crossed the threshold of the store. “So, you’re re to be a Bighead boy like brother Percy. Following proudly in his footsteps, I bet.”

Ron grumbled under his breath and turned a fierce shade of puce, which clashed horribly with his hair.

“No worries, ickle-pickle-Ronnie-poo!” chortled George. “We can enchant your badge to say ‘*Bighead boy*’ just as we did Percy’s when he was Head boy!”

“Quiet, you lot!” hissed Ginny. If dad hears you going on about Percy like that, he’ll have a fit!”

Fred snapped up after chancing a look at Mr. Weasley, who had taken to picking curiously through a batch of puking pastilles merchandised next to the sales counter.

George acknowledged quietly to Ginny, “That’s right; that bumbling git Percy is so full of himself that he still refuses to acknowledge he’s family. Mum says he doesn’t even so much as say hello to dad at work.”

“Say, Fred, how much for this self hairstyling gel? The sign’s missing,” said Ron quietly, holding up a fat purple tube with glittery silver wording that said, *Hair’s to You*, across the face of it.

“Aw! Does ickle Ronnie prefect wish to be all handsome for the little first year lasses?” teased George.

“Very funny,” grumbled Ron, hurling the product at his brother, who jinxed it away. “I probably couldn’t afford it anyway. You lot charge an arm and a leg for this rubbish, and you refuse to even cut your own brother a break once in a while.”

“On the contrary, Ronnie; you and Ginny can take whatever you like, provided you don’t exceed Morley’s pay packets,” said Fred cheerfully, tossing a Quaffle-sized bag full of galleons to Ron.

Ron made a face as if his brothers had just sprouted tusks and quite possibly some rather sizable tumors that had obviously interfered with their normal brain function.

“Huh?” he said in disbelief as he eyed over the money, waiting for the bag to explode, punch him in the eye, or perhaps transform into a pile of dragon dung.

“Relax, Ronnie,” said George. “Fred and I are still the same heartless gits we always were. That money’s not from us. It’s from Morley. She’s donated four weeks worth of her pay packets to you and Ginny so you can buy whatever you like. She claims she doesn’t need the money and she feels bad that you and Ginny constantly have to settle for second-hand school stuff. So, there you have it.”

Hermione looked suspicious. “You’re not really going to accept all that money, *are you*, Ronald?”

Ron, who was utterly beside himself with delight, said frankly, “*Of course!* Why shouldn’t I?”

“I just think it’s a bit *excessive*, that’s all. Hannah must have worked awfully hard to earn all of that money, and then to go giving it away — it’s just *strange*.”

“I personally think it is incredibly kind,” said Harry adamantly.

“Bloody brilliant is more like it!” said Ron with awe when he opened the bag and sifted through the golden coins with his lanky fingers, having been completely mesmerized by the shine of the metal as it reflected the brilliance of the candlelight in the shop.

Hermione’s stand didn’t soften. In fact, she looked more troubled than ever.

“Well, I, for one, don’t need her stinking charity!” spat Ginny. “I’ll stick with my second-hand rubbish!”

George was slightly taken aback. “What’s with you, Gin?”

Fred stepped in and said knowingly, “I believe I know, George. I’m willing to bet our little sister is jealous.”

“I’m not *jealous!*” snapped Ginny.

“Oh, but I think you *are*,” countered Fred tauntingly. “You’re all sore because young Harry’s eyes have wandered away from your underdeveloped sprouting field and onto more expertly cultivated pastures.”

“*Fred Weasley!* What an awful thing to say to your sister!” gasped Hermione.

Harry had to agree. Fred’s comment wasn’t exactly a testimonial to Harry’s virtuous side. He looked on as Ginny shrieked in outrage, her face flushing the same flaming red color as her hair, which rustled wildly behind her as she stomped off to the front of the shop. Harry squirmed in his place. He wasn’t exactly sure if he’d be better off high tailing it

after Ginny, or remaining there with the Weasley twins and quite possibly having to suffer more from their imprudent remarks. Thankfully, Ron's tactless temperament kicked in as he continued to revel in the weighty bag of jingling galleons he held in his hands.

"I reckon that just leaves more for me," he said.

"What do you plan to do with your newfound riches, Ron? Are you to buy a mount for your Head Boy badge?" teased George.

