

The Problem with Purity

by phoenix writing

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The Prologue

Chapter 1 of 4

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Anti-Litigation Charm: It all belongs to JKR; I play for non-profit amusement.

Author's Notes: I have two OTPs, and they both feature in this fic; the SS/HG pairing is predominant, but there is H/D non-graphic slash as well. If this is not your cup of tea, please go elsewhere.

This fic is monstrously long. And when I say long, I really, truly mean it. It's my 2007 NaNo, and when November ended, I was 210 000 words in and nowhere near done. I finished it 123 days after I started and spent the next eight months editing it. And it's still nearly 600 000 words long. Yes, 600 000 words. You have been warned. ;)

It's been a labour of love. Maybe it would have been better if my inner editor had climbed a little further out of her box than she did, but *shrugs*, it is what it is. I've thoroughly enjoyed the experience...though I'm not sure I'll ever try to repeat it.

So expect lots of prose, and expect it to take a little while to get where it's going. Maybe it's *OotP* all over again, but I had a hell of a lot of fun writing. ^_^

Bigger lemons are generally het-filled and few and far between. There is the occasional bout of cursing (of the profane variety) and a good deal of cursing (of the magical variety).

This fic is complete and should be updated once a week as I give each chapter a final edit to make sure it's post-worthy; I'll be playing catch-up for a little while to match up with my posting on ff.net and Ashwinder, and then the three should be posted concurrently.

Neither *HBP* nor *DH* compliant.

Reviews make me smile. ^_^

The Problem with Purity

The Prologue

Andrew Stebbins was having a very exciting day. He worked in the Auror Department for the Ministry of Magic, but he was not a field agent; no, he was in charge of all

correspondence that came into the department. He had been doing his job for nigh on thirty years, and the quiet and studious man acknowledged that he did it well.

He didn't mind confessing that before he had assumed the position, the place had been in shambles. Aurors might be brilliant at capturing evil-doers, but they couldn't file paperwork to save their lives; it was as if they hadn't heard of the alphabet or file cabinets. Within ten weeks of his being on the job, the horrendous backlog was put to rights. All memos, pardons, praise, complaints, Howlers (which he knew how to deactivate while preserving the words themselves), requests, logs, reports, advisements, copies of motions...and all other types of correspondence...were properly filed.

He had done away with the daft system that separated each piece of parchment into one category and had instead tinkered with the storage cabinets until they accepted multiple categories for the same material, allowing it to be called up under any appropriate heading. It had been he, too, who had put the simple Space Charm on the parchments so that they were all flat and uniformly shaped and sized when filed, but originally shaped and sized outside of the cabinet.

He put the correspondence away by date of arrival and then by name of sender, and this assured that it was called forth smoothly; one had only to tap on the cabinet with one's wand and request memos sent by Rufus Scrimgeour between January and March 1994, for example, and they would appear when the drawer was opened. Any that were complaints would also respond to a request for such, and now no one had to stand at the cabinet guessing whether a letter that lauded the department but deplored a recent arrest was filed under praise or complaint.

Andrew was inordinately pleased with his handiwork, especially since more than one Auror had noted the efficiency over the years. Of course, the newer employees didn't even know there had ever been another system, but he still felt a glow of pride whenever a needed material was speedily found. It was a darn good thing he'd been able to whip the office into shape, too, because ever since You Know Who had returned, there had been an exponential increase in the amount of material that went through the Auror Department.

When he'd first been hired, it had been implied that he would sort out the veritable snarl of paperwork in the Auror office and then move on to other departments; to his not inconsiderable satisfaction, once they had actually seen what he was capable of, such a move had never been mentioned again. In fact, he'd even heard a rumour that Auror Scrimgeour, when he had been Head of the Department, had quashed attempts from several other departments to acquire Andrew.

He could still remember with fondness when Alastor Moody had requested a similar cabinet for the field files because it was the job of the Auror in charge of the case to seal and file those reports. Andrew had made certain ever since that each of the Aurors knew how to properly return those files to their cabinet, and he was always available to help sort out any filing mishaps.

But today wasn't even one of those days, when he could feel a bit as though he was rescuing an Auror from a filing nightmare. No, it was even better: for the second time in his life, he'd received a grade one, orange-proof scroll (so called because it was the most top security scroll in the world, its distinctive orange colour made from a dye that couldn't be used for anything else). Just the thought of holding this indestructible parchment made him almost bubbly with happiness...and bubbly, he acknowledged, was normally one of the last adjectives that could be used to describe Andrew Stebbins.

Feeling unusually exuberant or not, Andrew made sure to follow the methodology he had set up for himself, opening, categorizing, sorting, and logging all the morning mail before gathering it up to file, with the precious grade one scroll in pride of place on top, since it was virtually in a category of its own.

Emerging from his office, he greeted Kingsley Shacklebolt as he passed by. The man returned the salutation with a respectful nod before turning the corner, and Andrew guessed he was heading towards Auror Tonks's office. He liked both these Aurors because they treated him respectfully, unlike some of the high-and-mighty new recruits who thought he was worthless. When Kingsley had become the Head of the Aurors, Andrew had received a pay raise and an invitation to call the man by his given name; he had appreciated the latter sign of respect even more than the money.

He hadn't made it two steps further down the corridor before he was stopped by an abrupt, "What do you think you are doing?"

Turning round, he found a red-faced Rufus Scrimgeour, who seemed to be bearing down on him. Confused, he turned his head to left and right and verified that he really was the only one there; the Head of Magical Law Enforcement must have been addressing him, although he was at a loss to explain such a tone.

"I'm about to file these correspondences, Auror Scrimgeour," he therefore answered politely. He realized Scrimgeour was a busy man with many responsibilities, but surely he remembered an employee with whom he had worked for years before moving to the even more esteemed position he now held?

"I don't care about the rest of that twaddle. I mean this." The man strode forward and snatched up the orange-proof scroll, demanding angrily, "Why didn't you report it to me immediately?"

Andrew frowned. "There was no tag on it indicating that the Head of Magical Law Enforcement was to be informed when it arrived in the office. I was just about to file it with the other one..."

"There's another one?" the man hissed explosively. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

"Of course I do," Andrew replied, a trace impatiently, because this was *his* job, after all. "It's a scroll attesting to Pu..."

