

## CHAPTER 25

### THE QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN CUP

Much to Harry, Ron, and Hermione's amazement, the day swiftly drew to a welcoming close. Under Charlie Weasley's guard, the trio swiftly departed the Great Hall after supper and headed back to Gryffindor tower in hopes of catching a few essential winks of sleep before seeing to their Horcrux mission.

After several hours of unproductive tossing and turning, the three rose from their restless slumbers and got themselves ready. The time was nearing five to one as Ron and Harry paced restlessly about the floor of their vacant dorm room, hoping no one would interrupt the start of their crucial operation.

The sound of a light scuffle and a prominent creak coming from the direction of their dorm room door alerted them to the certainty that another presence would soon be joining them. They examined the entrance anxiously as the door slowly edged open, revealing nothing except for the cool empty space of the stairwell behind it.

"Harry? Ron?" whispered the delicate feminine voice of Hermione, her slender figure concealed beneath the effects of Harry's invisibility cloak.

"Yeah; over here," said Harry in a raspy whisper, waving her in his direction.

"Hurry, Hermione, before we get caught!" exclaimed Ron in a quiet panic.

"Would you relax, Ronald! It'll be fine. Charlie is on duty tonight and he's outside the portrait hole, flirting with Lavender Brown. As far as all your roommates are concerned, they're all carrying on down in the common room competing to see who can write out the best essay for Hannah. Honestly, it's like they're possessed or something; I've never seen anything like it. It'll probably be ages before they come up to bed," grumbled Hermione.

Harry tried hard not to smirk upon the receipt of Hermione's bitterly delivered rolling commentary, but he couldn't help it. Hannah certainly had her way with the male species, and very clearly, it annoyed Hermione to no end.

"Here," she said shortly, handing Harry the Polyjuice Potion.

He and Ron took turns dropping the potion onto their puffs and watching in amazement as the little white sponges transformed into exact replicas of themselves.

"Blimey, that's just *spooky*," gasped Ron, poking at the replica of himself and causing a soft snore to erupt from its mouth.

“Wow,” whispered Harry in awe, pulling the covers of the bed over his sleeping twin. “Alright, you lot — into the cupboard.” He waved them in the direction of his walk-in wardrobe.

Hermione and Ron obliged by squeezing in beside him and spreading the invisibility cloak evenly amongst themselves.

Harry passed his wand in a smooth star pattern along the back wall of the cupboard to conjure the enchanted doorway. On his word, Hermione and Ron shuffled along with him through a short, narrow passageway leading to the Grimmauld secret room.

“OUCH, Ron; that was my foot!” snarled Hermione.

“Sorry! This isn’t exactly my preferred means of transportation!” retorted Ron.

“Would you two *hush!* We need to keep quiet until we’re certain that no one from the Order is in the secret room,” snapped Harry.

“Sorry,” They grumbled in unison.

They trio progressed onward until they came to what appeared to be a dead end. Harry drummed his wand on the wall before him, conjuring another enchanted entrance. He slowly tapped open the doorway and peered through it, spotting Hannah standing in the center of the room. She was talking to a tall, heavily masked man and a slender, hallow-looking, masked woman with long flaxen hair.

Hannah instantly turned to greet Harry. Waving him along impatiently, she said, “Come on, you lot. It’s all clear. These two are with us.”

Harry removed the invisibility cloak from around him and his friends and entered the secret room. When he looked off to his right at the four-poster bed, he noted that Hannah had also used a puff to copy herself. Her angelic replica lay tucked away beneath the soft silken covers in sweet, peaceful slumber.

As he moved to approach the actual Hannah, he noticed the masked man standing beside her instantly reached up to her shoulders and clapped his hands firmly around them. *He was Hannah’s lover!* Harry was certain of it. His pulse quickened when he looked into the man’s cold onyx eyes and they returned him a terribly harsh glare. The man’s lip twitched fiercely beneath his heavy plastic disguise as he proceeded to take in every inch of Harry’s stature. At long last, Harry had come face to face with the anonymous man who held Hannah’s heart.

“This is my lover. You may call him Wes,” said Hannah, gesturing to the tall masked man. “And this is our most trusted friend. You may call her Rue.” Hannah motioned to the woman. “They’re to help us, but they have asked that they remain anonymous, as I’m certain you can understand.”

“Hi,” said Harry, reaching out to shake their hands.

The woman reached her hand forth to make his acquaintance. Wes just stared at him, tightening his claw-like grip on Hannah’s shoulders, and gnashing his teeth beneath his thin, angrily contorted lips. Harry immediately withdrew his goodwill gesture, having felt the intense fuming energy coming from Wes’s heated stare.

Hermione pushed forward, and breaching the awkwardness of the moment, she said, “Hi. I’m Hermione and this is Ron.”

“Hey,” said Ron uneasily.

The two eerily veiled figures nodded in wordless recognition of them.

“Alright,” said Hannah. “We must be quick. We’ve got a little under three hours,” Then, holding out a silken ivory-laced camisole, she commanded, “Everyone take hold of this and we’ll be off.”

Ron smoothed his hand over the racy article and proceeded to eye it with a hypnotic interest until Hermione slapped him back to a conscious state.

“Sorry,” murmured Hannah, “but we needed something flexible that we could keep with us, something that would fit into my cloak pocket, and this is all I had.” Each member of the group took hold of it as Hannah counted off, “One, two, *three!*”

Harry felt the floor shift, then drop out from beneath him. He sensed his body twisting, turning, and spinning as he fell freely through the atmosphere.

Moments later, he, Ron, and Hermione landed in a scattered and crumpled heap on the leaf covered ground of a steeply angled forest. Hannah landed perfectly poised before them, both her feet planted firmly on the ground with Wes and Rue standing boldly on either side of her. Ron, Harry, and Hermione scampered quickly to their feet, following Wes’s instruction as he waved them off to their right.