"One for *your head* is more like it," said Ron smartly. "That's right! Then, we can hang you and Fred between the trolls heads lining the stairwell at Grimmauld!"

"Ooooh!" said Fred, slapping Ron brusquely on his back. "Sharp comeback, ickle! I believe that's the most intelligent thing to come out of your mouth since — oh, I don't know — your last burp?"

Ron grimaced.

"Grawp! *NO*, Grawp!" boomed the sound of Hagrid's resonant voice through the streets of Diagon Alley.

Harry and his friends' attention were instantly drawn to the storefront window. They watched on as Hagrid's brother, Grawp, pounded his way through Diagon Alley with what appeared to be a large plastic over-sized cover bound in the mighty grip of his monstrous hands.

Chasing after Grawp with the leg of a hefty dining table was Florence Florean, shrieking out at the top of her lungs, "Come back here, you filthy beast! You wretched thief! You pestilence of destruction! Come back and face me like a man!"

Florence's black and white streaked bun flopped wildly behind her and seemed in jeopardy of unraveling as the plump, and purple floral-frocked-coated witch chased fearlessly after the terrifying giant. Her knee-high stockings bunched and sagged around her prominent elephant ankles and spread over her old lady loafers as she continued her mad dash after the lumbering giant. All the while, she carried on swinging the table leg at the massive creature in an attempt to knock him to the ground.

"Grawp! *Grawp!*" Hagrid continued to shout out with an ever-increasing sense of desperation.

Arthur dashed out of Fred and George's joke shop and into Diagon Alley, bellowing out, "Petrificus Totalus!!"

A bright white flash of light burst from the tip of his wand, causing Grawp's body to go rigid. His stiff form swayed perilously for several moments before he finally dropped to

the ground, landing flat on his face with a loud prominent *boom* in the center of the alleyway. Harry, Hermione, and Ron rushed outside the storefront for a closer view.

“I’m calling the Ministry!” shrieked Florence. “That horrible oaf will be banished from the wizarding world and thrown into Azkaban with the rest of Britain’s rubbish!”

“No! You can’t! He’ll go mad locked up in Azkaban!” blubbered Hagrid with the effect of an overgrown baby.

“He ruined my shop and caused galleons worth of damage! How am I ever to put it right without taking on a loan from Gringotts? I haven’t enough collateral! I’ll lose everything, EVERYTHING!” wailed Florence.

“I’ll find a way ter pay you fer it! I’ll sell everything I own if I have ter! Jus’ please don’t take Grawp from me! He’s the only family I got left!” crowed Hagrid, his bucket-sized tears soaking the frizz of his thick beard and matting it to his chest.

“Calm down, everyone! No one will be sending anyone to Azkaban!” shouted Arthur.

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong, Arthur!” roared Florence. “One urgent owl to my dear friend, Rufus Scrimgeour, the Prime Minister of Magic, and Grawp will be *history!*”

“*No!*” howled Hagrid, collapsing to Florence’s feet in a fit of blubbering sobs.

Ron looked to Harry and Grawp, then to Hagrid, and Florence, finally returning his attention to the lovely sack of Galleon’s he cradled in his arms like a long-lost, precious love. “Oh, for the love of Merlin!” he growled. “*HERE!*” He shoved the treasured sack into Florence’s confounded grip. “That oughta be enough to cover the damages!”

Florence’s face flooded with astonishment. “B-but—”

“Just, take it before I change my mind!” spat Ron grudgingly.

Hagrid’s eyes flooded with eternal gratefulness as he scrambled to his feet and gathered Ron up into his bumbling embrace. “Ron! Oh! I’ll pay yer back *every last bit*, I swear! Jus’ yer wait. You’ll see!”

“*Forget it*, Hagrid!” wheezed Ron, wriggling to escape his hairy friend’s staggering grip. “Just promise you’ll keep the bloody beast out of trouble!”

“I will! I’ll return him ter the Forbidden Forest! He likes it in there! I’ll keep him out o’ sight! Yul never know he’s there!” rambled Hagrid frantically.

“Alright!” shouted Arthur. “Florence, you’ve got your payment for the damages. Hagrid, you’re to take Grawp into the Forbidden Forest and keep him from causing any further trouble.”