"Not here, you fool!" the other man snapped. "Come with me."

Growing more confused by the minute, Andrew nevertheless hastened to obey. Whatever was going on, it was clearly a misunderstanding of some sort because he was quite certain that he'd followed all the proper procedures. In his long career, he had not once misfiled a paper, and he was certain that continued to hold true, especially for parchment as important as this.

Once they were in the Head of Magical Law Enforcement's office, the secretary told to hold all Floo calls and keep everyone out, the door sealed, Scrimgeour turned towards him.

"Have you told anyone else about the scroll? Does anyone else know about it?"

"Of course I haven't," Andrew exclaimed indignantly. Of all the accusations for the Head of his branch of the Ministry to make! As though he, an employee of nearly three decades' good standing, would jeopardize his position with a loose tongue.

He was so outraged that it took him a moment to process the second question and realize that it was possible Auror Shacklebolt had seen the scroll, although he had not given the slightest indication that he found any of what Andrew was holding noteworthy. He had just started to conscientiously open his mouth to advise Scrimgeour of this possibility when the man interrupted him.

"Excellent." He smiled a grim little smile, and Andrew suddenly found himself faced with a man wielding a wand like he meant business.

"Obliviate!"

Author's Notes: Alas, Andrew Stebbins's method of filing is not a brainchild of mine. The lovely people at Gmail came up with it first, and hopefully they don't mind that I borrowed it for my magical world, since I've been nothing but impressed by their "labels" as opposed to the "folders" used by everyone else.

Chapter one, in which the problem is brought to the attention of the Order, will be up within a week (admins willing). ;)

One: The Problem

Chapter 2 of 4

In which the problem is presented to the Order.

Anti-Litigation Charm: It all belongs to JKR; I play for non-profit amusement.

Author's Notes: Neither *HBP* nor *DH* compliant.

Conversation in Italics signifies *MindSpeech*.

Reviews make me smile. ^_^

The Problem with Purity

Chapter One: The Problem

Most of the Order members had already left Grimmauld Place and those remaining, now seated around the sturdy wooden kitchen table, made up what Ron had termed...accurately, if unoriginally...*Harry's group*: as many Weasleys as were able at a given time, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Remus Lupin, Severus Snape, Nymphadora Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Harry might not like them all, per se, but he interacted with them on a regular basis and trusted them with his life, having been taught, trained, rescued, or befriended by each of them...or in most cases, some combination of the four.

The curtains had been drawn against the darkness outside and candles lit so that the kitchen, still easily the cheeriest room in the house, seemed warm and welcoming, even at ten o'clock at night. They'd all been served fresh tea, and now that Albus had discussed everything on his agenda, he had opened the floor to other concerns.

"There is one last issue that I need to bring to the Order's attention," Kingsley declared in his deep voice, although his tone suggested that he was reluctant to bring up the topic in question. It sounded as though he was doing his duty rather than following an inclination.

Everyone's attention went to him following this announcement, but rather than continuing, Kingsley's eyes cut to Arthur, who was across the table and down one seat from the Auror. The eldest Weasley looked doubtful, blue eyes troubled as his gaze strayed to his wife on his left, who managed to glower simultaneously at the two Ministry men despite their seating positions before casting a baleful look at the other end of the table where the three newest members of the Order of the Phoenix sat: Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, and Harry Potter.

On August 31, 1997, the date of this meeting, Hermione Granger was indisputably seventeen years old; she had legally celebrated her seventeenth birthday on the nineteenth of September of the previous year. Ron had been seventeen since March of the current year, and even Harry had joined the mass of wizarding adults a month ago.

He had promptly left the Dursleys forever and joined her at Grimmauld Place. Ron had made sure to shift his belongings from the Burrow to the Most Ancient House of Black soon after, and since that time, the three of them had been a conspicuous and insistent presence at Order meetings because no one had a legal leg to stand on when they mentioned that nonsense about *children*.

What none of the other Order members knew was that Hermione had been privy to the contents of these meetings since the summer following her fifth year. Counting the same months everyone else had experienced only once, she was sixteen years and nine months old at the end of June in 1996.

As far as well-meaning but overly mothering members like Molly Weasley were concerned, that might as well have been three years shy of the necessary age. Albus, too, had maintained his stance that admittance was only at seventeen for very good reason, despite the fact that the three of them were right in the middle of this war.

The fact of the matter, however, was that Hermione had been an adult for longer than most of them understood. For in the ten months of her third year at Hogwarts, she had been the clandestine owner of a Time-Turner. Despite what Harry and Ron suspected by the end of the year, she had not doubled up on her days. She had, in fact, tripled up on an average of sixteen hours of the day, six days out of seven. This had been necessary to keep up with all her school work, study groups, and bizarre extracurriculars, like helping Hagrid with Buckbeak, saving Sirius, and watching her friendship with Ron fall apart. She didn't think that either Minerva or Albus was aware of the extent of her usage.

This extra time of hers didn't seem like so much at first, but it worked out to 192 extra hours per week and therefore 7680 extra hours in the school year, or 320 days. Even subtracting the twenty-two days she had been Petrified in her second year (and most people didn't consider being incapacitated in real time as a detriment to counting it towards one's total age), that left her 298 days older than everyone thought. As far as her physical and mental development was concerned, she was thus actually seventeen and seven months old at the end of June in 1996.

Her use of the Time-Turner was not common knowledge, however, and she knew it was not meant to be shared even with all the members of the Order. One look at Molly and Albus had made it clear to her that they were going to be intractable. Having just come out of a battle that had lost them Sirius and nearly killed her, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna, she even understood their point of view, to a certain degree. But now more than ever, she also understood Harry's need to know what was going on.

The situation was not ideal; if it could have been put to a vote, all of them would no doubt have agreed to have peace and childhoods. The war against Voldemort was happening whether they liked it or not, however, and they were an inextricable part of it, as they had proven for five years running. It did no one any good to pretend that Harry was not at the war's centre.

Fortunately, Albus had a familiar. Fawkes was not human, and he was not constrained by human understanding, failings, or foibles. The phoenix appeared to be entirely certain that she was of age, and he was, as it turned out, rather irritated by the stubborn stance of the humans in the face of what he saw as a simple fact. He couldn't overrule Albus, per se, but he could and did include her in the meetings in his own way.