“This way,” said Hannah, tucking the Portkey into her cloak pocket.

Harry hurried along side of her and inquired, “Where are we?”

“Albania,” she said simply.

The rest of the group lagged behind in the pitch darkness of the chilly night, while Wes edged up behind them, bumping Harry rudely aside. Harry saw Hannah flash the man a look that he interpreted as a quick sideways glance of reprimand, because the man immediately withdrew. They continued to pace their way toward a cavernous structure. Hannah halted in her tracks when Wes tugged at her arm.

“This is it,” she said with swift certainty.

Harry surveyed the jagged face of a large, moss-ridden, graying stone blocking the entrance to the cavern. He noted a small silver serpent molded into the top, right corner of the stone’s face.

Hannah smoothed her hand over it and instructed aloud, “Harry, say something in Parseltongue.”

Harry began to hiss and spit in language distinguishable only to him. The stone slab eased open, revealing the moist darkness of a broad damp grotto.

“Wands at the ready,” murmured Hannah.

Upon her command, everyone seized their wands and crept along behind her and Wes. Harry felt a chilling grip of jealousy biting into him as he witnessed Wes swathe his arm firmly around Hannah’s waist and whisper intimately into her ear.

“*Lumos*,” called Hannah quietly, swirling her wand about the velvety blackness of the cavern. Several ancient torches illuminated to light their way.

Hermione tiptoed along beside them, clinging tightly to Harry’s arm and taking in her surroundings warily. Gradually, she released her grip on him. She backed herself way ahead of the others, off to their right, her feet crunching on something thick and rounded beneath her.

All of a sudden, Hannah shouted out, “Hermione, *STOP! DON’T MOVE! DON’T...MOVE...Stay right there, right there.*” Her voice trailed off into an alarming whisper as she and Wes hunched forward and slinked carefully toward her.

Hermione stood frozen in place, her horrified gaze following the direction of their eyes, which were revolving around the spot in which she stood. She realized that she had landed herself smack dab in the center of a strange wide circle made of long woven tree limbs.

“What? There just a bunch of sticks, *right?*” she choked nervously on her shortened breath, her heart racing.

“Look beyond the magic, Hermione, *beyond* it!” said Hannah. “They’re transfigured poisonous serpents. Take one more step, it will reverse the spell, and you won’t stand a chance. You’ll be dead in the blink of an eye!”

Hermione’s eyes drew wide. She looped her eyes around the circle of limbs, again, noting tiny specks of red, white, and green freckling them, and she started to tremble from head to foot.

“Well, what are you waiting for?! Get her out of there!” howled Ron, lurching forward to claim Hermione, his face flaming red and his hands shaking wildly.

“RELAX!” shouted Hannah, shoving him away.

Ron scoffed and bellowed out, “Relax? *Relax?* My girlfriend is about to get the life bit right out of her, and –!”

“RON! *Calm down!*” shouted Harry.

“SOD OFF, Harry! That’s not *your* girlfriend standing in there!” hollered Ron.

“Would you SHUT IT, *both of you!*” snarled Hannah. “I need to think.” She studied the ceiling and the walls of the grotto. She stepped around the outer edge of the circle, and with a show of reassuring palms, she said calmly, “Hermione, stand still. As long as you don’t take another step, they won’t waken.”

Hermione nodded in terror, her eyes brimming with terrified tears. Harry and Ron remained entirely breathless while Hannah motioned to Wes and Rue to secure the cavern. The two obliged, surveying the space from floor to ceiling and reporting to her several minutes later. Hannah leaned into Wes, whispering in his ear while pointing to the ceiling of the cave. He returned her whisper, nodding to her in agreement. Then, he backed several feet away from the rest of the group until he reached the opposite side of the cavern.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” said Hannah edgily. “Now, Hermione, very slowly, without moving any part of the rest of you, I need you to secure your wand in your pocket. Can you do that?”

Hermione nodded fretfully, slowly raising her shaking hand, and slipping her wand into her back pocket.

Ron and Harry stood motionless, beads of sweat compiling on their foreheads, their breath stepping up as they anxiously took in the scene unfolding before them.

“Now, this is going to be a little rough, but you must promise me *not* to flinch,” said Hannah to Hermione. “You need to remain entirely still. Just, trust me; alright?”

Hermione nodded vigorously.

“Hold out your arms to your sides,” said Hannah.

Hermione slowly raised her arms into the air and closed her eyes tightly in a hushed show of trepidation.

“Okay. You ready?” asked Hannah.

Hermione shook her head.

“SUNCEPTRA!” bellowed Hannah: Two chains capped with thick silver-banded shackles dropped from the ceiling of the cavern, wove themselves tightly around Hermione’s wrists, and then yanked her straight toward the ceiling. “RELASHIO!” bellowed Hannah, again: Hermione was jerked over to the opposite side of the cavern. She let out a blood-curdling scream as she hurtled violently through the air.

“EVANESCO!” shouted Hannah: The chains vanished, and Hermione plunged from the face of the ceiling toward the rest of the group, her screams growing louder and more intense until she landed safely in the strong grip of Wes’s arms. He instantly stood her to her feet and backed swiftly away. Ron ran for her and gathered her up in his arms.

“Are you alright?” he asked Hermione concernedly.

“Yeah,” she said, still shaking. “Thank you, Hannah, Wes.”

“You’re welcome,” said Hannah stiffly.

Wes granted Hermione a gentle nod.

Harry reached for Hermione and gave her a quick squeeze, then dashed off to Hannah, smoothing his hand across her back, gushing out, “That was *brilliant!*”

Hannah flashed him a revering smile, to which Wes responded disapprovingly by wedging between them, his teeth clenched in opposition. Hannah shot Wes an affronted glare and mouthed the word “**STOP**” to him. The man’s eyes darted back over to Harry, and a thick frown of disapproval stretched across his face. Harry was quick to take the hint and backed away, joining his friends and Rue and trailing uncomfortably behind. He watched on in angst as the man, once again, clapped his arm firmly around Hannah’s waist.