“Abserlutely!” agreed Hagrid instantly.

Florence turned her nose up at Grawp and, addressing Hagrid, she snapped harshly, “Very well, Mr. Hagrid, but you’re to keep that wretched *thing* out of my parlor! If he so much as slips a toe through the doorway to my shop, I’ll see to it that he’s hauled off and locked up in Azkaban for all eternity!”

Ron rolled his eyes at the old battleaxe, while Hagrid tended to Grawp, working with Mr. Weasley on strategy to remove the great ugly brute as safely and effortlessly as possible from the premises.

“That’s a right noble thing you did, Ron. I’m proud of you,” said Harry.

“As am I, Ronald,” purred Hermione, snuggling up to him.

“Ugh! I reckon I was born to be poor and stay that way!” grumbled Ron, watching as his parcel of galleons walked off in the pacified possession of Florence Florean.

Harry patted his best friend comfortingly on the shoulder and said, “You may be poor in substance, mate, but you’re rich in spirit.”

“Yeah, *fantastic*,” grumbled Ron. “Too bad having a rich spirit doesn’t pay the bills.”

“It might not pay the bills, but it will win you good friends for life,” said Harry with absolute conviction.

Still, Ron was insistent on continuing with his muted vocal grievance, mumbling incoherently under his breath.

“Come on,” said Harry empathetically, guiding Ron back into the Weasley twin’s joke shop. “I’ll buy you that hair gel.”

Hannah spent most of the morning tossing and turning restlessly in her four-poster bed, unable to sway herself to sleep, her mind swarming with the awful memory of the bitter exchange of words that had taken place between her and Severus hours earlier. She snuggled under the covers, tucking Harry’s pillow into her chest, taking in his calming scent, and staring blankly into oblivion. She heard a distinct *POP*, and subsequently found herself staring at the bottom half of a tall jet-black robed figure.

“What the hell are you doing here, Severus?” she hissed, rolling over and throwing her back to him.

“I came to see you.”

“Ugh! I’d forgotten to block your access to this space!”

“Are you *trying* to see to my demise, Hannah?”

“The only thing I’m *trying* to do is pluck your non-committing bum the hell out of my life! I swear, you’re like some kind of enchanted weed or something. You keep cropping up and choking me to death with your poisonous roots and bitter disposition!”

“How can you say such a thing to me!” he snarled. “I am *wholly* devoted to you! I’ve spent half my life seeing to your safety and welfare, putting your interest above all others, including my own! I’ve only asked that you bear with me for these few short months until our mission is complete. Then we can be as we were before!”

“Nice try, Severus! Sorry to say you made yourself perfectly clear to me earlier, so quit trying to worm your way out of it! I have no further use for the rubbish you’ve been dishing out to me these long months! In fact, I no longer have any use for *you*!”

“We had an agreement!” he stated firmly and hauntingly.

“No, we had a *relationship*! At least I thought we had. I’m not some sort of business arrangement. I’m a person; one who has taken far too much emotional abuse from the likes of *you*!”

“What are you saying?”

“Let me spell it out for you, Severus. We — are — finished! I’ll see to the mission on my own, *without you*. Now, *leave*!”

Severus lunged forward and snapped her upright, snarling out, “Do you think this is some kind of joke?”

“Do I look like I’m laughing?” retorted Hannah, yanking her arm from his grip.

“So, you believe you are to just parade up to the Dark Lord and tell him what? That you quit?”

“*No*. I’m to tell him that I will proceed with the mission on my own, that I no longer wish to deal with you.”

Severus cackled. “Perhaps, you and I should kill one other now!”

“Don’t tempt me, Severus. Seeing to your annihilation is currently at the top of my very long list of punishments for you!”

“Do you realize that the only reason Voldemort has accepted you is because *I* have made it so? You need me to complete this mission! You cannot go it alone. He’ll never stand for it!”

“Do you recall that the only reason you’re still alive is because *I* agreed to fill the vacant space of Voldemort’s direct connection to Potter AND to Hogwarts? You know the space, don’t you, Severus? The one you so foolishly lost, thanks to your valiant response to that ridiculous fair-maiden-in-distress routine of Narcissa’s! Face it — it’s *you* who needs *me*, and you know it!”