This was her first introduction to *MindSpeech*; up until that time, the closest she had come to Fawkes had been through his interaction with Harry. The phoenix had been invaluable to Harry and had demonstrated amazing abilities, but he had remained, for all that, decidedly bird-like. The summer before sixth year, however, Hermione had discovered that Fawkes was only as avian as he wished to be.

With her, at least, he was entirely capable not just of singing, but of speaking right inside her head. Gifted with this communication, the Gryffindor girl found that she was the recipient of the information discussed in the meetings nearly in real time, or even better, the bird would share his senses with her so that she was actually seeing and

hearing the meeting as it was unfolding.

The researcher in her balked at how little she understood this phenomenon, but Fawkes had not wished to discuss it, and after a short but ferocious argument with herself, she had had the sense to respect his wishes. What little documented research had been available in the Hogwarts Library...in the Restricted Section, of course...suggested that this was a gift that could be bestowed between familiars and their humans; she had come across no reason why the ability should have been extended to her.

Whatever the reason, the benefits were readily apparent. Despite the fact that her body was dutifully in bed up the stairs and separated from the Order meeting by various spells and wards, most of Hermione's mind seemed to be visiting Fawkes's and watching the meeting through bird eyes and hearing it through bird ears. After that first meeting, she even got the hang of not trying to speak in response to what was going on around her.

Knowing how badly Harry had taken it after fourth year, Hermione had made no attempt to hide the information from him. She had only two requirements: he was not to ask how she got the information and he was to learn how to properly Occlude his mind. Given the disastrous events in the Department of Mysteries, he desired this last already, but he dreaded the possibility of resuming lessons with Professor Snape.

Since he now both wanted to learn and was willing to speak to her of the difficulties he'd been having previously, he found the entirety of the Hogwarts and Black libraries and all the information that could be gleaned from them about Occlumency, Legilimency, meditation, mental shields, and MindMagic at his fingertips in the condensed Hermione version.

Ever since Occlumency and Legilimency had come to her attention in fifth year, Hermione had been determined to learn everything she could. Her mind was her greatest asset, and she wanted it as fortified and protected as it could possibly be. They didn't have an accomplished Legilimens to test it with yet, but by the time Hermione was done with him, Harry was never without mental shields, crucial thoughts and memories locked deep inside his mind, and mind clear as glass before he went to sleep at night.

It was in one of her initial forays at Legilimency, when he was still completely hopeless at any sort of shield, that she had stumbled across his memory of the prophecy. The glimpse that she had got had been enough for him to confess the whole truth. It had only made her more determined to protect his mind from outside forces and to see him through this daft war so that he could live his own life.

In this, at least, both she and Ron had been unwavering in their support, and Harry had been quietly relieved and pleased. As Ron had put it at the time, they hadn't had it spelled out in prophecy form before now, but it had been pretty clear that You Know Who was always after Harry and that Harry was always going to stop the bloody wanker.

Hermione thus felt that she had been doing her part in this war in myriad ways, and once she legally turned seventeen, she had insisted that she be allowed to instantly join the Order, and she'd watched with glee as their arguments worked against Molly and Albus. Upon reaching the age of majority, which was eighteen in the Muggle world, she could vote, legally drink, live on her own, and be tried as an adult in a court of law. The wizarding world took coming of age even more seriously, with certain societal customs remaining rather formal and old-fashioned. At seventeen, she had become an adult witch, and adult witches and wizards could therefore accept her as their peer.

Whether she *felt* equal to the headmaster or his deputy was not at issue; if they wished to, they could acknowledge her as such, as this came in the form of an invitation to address them by their given name. Since she was still in a school setting and this invitation was by no means extended to all of the seventeen-year-old students, she had to use her regular allotment of common sense, but the consideration meant a lot to her.

Throughout her sixth year, as she was asking an extra question or ran into one of her professors in the hallway, each extended the invitation, which she had reciprocated. Even Severus, evidently in a fit of insanity, had done so, although he had waited until the summer. He frequently seemed to regret his decision, though, his expression making plain that referring to him as Severus, even in the presence of just Harry and Ron, was strongly inadvisable. Rescinding the invitation was considered extremely rude, however, and even the snarky bat of the dungeons seemed to hesitate before doing that to her.

A similar invitation had not been offered to either Harry or Ron.

The Order members were stuck, then, when she'd come of age. Legally, she was as adult as any of them. She'd had no trouble shooting down the argument that she would tell her friends, since none of the elder Weasleys were barred from joining despite having younger family members who weren't of age, wished to join, and would do their best to ferret information out of them. She had the phoenix of the *Order of* on her side, so she wasn't terribly concerned about any accusation they could throw at her.

She suspected that Albus was not the only one to suspect that she told Harry and Ron virtually everything, but so long as no one made an official complaint, she wasn't going to worry because she could argue semantics with the best of them; when asked, she had very carefully told them that she knew *how* to keep a secret, especially from those two boys, not that she intended to do so.

Since she had already effectively been to several months of the meetings and knew perfectly well what they tended to be like, who sided with whom, who listened to whom, and how the youngest and most inexperienced members were treated, she had worked this advantage to its fullest, along with any extra tidbits which Fawkes had been kind enough to share. As a result, she hadn't seemed like a rookie and had caught several members out in attempts to goad her into an ill-considered reaction.

Given that she had made it through the protections on the Philosopher's Stone, survived an encounter with a Basilisk, lived through a night with Peter Pettigrew, a werewolf, and a dozen or so Dementors, and kept a crucial prophecy away from Voldemort with the help of five other school children, her curriculum vitae was hardly empty, either.

Once Harry knew how to Occlude, he was much better at hiding his emotions and quite able to prevent others from knowing what he did or didn't know. Hermione coached Ron ruthlessly so that he could join calmly for the Easter meeting in sixth year, to the surprise of his family. All she and Ron had needed to do was ignore the twins' suggestions about Ron's "whipped" state. Ron still remained one of the least even-keeled members of the Order, but by the time he displayed a show of temper in a meeting, it was accepted as a Weasley trait rather than one of youth and inexperience.

By the time Harry joined, even Molly had welcomed him with relatively genuine acceptance, and the three of them had agreed that there was nothing to be gained from bringing up old grievances. By the same token, however, there was no way that they were going to allow themselves to be run out of the room now that they *were* members. Harry crossed his arms and glared back at Molly, and after sharing an amused glance, Hermione and Ron did the same, presenting a united front.