“Now all of you, follow Wes and My lead and don’t touch anything or step anywhere else unless we give you the okay,” said Hannah sternly.

They traveled onward until the cavern’s mouth widened, then emptied into a brilliant, green-hued rounded room. Harry circled his gaze about the open space. He noted that there were several long, jagged, slated rocks floating throughout it surrounding a brilliant mass of shining gold, which was suspended in mid-air several feet below the center of the ceiling. There it was; the same article he saw in Dumbledore’s Pensive, last year; it was a small golden chalice with two finely wrought handles, the image of a badger engraved across the front, and Helga Hufflepuff’s initials engraved beneath the badger.

“There! Hannah, I see it; it’s the Hufflepuff cup!” shouted Harry eagerly, and he stepped forward to claim it.

“WAIT!” shouted Hannah, catching his chest with the palm of her hand and holding him back. She fired her wand a few inches in front of them; a massive swarm of tiny, green, razor-sharp spikes whizzed around the cavern in every direction, dropping to the ground, and vanishing from sight.

“WHOA!” gasped Harry.

“What the bloody hell was that?” hollered Ron, still cradling a cowering Hermione in his arms.

Hannah and Wes exchanged looks of what Harry thought was dread. However, Hannah’s voice was assertive as she spoke.

“Spikes of Oblivion,” she said.

“Spikes of *what?*” said Harry.

“*Oblivion*. Get hit by one of those, and your mind is wiped clean of all recognition of your life, and your whole self, *forever*. You’re left to live out the rest of your days as a zombie.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione gulped. Hannah removed her cloak, revealing her fitted black leotard beneath it. She knelt down to her high-heeled boots and tapped her wand on them, uttering a series of indistinct incantations; she appeared to be bewitching them somehow. Wes knelt down beside her in protest, but she waved him off.

“I’m the only one who can do this and you know it,” she said firmly.

“Do what?” inquired Harry, listening in on their conversation.

“*I’ve* got to retrieve the cup,” said Hannah.

“Hannah, *no*. Let me do it,” said Harry insistently.

“Harry, you’re too important to this mission.”

“But —”

“Harry, *clear off*; I need to figure this out,” said Hannah tersely. She fired her wand into the room in multiple locations, observing each spike that shot across the space from every direction. At the same time, Wes slashed his wand fiercely at the open space, and hundreds of thousands of red light trails lit up the once invisible pathways, which, if touched, would trigger the release of the spikes.

Harry noted that the only parts of the room not smothered in lines of red were a small opening in front of them, one high above them, along with the tops and upper

surroundings of five out of the six long stone slabs, and a small space between each stone resembling the centers of high hurdles. The stones were scattered about at various levels, too far apart from one another to step through the high and narrow space carved between each without risking tripping one of the enchanted lines. The golden cup was completely engulfed in red light, all with the exception of the rim. Harry examined the space further, noting that there were no slabs of stone close enough to the cup to claim it safely. The fifth step stood several feet below it and the sixth one hovered several feet above it. The top surface of the sixth stone was surrounded in red light, freeing only the bottom face of it and the space directly below it.

Harry wondered, *If she couldn't stand on top of the sixth stone and lean down to get the cup, how would she do it?*

Hannah looked to Wes again with a flicker of apprehension in her eyes. She handed Harry her wand, and said firmly, "When I give you the word, shoot the wand at my feet."

"What are you going to do?" said Harry with a prominent gulp.

"A little routine I'd like to call, '*An ode to the death of Voldy!*' Well; here's to the lot of you! CHEERS!" she shouted boldly, and she took off running.

She dove through the open center leading into the room, hitting the face of the first stone in the form of a handstand, launching herself forward, high into the air, and alternating landing from hand to feet on each step, slipping smoothly through the hurdles between each flip.

She hit the fifth step in a solid handstand and shouted, "*NOW!*"

Harry fired her wand at her feet, and two huge, open-hooked spikes burst out of the center soles of her boots. She nailed them firmly into the underside of the sixth step hovering above her and the cup, pausing for a moment as she hung upside down in mid air.

"*Bloody hell,*" whimpered Ron in total awe.

Hermione stood motionless beside him with her hands cupped over her mouth, while Wes and Rue exchanged intense glances, letting out gentle sighs of relief.

"Hannah, are you alright?" shouted Harry concernedly.

"Yeah," she replied, panting heavily. "I just need...to catch...my breath. *Whew!* Who would've known all those years of gymnastic lessons would've actually done more for me than just keeping my bum toned!" she joked.

Harry couldn't help but chuckle at her usual trademark tendency to crack jokes at the most intense and inopportune moments.

Hannah began swinging back and forth in an attempt at reaching the cup. The tips of her fingers brushed lightly against the rim, causing the cup to teeter slightly in mid-air and nearly clip the edges of the enchanted lines. With one last hard swing and a pronounced grunt, she secured the cup.

“Got it!” she exclaimed.

“YES!” crowed Harry in elation.

The rest of the group expelled equally profound sounds of triumph.

“Alright, Potter; I’m going to bung the cup to you! Stay BEHIND the line or you’ll set off the spikes! No matter what happens from here, *STAY PUT!*”

“Okay!” he shouted, panting nervously while he readied himself for the catch.

“Ready, Potter?!” inquired Hannah.

“READY!” said Harry.

Hannah swung her arm to gather enough momentum to pitch the cup in his direction. Just as she did so, the base of the rock where her feet were planted cracked, and she was thrown forward as the cup left her grasp. The edge of it cut through several of the light bands setting off a series of spikes in every direction.

“AHHH!” she screamed, crumpling onto the stone slab beneath her.

“HANNAH!” shouted Harry, catching the cup and tossing it aside, then running in her direction.