“Hannah, please,” said Severus near desperately, dropping to his knees before her.

“Oh, quit groveling, Severus; it’s totally unbecoming of you!”

“Give me the chance to make this up to you. Let me please you,” he said insistently. He climbed into bed beside her, pulling her into his passionate embrace and proceeding to sway her with his delectable kisses.

“*God*, why can’t I shake myself of my love for you?” whispered Hannah in exasperation into his lips.

Severus smiled triumphantly and replied, “Because you know as well as I do that we were meant to be together.”

Hannah nuzzled her head in his chest. Almost immediately after breathing him in, she pushed off him and inquired brusquely, “What’s that smell?”

“What smell?” he replied.

“I smell perfume on your robes, *Narcissa’s* perfume!” snarled Hannah.

“Would you settle down! I only left Malfoy Manor moments ago. I was talking with her.”

“Talking? So, what, the two of you were having a nice little *chat* and her perfume just happened to embed itself in your garments?”

“If you must know, I was comforting her,” said Snape matter-of-factly.

“Comforting her? You were *comforting* her? Isn’t that what she’s got a husband for?!” spat Hannah.

“Hannah, the Dark Lord tortured Lucius late this morning. Lucius nearly died; Narcissa was in complete despair over it. What would you have expected me do? stand by and watch as she collapsed helplessly to the floor and cried her eyes out?” inquired Severus impatiently.

“Voldemort *t-tortured* Lucius?” choked Hannah in disbelief, bringing her hand to meet her mouth. “H-how?”

“He employed the Imperius curse to force Lucius to beat himself nearly to death,” said Severus.

Hannah gulped. “Why would Voldemort do such a dreadful thing to one of his most dedicated followers?”

“Don’t look so surprised. It’s not as if it’s out of character for the Dark Lord to be merciless and cruel.”

“Still, what happened to make Voldemort so angry?”

“Apparently, Lucius’s former house elf, Dobby, had been sequestered by the ministry. The sniveling little beast managed to present nearly two decades worth of privileged information it acquired through Lucius from working for the Malfoys. It appears that the extent of Dobby’s detailed knowledge of Lucius’s private affairs was valuable enough to lead to the expulsion and imprisonment of several ministry executives, whom were doubling as spies for Voldemort, consequently severing of all of the Dark Lord’s ties to the Ministry of Magic, all with the exception...of you.”

“Fantastic. That certainly relieves some of the pressure!” snorted Hannah sarcastically, throwing her hands in the air.

“Hannah, this is an incredibly *serious* matter! The spotlight is on *us* now! We **MUST** deliver what The Dark Lord requires of us, or we will most certainly die!”

“Oh, calm yourself, would you? It’s called *sarcasm*, Severus! It keeps me from going insane in the uptight world I’ve been living in ever since I joined this circus of yours. I don’t know who is worse to toil with, *you* or *Remus*!”

“How *dare* you compare me to that sniveling *fool*!” hissed Severus.

“Ugh! Are we to fight again? Or can we retreat to Spinner’s End so that you can shower to rid yourself of that wretched woman’s stench and we can spend the afternoon together?”

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I haven’t that much time. I’ve only an hour at best, and then I must return to the Malfoy Mansion. Narcissa has requested that I remain with them until Lucius is well.”

“Surprise, surprise,” she drawled, flinging herself against the bed in exasperation.

“Hannah, you must understand. The Malfoys trust me above all the others in our group. Lucius requires a mixture of intricate potions to restore his health and I am the only

wizard he can confide in, the only one who possesses the skill to brew the remedies *effectively*. His only other option would be to go to St. Mungo's, and if he does, he would surely be cast back into Azkaban and —”

“And Voldemort would annihilate the lot of them,” she interjected knowingly with a weary sigh.

“Precisely.”

“Ugh! Just, promise me you won't do anything foolish for the lot of them this time around, Severus.”

“Foolish?”

“Yes, *foolish*. For example: *Unbreakable Vow* foolish.”

“Hannah, not this again,” groaned Severus.

“*Promise me!*” she insisted more assertively.

Snape let out a deep exhaustive sigh and muttered, “I promise.”

“That Narcissa woman's got a thing for you, Severus. I'm telling you,” said Hannah with a disapproving huff.