"What did you need to tell us, Kingsley?" Albus asked, his familiar perched, ever watchful, on a cabinet behind his head. Molly opened her mouth, and Albus cast a stern glance at her from his position at the head of the table. "Now, now, Molly, everyone here is a full Order member."

She didn't look happy, but given that it was the headmaster speaking, she subsided without subjecting them to the impassioned but misguided plea that they had known was imminent. Ron let out an audible sigh of relief...he was only two seats away from his mother...and Harry's lips tipped up slightly as his stance relaxed to wary rather than adversarial.

Kingsley did not stand, but he projected forcefully from his seat so that they could all hear him clearly: "A week ago, on a visit to the Auror Department, the Head of Magical Law Enforcement encountered the wizard in charge of correspondence and paperwork for the Department, Andrew Stebbins. I was out of sight but stopped at Scrimgeour's tone. He demanded to know what Stebbins was doing with a particular parchment and dragged him away as he was about to reveal what the parchment was rather than staying for his meeting with me.

"Curious at this suspect behaviour, I took the opportunity to duck into Stebbins's office and copy as much of his records as I could; the man is meticulous about noting every single piece of parchment that he receives, and I knew that whatever had caught Scrimgeour's attention had to be there.

"I sent the record I had made off to Arthur as a private memo and then made sure I was promptly elsewhere and occupied. I didn't see Stebbins until the next day, and by

then, he had no memory of his meeting with the Head of M.L.E. or the parchment. His log had been expertly modified, and all traces of the parchment in question were gone.

"Comparing the copy I'd made to the original that had been doctored, I discovered what had caused such a strong reaction in Scrimgeour: two grade one, orange-proof scrolls declaring Pure Age of Majority."

From the awed but comprehending looks on most people's faces, this made more sense to the rest of them than it did to Hermione and Harry.

"I thought that was a myth!" Ron gasped, and Hermione saw that Arthur, Molly, and Tonks were nodding in agreement.

"Thought what was a myth?" Hermione demanded impatiently, glaring across the table at him.

The redhead's look of incredulity had faded to that annoyingly superior one he got whenever he knew something that she didn't.

"Wizards come of age at seventeen," Ron began.

"I am aware of that, Ronald." She stretched his name out into two long syllables, just the way she knew he hated. As though he had not just spouted off that totally commonplace fact, he had the nerve to shoot her a look of annoyance. Albus interceded.

"I believe what Ron was attempting to elucidate, Hermione, was that there are two seventeen-year-olds who have reached their majority and remain in a Pure state."

Hermione had gathered something of that nature from what Kingsley had said, and Albus's explanation was about as helpful as Ron's.

"Headmaster, they are hardly infants." Severus's sneering voice interrupted from his position at Albus's right hand, for which Hermione was grateful, as it meant she was about to get an unambiguous answer. "These two adult wizards are still virgins, Miss Granger."

On balance, this cleared the matter up rather less than she had hoped, and she noted sourly that she still hadn't managed to convince the man that an Order meeting was private enough for her given name.

"And why does this warrant the highest security, most indestructible scrolls that the wizarding world has to offer?" she asked when no more explanation was immediately forthcoming.

Albus smiled faintly. "You see, Hermione, not only is the age of majority different for wizards than for Muggles, there are more effects for wizards as well."

Hermione watched curiously as pink cheeks tinged the faces of the headmaster, the deputy headmistress, the Weasley parents, and Remus. Severus, although she thought he looked tired, had no outward reaction to Albus's words, but Hermione could see that Tonks...who'd smiled when she first saw the seventeen-year-old Hermione, recognized her as an adult, and told her she'd kill her if she called her Nymphadora...looked quite amused.

Albus resumed: "In the years leading up to a witch or wizard's majority, she or he will experience an increased ... libido, more so than a Muggle. Coupled with the regular hormones in any teenager, this generally results in the ... usual result."

Hermione's lip curled, and she noticed with amusement that Severus, on the other side of Kingsley and Tonks, wore an almost identical expression.

"Normally wizarding teenagers have sex before they reach their majority," she summarized.

Albus's slight expression of unease cleared. "Exactly so, Hermione. It has become a traditional part of a wizarding upbringing." This did begin to explain what had been, for the Muggle-born Hermione, the very bizarre sex-ed class they had had in third year. "Young people these days tend to take it as a matter of course. It's not as though wizards and Muggles assess what they are feeling and compare it to others' feelings. The last time that a Pure Adult was recorded, I was only a boy."

"So that's over a century ago, then?" Harry asked with a grin.

Severus glared the glare he seemed to reserve especially for Harry, but Albus only smiled.

"Quite right, Harry."

"And now we have two such cases occurring at the same time?" Hermione asked sceptically.

Kingsley took over. "The first scroll appeared in January, but we are not sure how long a delay there is between the attainment of Pure Adulthood and the arrival of the scroll."

"Why don't you ask whoever sent them?" Harry said.

Severus opened his mouth, scathing diatribe clearly imminent, and Hermione hastened to speak first, which earned her a glare of her own, but she just rolled her eyes at him.

"They're automatically generated scrolls, Harry, and from what Kingsley is saying, they were spelled to arrive at an interval after the magical occurrence that generated them. That prevents unscrupulous individuals from figuring out who the scroll pertains to by their birthday; obviously it was set up some time ago when somebody at the Ministry had morals."

She offered the current head of the Auror Department an apologetic look, since she doubted the institution in general, not him personally.

Kingsley nodded, his slight smile indicating both his acceptance of the accurate words and the lack of personal attack in them. "Stebbins made a notation that the interval was random, so the two likely do not even have the same gap between real date and arrival in the Ministry."

"Okay, I get that they're rare and that we don't know who these two people are," Harry said with a nod to Hermione, "but what does that matter? Why does the Ministry care?"

"How you have managed to survive six years in the wizarding world, Mr. Potter, without a modicum of..."

"Severus." The tone was one of clear warning, and the Potions master subsided, although he looked disgruntled. Albus actually answered the question: "Upon a young witch or wizard's arrival into adulthood, her or his full power becomes available. This increase is noticeable but not extraordinary. In the case of Pure Adults, however, they not only receive this regular increase, but what could be considered a large bonus."