Wes stepped in front of him, blocking his path and hissing out in a horrible menacing whisper, “*STAY PUT* or you’ll make it *worse!*”

Harry cringed as he observed the man’s face contort into an almost inhumane grimace. He grunted helplessly and swiftly backed away, his teeth and fists clenched while he watched in horror at the sight befalling him: The entire room was now entirely engulfed in flaming streams of brilliant light. Collective sharp, whistling echoes had enveloped the entire cavern as thousands and thousands of spikes ricocheted throughout it. It seemed like an eternity had passed before the spikes began to slow, then eventually ceased altogether. The room fell eerily quiet, still fully ablaze in a blur of blinding red light.

“HANNAH!” cried Harry in a panic, trying desperately, along with the others, to see through the glaring light to locate her.

There was no answer to his beckoning calls.

Harry felt his throat tighten and his heart seize up in his chest. He swore he was going to be sick. He looked to Hermione, then to Ron, to Wes, and Rue, who were all staring equally as anxious in the direction of the Horcrux room.

“HANNAH!” Harry screamed out again, now entirely numb from head to foot.

There came a light scuffling noise coming from behind the thick wall of light, and then...more aching silence.

“HANNAH!” Harry screamed out, again. He was going to go in. He wasn’t going to leave her in there alone. He was going to —

SWOOSH! Out of nowhere, a shadowy figure came hurtling through the tiny opening at the top of the cavern, landing face down at his feet, and panting wildly.

“Hannah!” Harry cried out as he went for her. But, Wes pushed him roughly aside and knelt down before her in his stead.

“*I want to see her!*” snarled Harry, hitting the man with a sharp, angry blow to the jaw.

“Wes fired his wand in defense at Harry, sending him hurling through the air.”

“HARRY!” shouted Ron and Hermione in unison, rushing to his aid.

Harry jumped back to his feet and faced the man with his wand arm outstretched, looking riotous. Rue forced her way between the two of them, pointing her wand back and forth between them, and shaking her head in dissent. Wes spun swiftly away from them, his black robes swirling in his wake as he returned to Hannah’s aid. He knelt down beside her again and flipped her over, pulling her into his lap.

“Come on, Harry,” whispered Hermione, taking him by the arm. “That’s HIS girlfriend, not yours.”

Harry wrenched his face in upset.

“Guys, *look!*” shouted Ron in alarm, pointing to Hannah.

“*Oh, god!*” cried Harry in terror.

“Oh, no!” gasped Hermione, clasping her hands over her mouth.

At that moment, Wes had reached over to the toe of Hannah’s left boot and pulled out...a dart of Oblivion. Harry retched as he watched Hannah lay there with her eyes drawn wide and staring around to them in winded silence. The others remained equally unspoken and motionless, staring back at her in trepidation.

All at once, Hannah took a sharp deep breath, shot straight up, and forced out evenly, “Steel-tipped lined boots. I never leave home without ‘em.”

The group heaved out long, winded sighs of relief. Harry dropped to his knees before her, pulled her out of Wes’s lap, and hugged her. He didn’t care what the nasty man did to him. At that moment, nothing was going to keep him from her. Much to his surprise, Wes did nothing but look on intently.

“You’re amazing. Do you know that?” said Harry, clinging to Hannah.

She laughed, patted him on the back, and breathed out, “No. Just lucky.” She turned to meet Wes, who helped her to her feet and into *HIS* warm embrace.

Wes kissed her tender lips, taking extra care to grin in conquest at the brazen, gutted expression bleeding across Harry’s face as he did so.

“Alright, let’s get the Horcrux and destroy this thing, shall we?” said Hannah. She reached forward and grabbed hold of the cup, kneeling down in a circle among the rest of the group.

Wes pulled out a small royal-blue decanter and popped open the cap.

“*Veritaserum*? What are you going to do with *that*?” inquired Harry in bewilderment.

“We’re going to pour it over the cup,” said Hannah frankly.

“*Why*?” asked Harry.

“Harry, in order to destroy the Horcruxes and bypass the curses, we have to understand the true death of the person with whom the Horcrux was made. It’s a little secret I accidentally stumbled across in my research this past summer.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

Wes dribbled the serum over the cup, whispering soft, barely audible incantations while he passed his wand over it. Within seconds, the room was whirling before them...

*A tall, pale man with sunken eyes was being led into a crowded living space by a tiny ancient house elf. The man was approaching a squat, fat, old woman, who was unfashionably garnished beneath her kinked gingered hair and scarlet-rounded cheeks.*

*“Tom!” squealed Hepzibah with delight, fussing with her brilliant pink-tented robes.*

*The man made his wordless way into the room and bowed low over her fat little hand, brushing against it with his lips.*

*“My goodness, Tom! This is twice in two days I’ve had the privilege of being in your presence. What can I do for you today? Not just coming back for another peak at more of my treasures, are you?” said Hepzibah, batting her eyelashes at him and crunching herself down into her armchair.*

*Tom Riddle stood over her smiling ominously. His eyes were gleaming a shameless scarlet red as he parted his robes, whipping out his wand from beneath them.*

*BAM! A bright light shot out from his wand and hit the house elf, who fell to the floor, stunned.*

*“T-tom?Tom!” Hepzibah squeaked in an alarmed voice.*

*That’s Lord Voldemort, to you, Hepzibah! Imperio!” he shouted, and she was left staring blankly into nothingness. With an insane hungry grin, Voldemort handed her a small glass vile and demanded softly, “Drink it.”*

*Hepzibah’s chubby fingers claimed the neck of the vile and she tipped it into her mouth. Within seconds of consuming its contents, she started gagging and spitting, her eyes rolling violently in her head. She tumbled out of her chair, landing face down onto the floor, her body seizing and writhing madly.*

*Voldemort cackled wildly as Hepzibah shrieked out in unbounded agony, her sounds gradually mellowing to an odd, senseless gurgle. He kicked her over with his foot and grinned in elation as her movements and sounds grew subtler and subtler still.*

*Then, her eyes glazed over...her mouth drew wide...her breathing labored...ceased...and she was dead.*

*FLASH!* The room came swiftly back into focus. The troubled group murmured aloud distressingly to themselves while shooting harrowing glances at one another.