“Would you stop being so snappish!”

“What do you expect of me? I'm aching for your touch and you're literally starving me of it! Instead, you're running off answering *Narcissa's* every beckon and call, staying in *Narcissa's* home, holding *Narcissa!*”

“Hannah, it's not what you believe!”

“Save it! Just, leave this place if you've nothing more to offer me other than a quick shag and more of your frivolous rationalizations.”

“Perhaps we could meet at my home later this evening? I'm certain I can sneak away from Malfoy Mansion for a few hours,” said Snape, advancing on her repentantly.

Hannah held her palm out to him in rejection and snapped, “Don't do me any favors. I don't want your *pity* sex. I want you to be with me because you *want* to be with me, not because I *guilted* you into it. Besides, I've already got plans with Potter for this evening.”

“Oh?” sneered Snape.

“Settle yourself, will you? It's just an Occlumency lesson.”

“And do you intend to be fully clothed for *this* lesson?” Snape shot back at her ruthlessly.

“Unless lady luck somehow finds me,” retorted Hannah cleverly with a defiant smirk.

Severus grunted in condemnation.

“So, what instructions have you for me? Clearly you’re here for a greater purpose other than seeing to my contentment,” pushed Hannah curtly.

“Hannah, I have some time. Let me please you,” said Snape softly, working her onto her back and roving his mouth along her most intimate places.

“*Get off me, Severus!*” she snapped, wriggling away from him. “I can’t stand that I can smell her on you, that you’re actually putting her before me, *again*. I’m sorry, but you know how I feel about that wretched woman! Just tell me what Voldemort requires of me and I’ll see to it that it gets accomplished!”

“Hannah, please,” he said penitently, going back for her.

“Severus, I’m not kidding! Stay away from me! Go ahead and get on with what you were sent here to say to me. I swear, I can’t take another moment of you,” she croaked.

Severus let out a deep surrendering sigh and answered, “Very well. Your instructions are as follows: seeing as how Potter is due to return to Hogwarts tomorrow afternoon and he will no longer be under your constant watchful eye, Voldemort has requested that you discover a way to stick close to him whilst you are off duty, without drawing attention to yourself. The enchanted portal you’ve constructed leading to the third floor corridor inside of Hogwarts is an excellent inception. The area is off limits to students and is rarely patrolled by the staff. However, now that Remus and the most of the Order have access to the main secret corridor, have been patrolling it regularly, and intend to use it as a means of shuffling Potter back and forth, to and from Hogwarts, Voldemort wishes for you to create a separate access to the school. It should be one that is kept entirely secret from the Order, and one that will allow you to stick as closely to Potter as possible, without suffering the possible infringement of the rest of the Phoenix guard. Be sure to let Potter know of the secret entrance, so he doesn’t accidentally stumble across it and become suspicious of you. Tell him it is to be used for emergency purposes only.”

“And you propose?” pushed Hannah impatiently.

“I propose you connect the separate secret passageway from your walk-in wardrobe to Potter’s dormitory wardrobe. Continue to make use of your Invisibility Potion so that you can come and go inside of Gryffindor tower undetected. That will allow you to listen in on his most private conversations and ensure that you are keeping his friends from influencing him too much over what you and I need him to do to complete our mission. See to it that he returns to Grimmauld on his free weekends so you may watch over him. From here on out, unless Potter is sleeping, you are to be at his side, day and night.”

“Excellent,” said Hannah in a mock pensive fashion. “I get to live, breathe, and eat Harry Potter, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It’s a girl’s dream come true.”

Severus curled his lip in censure.

“I was only joking, Severus! It was a *joke*! Ease up, would you?”

“I’ll *ease up* once I know you’ve accomplished your orders!”

“Relax. It as good as done. McGonagall has granted all the members of the advanced Order full access to all of Gryffindor Tower. I’ll have the password I need to make the connection to his dormitory. Have you anything further for me?”

“Not at the present time. Since you managed to sway the Order and the Ministry to allow you the opportunity to perform the *grueling* task of being Potter’s personal guard during the school week, I believe we have everything we need for the time being.”

“It certainly looks that way,” agreed Hannah quietly.

“Indeed. And Hannah...use your privileges well.”