Fawkes trilled, and Hermione sensed both excitement at the mention, finally, of the Pure Adults and amusement at his familiar's delicacy.

You might have mentioned it earlier, she thought irritably.

And spoil the surprise? Certainly not, he replied smugly.

"So the Ministry wants to keep tabs on the wizards who get more power?" Harry asked.

"Not exactly, Harry. You see, this extra increase in power does not come about at the Age of Majority but when" Albus trailed off, looking to his right and his left as

though for assistance.

With a long-suffering sigh, the Potions master took over, since Minerva looked nearly as uncomfortable as Albus. "The power increases during coitus, and the Ministry cares," Severus glared, "because whoever takes the Pure Adult's virginity experiences an increase in power as well."

"Severus!" Minerva protested from her position opposite the Potions master.

Hermione blinked, digesting this. "If that's true, why hasn't Voldemort incarcerated a horde of wizarding children until their seventeenth birthdays?"

Severus's piercing gaze met hers for a moment, and she made sure she was Occluding fully. The headmaster accorded her a nod for the question.

"As Ron here has proven, some considerable effort has been made to relegate the truth to myth for the vast majority of wizardkind. An attempt such as you suggest was made several centuries ago; all of the witches and wizards died before they reached their seventeenth birthdays."

"How?"

"It is not known," he answered slowly. "Given the wizard's increased obsession with keeping the children safe, it seems unlikely it could have been a traitor in his midst, nor were these final children in a fit state to accomplish the deed consciously."

"But you think their magic did it for them," she said flatly.

"Preventing the children from being horribly abused," Albus said with a gentle nod of his head. "I wouldn't say it was out of the question. But his actions decimated a generation, and thus the forced relegation to myth; the wizarding world, as a general rule, is very protective of its children."

Hermione thought she finally grasped the point. "But now that we have two people who are *already* seventeen, all such protections are gone, and they're available to the highest bidder."

"That is our fear," he agreed. "If Voldemort hears of this, he will wish to claim these two adults for his own. There is currently no data on the exact results of having relations with two Pure Adults, but the evidence strongly suggests that he would experience an exponential increase in power."

"Scrimgeour, too, is evidently eager to dictate this choice, whether or not he thinks he can get away with claiming the power for his own use," Severus was quick to point out, as if they hadn't grasped that both men were going to be ruthless about this. "He has been looking for ways to regain power for months now. If for no other reason, I'm sure he imagines he could ... engage your cooperation with the Ministry, Mr Potter, and that would be a coup indeed."

Wisely, Harry ignored this, perhaps recognizing that Severus hadn't actually suggested that Harry *would* succumb. Instead, Harry asked, "Can the scrolls be opened? I mean, there has to be a way to undo them, right, or what would be the point?"

Albus explained: "These particular scrolls will be keyed to the individual in question. The Ministry insisted that they needed to be aware of these occurrences because of the magical power generated. The Wizengamot ultimately ruled in favour of the notion but with the caveat that it would be the right of the individuals to reveal the specific information as they saw fit. Having great power, after all, does not automatically denote the misuse of it." His eyes seemed to linger on Harry for a moment. "The Ministry will thus be aware of the potential danger and can monitor for any particular outbursts, but there is no single person for them to pinpoint."

Minerva continued: "There is no record of such scrolls being broken by anyone other than the intended person."

Severus added his own sardonic comment: "And wiser and better men than the likes of Scrimgeour and the Dark Lord have tried. They will, however, employ other methods."

"This is why I have brought the news to your attention," Kingsley took back the floor. "The two Pure Adults need to be found."

Hermione's voice was dry. "What a boon it would be for our side..."

"...to secure them."

For an instant, Hermione had a weird sense of what it must be like to be the Weasley twins, with someone else thinking what you were thinking and able to finish your sentences. Ron's entire side of the table looked upset, although Ron seemed to be focussed on the fact that she and Severus had expressed the same opinion, whereas Remus, Molly, and Arthur looked more upset by the idea itself.

"I'm sure we all agree that these people need to be protected, not exploited."

Interestingly, it was Harry who'd spoken, not Albus.

"No one will be forced to do anything against their will," the headmaster assured everyone.

Hermione couldn't seem to help her cynicism as she imagined what would no doubt be *strongly encouraged* for the good of the Light if they did find the two Pure Adults.

"I'm sure we can agree," the headmaster continued with a stern look at everyone, "that the witches or wizards in question would be far safer if found by us prior to being found by Voldemort."

That, Hermione conceded, was definitely true.

"How long before Voldemort knows?" Harry directed this question towards Severus, who didn't look pleased with this demand for information but responded nevertheless.

"The identity of all the Ministry moles is known only to the Dark Lord. I suspect, given some of the information to which we are privy, that there is someone high up in administration. One way or the other, crucial information like this tends to get out."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shared a grin that probably seemed out of place to the others, but she was pretty sure they were all remembering the similar sentiment Dumbledore had expressed to Harry in their first year after he had battled Quirrell and Voldemort for the Philosopher's Stone.

"Okay, but theoretically," Ron pointed out with a good show of logic, "especially since we don't know how long a delay there was between the, er, occurrence and the scroll getting to the Ministry, isn't it possible that the two people in question aren't even students anymore? Or aren't at least, you know," he fumbled awkwardly, "Pure anymore?"

Severus smirked at Ron's embarrassment. "The scrolls will likely be spelled, either to disappear when their function is fulfilled, or to indicate the change in status in some way."

Kingsley nodded. "Stebbins's notes didn't indicate either way, meaning it wasn't readily apparent from his examination of the scrolls. Wherever they are now, I doubt we can get our hands on the originals. Your question is a valid one, Ron, but given Scrimgeour's reaction, it seems likely he, at least, has high hopes that the individuals in question will still be Pure when he finds them."

"From what I've read," Remus, next to Ron, spoke for the first time since the discussion had started, "it seems unlikely these two people would be able to resist their ... libido for too long. Certainly not for years."

No one attempted to gainsay this.

"Seventh-year students it is," Ron said cheerfully. "You want us to question our year-mates?"

"It would be useful if you could keep your eyes open for any unusual behaviour," Albus said diplomatically.