“Alright, everyone? inquired Hannah quietly.

“Yeah,” breathed Harry.

The others fell eerily silent and nodded in speechless accord.

“Okay, Harry; would you like to do the honors?” said Hannah.

“You bet your life I do!” he responded with a notable tinge of bitter vengeance caking his voice as he drew his wand forward.

Wes leaned in and cased his greedy fingers around the cup.

Hannah flashed him an impatient glare and whispered, "Let Harry do it. He's earned the right."

Wes's mouth contorted in disgust. He sheathed his hands from the cup and backed off.

Harry grinned smugly, then turned and focused wholly on Hannah while she began to speak, "Okay. Through the use of the Veritaserum, we've managed to get around the curse by forcing out the secret that lay within this piece of Voldemort's soul. Now, Harry, I want you to come kneel here in front of me." She patted on the ground in front of where she knelt.

"Okay," he said nervously, and he scooted in front of her.

Hannah leaned forward and draped the front of herself over his back.

"You're shaking," she whispered to him.

The most incredible sensation shot up and down Harry's spine as the warmth of her breath caught his left ear.

"No, I- I'm fine."

"Here, let me help you. We must do this properly, or we'll have a mess on our hands," said Hannah, cupping her hand gently over his.

Harry saw Wes squirm uncomfortably in his place and twitch his upper lip at them in defiance.

Hannah swiftly called for Harry's attention, commanding him, "Harry look at the cup. You must concentrate. Don't worry about what anyone else is doing."

"Sorry," said Harry quietly.

"On the count of three, we're going to wave the wand anti-clockwise seven times, then clockwise the same. Finally, we will speak the incantations, 'Cupio Caesus.'"

"Cupio Caesus," Harry repeated. "Got it."

"One, two, three!" shouted Hannah.

Together, Hannah and Harry waved the wand according to Hannah's instruction, and then in unison, they uttered the appropriate incantations. A bright flash of green light erupted from the cup, leaving a long, sweltering scorch mark along the inside of it.

"You did it!" said Hannah, patting him on the shoulder and taking to her feet.

Harry let out an exuberant gasp of triumph and remained knelt before the cup.

“Nice one, mate!” breathed Ron, slugging Harry in the side of his arm.

“Harry, just think, you’re one step closer to finishing him for good!” said Hermione breathlessly, clapping her hand proudly on his shoulder.

Wes leaned in and grabbed hold of the cup.

“Wait!” said Harry, tugging at it.

“Harry, let him take it,” said Hannah gently, plucking his fingers away from the handle. “It’s far too dangerous to leave lying about. Trust me, we know what’s best.”

Harry nodded reluctantly and released his grip from the cup.

“Alright, you lot, we’ve got twenty-five minutes to get you back to your dormitories before your puffs turn back and someone notices you’ve gone missing,” said Hannah anxiously. “Let’s get moving. Follow me.”

On Hannah’s word, the group headed out of the cavern after her and took several steep paces into the forest before Hannah and Wes came to an abrupt halt in front of a thick scorching pathway leading off into the darkness.

They exchanged immediate looks of concentrated foreboding, and Hannah shouted out, “Cover your nose and mouth, EVERYONE!”

“*What is it?*” spat Ron.

“It looks like something singed the hell out of the ground!” shouted Harry.

“Oh-no!” whimpered Hermione, flashing Hannah a knowing glance of terror.

“You’ve got it Hermione. It’s a Heliopath.”

“Helio-*who?*” snorted Ron ignorantly.

“*HELIOPATH,*” breathed Hermione nervously. “It’s a sort of spirit of fire, a flaming creature that gallops across the ground, burning everything in its wake.”

“And its fire emits a *highly poisonous gas,*” added Hannah. “It can be deadly if you inhale enough of its fumes.”

The group looked to one another fretfully, while Hannah waved them on. “Let’s get out of here before we meet up with our fine friend. We just need the Portkey.” Hannah fell

silent when she reached around herself and realized she had left her cloak in the cavern with the Portkey still tucked safely away in its pocket.

“LOOK!” shouted Harry pointing off into the distance.

“It’s that flame thing! It’s heading straight for us!” said Ron in a panic.

“Ron, Hermione, Harry, go with Wes and Rue! Head down that hill. By the look of this rock formation, there’s a lake down there. The spirit of fire can’t travel on water. If it comes close, jump in. Harry, we’ll use our Patronus’ to signal each other when the coast is clear. I’ve got to go into the cavern and get my cloak. We’ll need that Portkey to get back!”

“Can’t we just Apparate?” inquired Harry anxiously.

“NO! This whole area has been enchanted by Voldemort, personally. If you try to Apparate, you’ll end up at the Riddle house. The Portkey is the only way; I’ve charmed it specifically for our protection. NOW GO! I’ll signal for you!” she shouted and took off running.

“HANNAH, *wait!*” shouted Harry.

“Harry, come on!” said Hermione insistently, tugging on his arm. “She’s been right about everything so far! We must listen to her!”

“But how is she to get back into the cavern? You have to speak Parseltongue to open it!” said Harry worriedly.

“Harry, I dunno! I think we should just do as she says!” said Hermione.

“I’m going after her!” he snarled, and he took off running.

“Harry, *no!*” shouted Hermione.

“Harry, are you mad?! Come back here!” hollered Ron.

Their words of caution were futile. Harry had covered his nose and mouth with his shirt and was heading straight for the Heliopath. Rue rushed Ron and Hermione in the strict direction of the lake, leaving Wes to deal with Harry.