"Lest it be all over school in moments," Severus finished snidely but not, Hermione confessed to herself, inaccurately.

Ron bristled, but Harry laid a hand on his arm.

"We'll try to subtly suss out the virgins," he promised dutifully, his tone droll enough that Ron subsided and Severus looked riled at the flippancy.

Albus averted any possible argument. "I will have other Order members checking up on our graduate students just in case." Kingsley nodded. "As many of them have gone on to get married, I'm sure we will be able to make short work of the task. You three and Severus, Minerva, and myself will monitor the situation at the school. Severus will do his best to ascertain what Voldemort knows of the subject. If the news comes to the attention of the general public, we will formulate a plan of action at that time. Until then, we will all keep one another informed."

Knowing a dismissal when they heard one, the remaining Order members rose.

So, Hermione asked Fawkes as she pushed her chair in, *has he admitted to knowing more than he's told us?*

He has not discussed it with me, no.

What good are you if you don't ferret out the information for me?

He gave her the mental equivalent of a stuck-out tongue, and she returned with a mental smile. Severus, Albus, and Minerva took their leave with Hermione only able to give them all a general farewell; they were the only ones returning immediately to Hogwarts, as everyone else would form part of the escort to King's Cross the next morning. Ginny, no doubt extremely irritated that she was only sixteen and would remain so until next August, was already upstairs.

Those who were staying trooped up the stairs until eventually the trio was on their own, marching up to the fifth floor where they resided alone. When Hermione had begun to live in the house during the summer after fifth year, she'd taken over the entire upper floor, refusing to continue living on the first floor with people frequently trooping above her to get to their rooms.

When Harry and Ron had joined her, it had seemed only logical to host them up there as well given the amount of time they spent in one another's company. Since several weeks of the arrangement had passed before anyone had become the wiser, it was allowed to stand.

"Two virgins, eh? Who do you reckon?" Ron asked gleefully.

"I hardly think that's a question to be answered here and now," Hermione said dryly.

Ron ignored her. "How about Susan Bones? When Seamus went out with her, he said she didn't put..."

Hermione stopped abruptly, causing Harry to nearly plough into her before he neatly sidestepped and left Ron to her mercy. Whirling around to face him, she glared at him, hands on her hips.

"Just because Susan had the good sense not to take up with that oversexed lout does not mean that she's a virgin. It suggests that she has some form of discrimination."

Ron made a face, clearly displeased with both her ire and her commentary. Like Harry, he finally ducked round her, and they continued down the hall.

"What about that Ravenclaw girl, then, what's her name, Mindy? Mandy?" Ron proposed, blind to her fury. "Or Bulstrode." He made a face. "Definitely her. Surely no one would..."

"Is there a particular reason only women are on your list?" Hermione asked coolly.

Ron looked at her as though she'd sprouted tentacles. "Are you batty, 'Mione? No bloke in his right mind would let himself be a virgin at seventeen."

Harry looked nearly as annoyed as she was at this point, but it was she who once again snapped at Ron. "I have more respect for a thoughtful boy who's a virgin at seventeen than for a boy who lost his virginity at fourteen to the first girl to twitch her hips at him."

Ron went red up to the tips of his ears, and she knew that he was about to blast her, first with anger, and then with awkward questions.

"But what about Crabbe, 'Mione?" Harry asked with seeming earnestness. "And Goyle? Do you really think someone was willing to shag them?"

The redhead's attention was instantly diverted. "Ooh, it's definitely them, I'm sure of it. We can totally trick them into admitting something tomorrow, I know we can..."

Shaking her head at the master strategist at work, Hermione bid the other two goodnight. Her room was at the head of the stairs with Harry's next and Ron's after that. Hers was the only room with a private bath on this floor, the two boys sharing the one at the end of the hall past Ron's room.

She changed into her pyjamas, flannel bottoms and a cotton camisole. Hermione wasn't certain if it was the aura of the house or if genuine spells had been cast, but even in the height of summer the house remained cool and gloomy despite the improvements which had been made since Sirius had first gifted it to the Order.

Not only was it now always clean, but Harry had finally removed Mrs Black's portrait, although he wouldn't say how, and it was she who had laid the elf heads to rest with an obscure potions formula she had found in one of the even more obscure books that was squirrelled away in the library.

She didn't think anyone else was aware of just how many of the books she had appropriated and tucked away in her room. At any rate, there had been tomes down there that she was pretty sure most of the Order would not want her, Harry, or Ron to get their hands on, and she had avoided that potential argument in the most expedient manner.

Finished with her nightly ablutions, she climbed into bed, the old wooden frame creaking slightly, but didn't bother to douse the lights. Sure enough, despite the fact that they had not made an official assignation, a few minutes later there was the barest of knocks on the door, which was opened immediately to reveal the messy, dark-haired head of the Saviour of the wizarding world. She motioned him in and patted the spot on the dark blue quilt next to her.

Soon they were seated side by side, shoulders and legs touching, backs against the cool outer wall. She was closer to the head of the bed and he to the foot, and they were facing the now-closed door that led into the hallway. Once she'd warded the room against interruption and eavesdropping, she turned to him with a smile.

"I think we had a lovely first time."

Author's Notes: I rather doubt that JKR intended for Hermione to use the Time-Turner as much as I'm suggesting. I don't think it's out of the realm of possibility for Hermione to have done so, however, and that's the line I took for this fic.

Two: The Plan

Chapter 3 of 4

In which a plan is hatched.

Anti-Litigation Charm: It all belongs to JKR; I play for non-profit amusement.

Author's Notes: Neither *HBP* nor *DH* compliant.

Conversation in Italics signifies *MindSpeech*.

Reviews make me smile. ^_^

The Problem with Purity

Chapter Two: The Plan

Harry blinked, looking horribly confused, but suddenly his expression cleared, green eyes sparkling brilliantly as he grinned at her.

"It was very memorable. Er, beginning of sixth year, was it?"

"End of fifth," she corrected. "My birthday's in September, remember."

"And you didn't want to give yourself a spectacular early birthday present?" he asked, batting long dark lashes as he looked at her with huge guileless eyes.

She laughed outright. "I was more concerned with the beginning of the school year than even your nigh-irresistible charm."

He offered her a mock pout, but it dissolved as he said, suddenly serious, "I wasn't at my best at the end of fifth year."

Laying a hand on his arm, she said softly, "But you were very much in need of comfort."

His forehead wrinkled. "A pity shag? That's low, 'Mione."

She shook her head. "One thing led to another. We got carried away once I was out of hospital."

He shrugged. "Okay. Just the one time?"

She smirked. "Or did we go at it like rabbits all summer once you were here?"

He couldn't seem to help grinning again. "Perhaps not. But maybe..."

"Your foot slipped from time to time?" she suggested dryly.

"But we're not official in school ... because I want to protect you from my enemies and..."

"From all the rabid fan-girls? And boys?" she asked pointedly.

Pink washed up his cheeks. "From anyone who might try to do you harm," he compromised.

"It'll do, I suppose," she agreed, adding philosophically, "especially since I had plenty of practice in fourth year."

Harry eyed her doubtfully. "So we should expect the *Prophet* to feature an article on the lurid and heartless way in which I stole you from Viktor Krum this time around?"

She laughed. "No doubt."

He sighed. "We're not telling Ron?"

It wasn't really a question. Ron had plenty of talents, but acting believably in this situation was not one of them, and they both knew it.

"Nothing comes out until it has to," she answered, meaning both to Ron and to the public at large. Harry nodded. "So: first time in the Room of Requirement after our O.W.L.s and occasionally since?"

"In the privacy of the summer months or with the aid of the Map during the school year. That makes the most sense. What are we going to do about hunting for those virgins?"

"I'd say leave it up to Ron, and we wouldn't have to worry about it again." Harry's lips twitched in appreciation of this sally. "But someone might wonder why you or I hadn't come up with useful information. I suppose we'll appear to be investigating but do our best not to make too much progress."

Harry gave her a short nod of acquiescence but lamented, "Why is it that these things always happen to me?"

"I'll do some research," Hermione offered promptly.

Harry snorted at this very prompt and typical response before asking, "Do you think anyone else has guessed? Albus?"

Fawkes hadn't said so, and she hoped that he would have given her that much, no matter how cagey he was being otherwise.

"Although one can never be certain about the headmaster," she answered aloud, "my guess is that he would want the situation controlled quite quickly to prevent Voldemort from getting the upper hand."

"I don't like to think of him forcing us."

It had been several years since Harry had had blind faith in the headmaster, but she could see that this idea disturbed him.

"I don't think he would have put us under Imperius and locked us in a bedroom together, but I suspect a massive guilt trip would have come our way; our scruples are apparently all that's standing in the way of Voldemort getting exponentially stronger magically."

Another frown puckered Harry's forehead. "What *are* the chances that it's the two of us? The last *one* Pure Adult was a century ago and now the two of us, who happen to be best friends?"

"It does seem rather fortuitous." She shrugged. "But I've found that the wizarding world tends to work in mysterious ways." Harry made a moue of distaste, and she continued, "I don't like that answer, either, but I don't have a lot more to give you right now, given that I didn't know anything about it until tonight. I've said I'll research, and I shall."

A grin broke across his face. "That rankles, I take it?"

She shoved his shoulder irritably, but he took the movement without protest before sliding back so that they were upright and touching once more.

"I don't like being ignorant about much of anything," she confessed reluctantly, "but in this case, it's yet another fact that all the wizard-born seem to know automatically, even if they don't have all the details."

"While we're left in the dark, waiting for someone to clue us in." Harry's voice had darkened considerably, and she knew he was thinking about his childhood and how literal the case had been for him.

"So," she immediately sought for a subject change, "regardless of any uber-libido that we don't appear to have experienced, why is it that you and I are here?"

He blushed again, and it really did make him look lovely. Or hot...however one was supposed to describe the sex appeal of a best friend. She knew herself well enough to be quite aware of why she hadn't got that many offers, but she had to wonder about the wizarding world's most eligible bachelor.

"Well, with Tom always after me," he said defensively, "there doesn't seem to have been much time for that sort of thing."

"I daresay you could have made some."

"So could have you!" he snapped.

She regarded him steadily. "Yes, I could have. Given that you're speaking to the wizarding world's other adult virgin, I think we've established that."

His nose wrinkled, and he began apologetically, "Ron..."

"Is a prat," she finished flatly. "You know that. Things come out of his mouth weeks before he censors them."

"You?" Harry asked politely.

"To start," she answered, "I'm Muggle-born, and while my parents hardly raised me to believe that *couldn't* have sex before I was married, they did share their belief that the act itself should be meaningful, and I should be having it for a reason. I didn't experience that uber-libido, and I ... didn't get a lot of offers, and the person I *am* interested in would die if I said anything."

"Me, too," Harry said with relief.

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Well, okay, not that bit about your parents, 'cause obviously Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon would've been relieved if I'd contracted an STD and died a horrible death, and yeah, I got a fair few offers, but the rest ... the rest was true," he trailed off lamely.

"So you didn't have out-of-control urges that threw you at someone you didn't really want rather than allowing you to wait for the emotional iceberg you do desire?"

"I wouldn't say h..." the Gryffindor boy cut off abruptly, studiously staring at his lap rather than her.

Hermione lifted his chin with her fingers so that he was forced to meet her gaze. "You're a little too easy to bait sometimes, Harry. I knew it was a 'he'."

Harry's eyes were huge. How he'd managed to go through so much and yet retain such surprising edges of innocence and guilelessness was beyond her.

"How?"

"I'm one of your best friends. I'm with you all the time. I know which way your eye strays."

"Ron..." Harry began frantically.

"Is a boy and remarkably clueless about things like that. I'm sure he thinks you're straight as an arrow. Although, really," she laughed softly, "after Cho Chang and 'wet', I think he might have bought a clue."

A reluctant grin was pulled from Harry. "That was a total disaster, wasn't it? We won't talk about how long it took me to get there?"

She smiled. "Of course not. Since, apparently," she cleared her throat, "you moved on *to me*, it would do just as well to not make too much out of the disaster that was Cho Chang."

One corner of his mouth tipped up, but he looked lost in thought, saying sadly, "I wish I knew...."

"He has to make his own decisions, Harry. He hasn't intimated that help would be welcome."

"You really do know everything, don't you?" He sounded more awed than angry.