Out of nowhere, a bright flash of blinding light enveloped Harry, sending him hurtling down the hill toward the rest of the group. He landed with a sharp THUD, face down, at Hermione’s feet. He looked up to greet the source of the ruthless Tripping Jinx assault and spotted Wes with his wand arm outstretched, pointed directly at him.

“Harry, are you alright?” gasped Hermione.

“Blimey! That was a hell of a fall, mate!” piped Ron.

Harry scrambled to his feet and lurched aggressively at Wes, shooting his wand repeatedly at the callous man. Wes blocked each one of his spells with the laziest flick of his wand. Harry lowered his wand and resorted to throwing out multiple Stinging Hexes by virtue of his elf magic. The spells hit Wes repeatedly across his face, head, and neck. Wes swiftly responded, casting a series of Slashing Hexes in Harry’s direction.

“Both of you, *STOP IT!*” screamed Hermione. That Heliopath is coming straight for us!”

“*LET’S GO!*” shouted Ron.

Harry and Wes stood facing each other, locked in an intense belligerent gaze, until Rue and Hermione grabbed hold of each of them, dragging them off. The group raced down the steep rugged hill, hurtling over the scattered debris of rotting tree stumps and roots until they reached the edge of a deep murky lake. They stood along the rugged bank of it, staring up at the massive ball of fire, watching intently as the Heliopath gradually retreated, turned off to their left, and scooted diagonally up the hill, vanishing from sight.

Harry focus was on Wes, again, as he harbored an aching desire to rip the mask off the horrible man and discover the coward that lay beneath its pathetic plastic facade. As if the man were privy to Harry’s every thought, his eyes narrowed in abhorrence. Harry returned him a fearless glower.

Then, *BAM!* A bright white light erupted among the tips of the trees atop the hill, transforming into a giant Patronus above their heads.

“A *ROOSTER?*” shouted Ron. “I don’t believe it! A *Rooster?*”

“It’s a *Capon*, Ronald!” spat Hermione.

“*What in the Bloody hell is a Capon?*” inquired Ron sourly.

Harry started to laugh and shook his head in amusement at Ron’s clueless expression. “It’s a castrated Rooster. Hannah said it was her way of giving her Patronus feminine qualities.”

Ron winced. Harry swore he saw him tighten the gap between his legs.

*BAM!* Harry shot his Patronus into the air. Within seconds, Hannah came tearing down the hill.

“*COME ON!*” she hollered, waving the Portkey in the air.

They hurried up the hill. They were steps shy of meeting up with her when Ron tripped over the root of one of the trees and went tumbling back down the hill, head over feet.

“RON!” screamed Harry and Hermione intermittently.

“I’m alright!” he snarled. “Bloody tree stumps,” he grumbled, taking extra care to kick a few of them around before making his way back to the rest of the group.

“RON, *LOOK OUT!* The Heliopath!” bellowed Hannah, motioning frantically off to Ron’s left.

The massive ball of fire had burst forth through the darkness of the brush and was quickly closing in on him.

“HURRY, RON!” screamed Hermione.

“COME ON, RON! *RUN!*” echoed Harry in a swell of panic.

Ron pumped his arms and kicked his legs out in a mad chugging sprint toward them. His stunning vigor was akin to that of a steaming locomotive charging down a one-way track. But, the Heliopath was much faster. It inched closer and closer to him. It was right beside him. He felt faint. Ugh! The horrid odor! It was like rotten eggs and sulfur. It was suffocating him...He could hardly breathe...The space around him was blurring, fading, and terribly...

“RON!” echoed his friends’ voices in his head.

SLAP! Someone had taken hold of his arm. SWOOSH! The floor dropped beneath him. He was spinning...spinning...spinning...the night was drawing blacker and blacker and...

THUMP! The group was back in the Grimmauld secret room. Hermione, Hannah, and Harry were kneeling over an unconscious Ron.

“Hurry, Wes, get the potion. We haven’t much time. His breathing is shallow,” said Hannah anxiously, pointing to a lengthy trunk in her walk-in wardrobe brimming full of potion-filled decanters. “Hermione, Harry, you two must head back to the castle. You only have seven minutes until the potion wears off on your puffs. We’ll take care of Ron.”

“NO! I’m not leaving him!” cried Harry.

“Me neither!” sobbed Hermione, brushing her hands through Ron’s singed red hair.

“PLEASE, you two! You’ll get us all in trouble if you get caught!”

“Is he going to *die!*” shrieked Hermione.

“I don’t know,” said Hannah quietly. “We’re going to do what we can. I don’t know how much of that poison he inhaled. If we can get enough potion into him, he might be alright.”

Wes nicked a small purple vile out of Hannah’s trunk, popped the cork on it, and hurried over to Ron, tipping the contents into Ron’s mouth, a few drops at a time.

“Oh, no. Oh no.” whispered Harry, over and over again, his heart palpitating horribly.

“Forget it! I’m not leaving!” shrieked Hermione.

“Nor am I!” said Harry resolutely.

“SHIT!” said Hannah. “Wes, Rue, take care of these three. Hermione, take your clothes off.”

“*WHAT?!*” hissed Hermione.

“You heard me! *Take your clothes off!*” demanded Hannah. “We’re going to have to be each other for the next few hours until we can get Ron back on his feet.”

“Can’t we just wear what we have on?” she squeaked uncomfortably.

Hannah eyed up Hermione’s thick polo-knit jumper, her rainbow belted tan corduroys and sensible shoes, and spouted off arrogantly, “Hermione, no offence, but anyone who knows me wouldn’t believe for a second that I’d be caught *dead* in that visual assault you call an outfit.”

“But —” she said, blushing self-consciously through her flood of tears while pointing over to Harry and Wes.

“Oh, for heaven sakes, girl! It’s nothing they haven’t seen before!” snarled Hannah, kicking off her boots and unzipping her leotard.

Harry gulped. He really didn’t want to see his best friend in her undergarments.

“It’s alright, Hermione, I’ll turn my head,” he said gently. “Wes, would you turn around too, please?”

Wes rolled his eyes and turned his head away.

Hermione was quick to shed her garments, chancing nervous glances at Wes and Harry to make sure they weren’t looking. She quickly exchanged clothing with Hannah, who continued rattling off her orders.

“Rue, get me the two yellow decanters on the top left hand drawer, and hurry! Hermione, give me a few of your hairs. Here are some of mine.”

“Alright,” said Hermione with a pronounced snuffle, yanking a few strands from her head and handing them over to Hannah.

A moment later, Rue burst through the closet with the decanters, passing one to Hannah and one to Hermione.

“Cheers!” said Hannah, chugging her potion.

Hermione gulped hers down, as well.

Almost instantly, the two of them transformed into one another. Wes let out a short grunt of disapproval and proceeded to force more of the Healing Potion in Ron’s mouth.

“Alright, I’m off!” said Hannah. “I’ll add more potion to Ron and Harry’s puffs, then wait out the morning in the Gryffindor common room. It’s Saturday, so no one should be surprised that Ron and Harry are sleeping in. Just in case anyone gets suspicious, I’ll be there to answer for them. I’ll return for you lot at nine a.m., sharp. Don’t budge until I come for you, alright?”

Harry and Hermione nodded in accord.

“Wes, Rue, you’re to hide in the bathroom if you hear anyone from the Order coming. Harry, be sure to use your invisibility cloak on you and Ron.”

“Alright,” he said. “But, wait! How are you going to get into our dorm without someone spotting you?”

Hannah threw Wes a strange glance.

They studied each other in silence for a stretch before she finally answered, “I’ll have to settle on the Disillusionment Charm for now. It’s still dark out, so I should be able to blend in just fine. Once the daylight comes, I’ll have to sneak off to the third floor corridor to get back here.”

She walked over to Wes and whispered in his ear, then leaned in and kissed him. He flinched in opposition, as did Hermione.

“I guess we’re even now, aren’t we?” sneered Hannah quietly.

Wes flashed her an irritated scowl.

Hannah smirked and pressed on, “Wes and Rue, please stay on until you are certain Ron’s out of the woods. If the worst should happen, Rue, you know what to do.”

They nodded in agreement.

“I’ll see you!” said Hannah, camouflaging herself by means of the Disillusionment Charm and vanishing through the enchanted corridor of her walk-in wardrobe.

“This is just *awful*,” whimpered Hermione.

“It’ll be fine, it’ll be okay,” said Harry breathlessly, his voice cracking slightly under the pressure because he truly was wondering, *Would it be?*

He put his arm around Hermione and they knelt down together at Ron’s side. He looked up to Hannah’s bed and noticed that her replica had disappeared, and in her place, lay a tiny white puff. He knew for certain that she had made it to the castle just in time.

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Back at Hogwarts, Hannah had finished replenishing Ron and Harry’s puffs and hurried down the staircase and into the girls’ dormitory, lifting the Disillusionment Charm from herself before entering the room.

“Hermione, hey; where did you run off to?” inquired a groggy voice off to her right.

“Hey, Ginny...Umm, I couldn’t sleep. I’m just here to grab my knapsack. I figured I’d get some studying done.”

“Oh, still researching that *wretched* woman, are you?”

Hannah wrenched her face at Ginny and answered, “What woman?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “*Duh!* Hannah — the *man stealing TOAD!*” she snarled.

“Yes, a toad, indeed...Funny how you’re the one who got left with all the warts,” hissed Hannah quietly.

“*What?*” spat Ginny in a raspy tenor. “I can’t hear you; speak up!”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Umm, I was just talking to myself,” said Hannah, trying to act more like Hermione and less like the ferocious reptile that she apparently was. She headed for the empty four-poster bed, which sat at the opposite corner of the room, snatched up the puff, and then grabbed hold of Hermione’s knapsack.

“God, I can’t believe you’re up at four o’clock on a Saturday morning. Ugh!” snarled Ginny, sitting up and looking entirely annoyed with Hannah.

“Yes, well, you know how it is. Oh, by the way, Ginny, I almost forgot, you might want to do something about those warts you’ve got all over your face,” said Hannah evenly.

“WARTS? WARTS? What warts?” shrieked Ginny, scrambling to her nightstand for a mirror, and then screaming at the sight of herself in its reflection.

Hannah turned away and headed for the door, sniggering under her breath.

“Well, goodnight!” said Hannah in a soft singsong voice and snapped the door shut behind her. She hurried down the staircase and into the emptiness of the common room, slinging Hermione’s knapsack across one of the desks in the far corner of the room. Unzipping the bag and spreading out its contents, she soon uncovered a large enchanted manila clasped folder. Rounding over it, she flipped open the front cover, and there it was: Hannah Morley’s Ministry File; the complete history of her life as she had known it since she turned eleven. She paged anxiously through it, plucking a little post-it note off one of the pages that Hermione had scratched some information on.

“Very clever, Granger. It seems I underestimated you; you’re quite the sleuth. Looks like you and I need to have a little heart-to-heart, and I need to switch on the charm. Perhaps its time for me to have a special chat with my dear Madam Pince, as well.” sneered Hannah aloud to herself. And she headed off through the portrait hole for the library.

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In the secret room at Grimmauld Place, Wes continued to tend to Ron. He and Harry carted him over to the bed once they were certain that his vital signs were stabilized, though he remained unconscious. Rue paced the floor in restless circles, flashing occasional nervous glances over at the trio gathered around Ron. Hermione held onto Ron’s hand, tracing her finger tenderly up and down his arm, still sniffing through a steady surge of tears.

“Wes...do you think he’ll be alright now?” inquired Hermione.

Wes responded to her with an odd softened expression about his onyx eyes, while he almost kindly nodded his head yes. Harry thought it had much to do with the fact that he was addressing an exact replica of Hannah. He could almost feel Wes’s love for her.

*Was it really love?* Harry wondered.

Hermione staggered her breath in thankful gasps and leaned in to kiss Ron on his lips.

“Bloody Hell!” mumbled Ron in shock, his eyes popping wide open.

“Ron! Oh, thank goodness you’re alright!” said Hermione, smothering him in her grateful kisses.”

“Excellent, mate!” exhaled Harry in relief, ruffling his best friends shoulder.

A Polyjuice-Potion-transformed Hermione continued kissing ecstatically over Ron.

“Hannah, w-what do you think you’re d-doing k-kissing me like that!” Ron stuttered in bewilderment between each lip-lock.

Harry chortled at the sight of Ron’s bulging eyes and clubbed-over-the-head expression as Hermione continued to slobber all over him, crying out, “Ron, it’s me, Hermione! Hannah and I used the Polyjuice Potion to cover our tracks after you got hurt!”

“Oh, well, in that case!” he said, grabbing hold of her and returning her passionate illustration.

Wes rolled his eyes at them in exasperation. Harry couldn’t help but laugh. He was looking beyond the magic...

With the knowledge that Ron was well on his way to making a full recovery, Wes and Rue motioned farewell to the trio and hurried for the Grimmauld Secret entrance of the kitchen.

When the cupboard hatch clicked shut, and Ron and Hermione had settled themselves, Ron asked, “What happened to me?”

“You got hit by that Heliopath,” said Hermione. “Hannah grabbed hold of you just in time.”

“That was *HER*?! Well she’s got a strong grip, hasn’t she?” grumbled Ron. “There, look at that great bruise on my arm!”

“Just be lucky she got to you in time. It could have been a lot worse,” said Harry somberly.

“Harry’s right, Ron. We owe her our lives. She saved us both.”

“Yeah-yeah, I guess you’re right.” he said, suddenly distracted by Hermione’s newfound cleavage. He pulled back the neckline of her leotard to sneak a quick peak.

“STOP THAT!” said Hermione, slapping away his wandering hand.

Harry sniggered.

“Honestly! That’s private! How would you like it if Hannah went off and stripped naked for her lover disguised as me?” snarled Hermione.

“Well, it wouldn’t really be you, and you’re not really her, so—”

“UGH! BOYS!” scoffed Hermione, and she stormed over to the dresser mirror. She looked proudly over her new temporary self in its reflection and unintentionally rambled aloud, “Although, I must say, she really is quite fit, isn’t she? I mean, look at her bum; it’s like a rock! As for her chest, well, she definitely takes care of herself, there’s no doubt about that!”

Hermione blushed severely when she realized that Ron and Harry were hanging on her every word, along with her every move.

“Well, come here, then. Let’s have a closer look,” said Ron hopefully.

Harry shook his head in amusement at his best friends, entirely elated that everyone had made it through the mission alive.

“Listen, guys, it’s nearly nine o’clock. Hannah should be back here any moment. Ron, how are you feeling? Do you think you’re well enough to head back to the dormitories?” said Harry.

“Yeah, yeah, I think so,” grunted Ron, sitting up and edging to the side of the bed.”

Moments later, there came a light scuffle from the cupboard of the secret room kitchen. Within seconds, Hermione’s replica emerged before them.

“Hello all! How are we feeling, Ronald?” Hannah rattled off cheerfully.

“Fine, thanks,” he said, with a slight blush about him.

Hannah winked at him, then directed her attention to Hermione, and said, “Well looks like our time as each other is just about up. I had an interesting morning, really.” Hannah turned and bounded into her closet in such a Hermioneish way, even Harry was fooled.

“You did?” inquired Hermione apprehensively.

“Oh, yes, well, you know, study, study, study,” said Hannah as she stripped off Hermione’s clothes in the secluded darkness of her walk-in wardrobe. She re-entered the secret room wearing a long pink silken bathrobe, holding a small orange vile in her hand.

Harry passed her a curious glance.

“W-what did you do?” inquired Hermione apprehensively.

“Oh, not much. I just hung out with Ginny, mostly. I startled her awake when I went into your dormitory to remove the puff from your bed. Ah! She and I had the most intense time!” said Hannah tauntingly.

“You did?” asked Hermione.

“Indeed. It seems she got herself hit with some sort of Wart Hex, somehow. She’s got warts all over her face. It’s just dreadful. She said she won’t leave the dormitory until someone fetches a cure for her. So, here you go,” said Hannah smoothly, releasing the vile into her possession.

Hermione collected it from Hannah’s intimidating grasp with a deep air of unease. Harry stepped over to Hannah and grabbed hold of her arm just as she and Hermione transformed back onto themselves.

“What did you do?” whispered Harry to Hannah in reproach.

“Nothing,” said Hannah with an honest doe-eyed expression.

Harry frowned.

“Oh, come now, stop that!” said Hannah with a pout.

“*Hannah*,” said Harry hardheartedly.

“Oh, Harry, I almost forgot to tell you. Remus says you’re to stay here after the Winter Festival in Diagon Alley, the first weekend in December.”

“That’s great!” said Harry, entirely pleased that after months of them being apart, he would finally have the opportunity to spend the entire weekend with her. All of a sudden, he’d forgotten whatever it was he’d just been reprimanding her for.

“Now, you lot better hurry along before your puffs change back.” She handed Hermione her clothing and shooed her, Ron, and Harry in the direction of her wardrobe.

“Oh, Hermione,” she called out abruptly, “could you come here, please?”

“Yes?” said Hermione in an extraordinarily small voice, approaching Hannah guardedly.

“Please make sure Ginny drinks the WHOLE vile, or the warts will return. And tell her...tell her that its compliments of the *Man-stealing toad*.”

Hermione winced upon the receipt of Hannah’s words. She scuttled back into the closet, cowering between Ron and Harry, and disappearing with them beneath the invisibility cloak, then through the enchanted entrance of the walk-in wardrobe.