"Your eyes tended to be more specific than general, but don't worry about it," she hastened to add when he began to look alarmed. "I know you really well, and you certainly look conflicted, if not downright angry half the time. I think your secret's safe."

After a moment, he let out the breath he'd been holding and nodded. "What about you? Who's this mystery bloke who's got your attention? Or girl," he corrected hurriedly, "because it could be a girl, and that would be totally fine."

She smiled at his flustered attempt to be open-minded. "Not a girl. Although, that does make me wonder just how this loss of virginity is assessed. Surely two girls must be

able to lose their virginity just like a boy and a girl or two boys?"

She began to mentally flip through the books she had here and the ones she thought it likely she should take with her to Hogwarts for further research.

It was several moments before she realized that Harry was waving a hand in front of her face. Her gaze focussed abruptly on him. He was grinning.

"Earth to Hermione, Earth to Hermione."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I have a lot to research. Now go away and let me finish packing."

"I thought you were done already," he accused, chin jutting out slightly in his belligerence. "You pestered Ron and me all day."

"Of course I was done," she said impatiently, "but that was before I had an entirely new subject to research. You think I can research this in my school texts or the extra Defence or Potions books I packed? Of course not...I'll need more books now."

He rolled his eyes, but obediently slid off the bed, his bare feet barely making a sound on the hardwood floor. With his hand on the brass knob of the door, he turned back.

"Hey! You haven't said who you like."

She just stared at him. Sometimes the wheels turned pretty slowly for Harry.

His eyes narrowed, and a determined look crossed his face. "All right, then. I'll figure it out."

"And I might even confirm it if ever you do," she offered with wry humour.

Waving an absent goodbye, Harry let himself out. She was pleased that she'd given him something non-Voldemort related about which to concentrate so carefully, although she was going to have to monitor where her own stare rested, apparently, so it wasn't too easy for him.

It took her almost two hours to go through the books she had in her room, slip into the library to select some from there, and finally select and shrink the dozen or so books she thought would be most useful. She added them to her trunk, no longer able to fathom how she'd survived the first eleven years of her life packing without magic.

Finally, she waved off the lights and buried herself under the covers of her bed. She cleared her mind, ensuring that she didn't dwell overly long on the non-existent relationship that seemed as unlikely to come about for her as for Harry, and was soon asleep.

The trip to King's Cross was happily completed with no cause for alarm. For three years running, they had discussed the merit of having Harry's reassuring presence on the train versus his presence making the train a larger target for Voldemort. As always, Harry had reluctantly remained a symbol for the masses if it meant parents were willing to part with their children and let them get their much-needed education.

Hermione always pointed out that unless she, Ron, Ginny, and handfuls of Harry's other friends were removed as well, the train would hardly be an untempting target. Giving Harry's friends permission to Portkey or Floo while everyone else had to go the long way was not a battle that even the headmaster had decided to engage in, and the argument had settled, as per usual, with all of them on the train.

This was not to say that they were left to their own devices; security had been visibly and invisibly increased, although it left Hermione wondering whether there had been more going on than she realized in her first years, when the only adults she had seen were the lady with the trolley, the conductor, and the driver.

Kingsley and Tonks had been officially dispatched by the Ministry to accompany the Express, and Hermione knew that there were a handful of Disillusioned Order members who were aboard and keeping an eye on things as well with two pairs dedicated solely to vanguard and rearguard. Several professors also accompanied them, word of their presence designed to help keep the students in line.

As for the students, the Prefects took it in two-person turns to patrol the corridors quite stringently, complete with examinations of the compartments at random intervals, while the Head Boy and Head Girl roamed the corridors in order to oversee the other students.

Many parents were greatly reassured by these measures, but the students tended more towards annoyed. The Ravenclaws felt that they couldn't get effective reading or studying done with all the interruptions, while the Slytherins felt there were a biased number of checks done on them. The Hufflepuffs, meanwhile, were embarrassed to be caught snogging their significant others, and the Gryffindors hated having their first pranks caught and stopped before they'd even reached the school. Logically, everyone knew these measures were for their protection, but unless an attack occurred, they were going to gripe.

"Why can't Draco visit our compartment?" Tracey Davis demanded petulantly. In Pansy Parkinson's absence, she had evidently decided that it went to her to heckle the Gryffindors. She was in a compartment with Daphne Greengrass...the third member of Pansy's clique...as well as Crabbe and Goyle; this was where Draco spent his time when he wasn't patrolling. "We know *he'd* be fair about it."

"We're taking turns," Hermione explained as patiently as she could, given that this was the third time in as many rounds that the girl had asked. "Sometimes it's going to be Harry and me; the fewer questions you ask, the quicker we'll be gone."

This, fortunately, seemed to make sense to the girl, and they were able to make their cursory inspection...no Dark Artefacts or malefactors in sight...and leave.

Hermione resumed the discussion they'd been having before they interrupted the Slytherin compartment.

"I still can't believe that Ron can be so dedicated to Quidditch and yet barely manage to pull together a single paper for class." After each inspection they had completed, she and Harry had found Ron deep in discussion of his revolutionary plan to bring the Gryffindor team to glory, complete with diagrams and play-by-play descriptions of a year's worth of new strategies.

"And yet if you were in his place..." Harry stopped at her pointed glare. "All right, yes, you'd probably read every Quidditch manual ever written and come up with an adequate plan. But honestly, we can't all be like you, 'Mione."

"I suppose that *would* be a daunting prospect." She briefly envisioned a class full of twenty Hermiones and was sufficiently disturbed. "It's good that he's passionate about something."

"Even if it *is* Quidditch," Harry completed her unspoken thought.

"Even then." She smiled.

She knew it had come as a blow last year to the Weasley matriarch when Ron had chosen the Quidditch Captaincy rather than remaining a Prefect. What Molly didn't know (but would be as proud of him as Hermione was, she hoped) was that Ron had had the opportunity to choose to remain both.

The Ministry had chosen not to strike down Umbridge's lifetime ban on Quidditch that had been imposed upon Harry, Fred, and George. Given the political climate in wake of news of Voldemort's return and Fudge's cover-up, however, it was likely that Albus and Harry could have swayed the decision. Much as Harry loved Quidditch, though, he had recognized in that horrible summer post-Department of Mysteries that he needed to devote himself to preparing for the Final Battle against Voldemort. Quidditch, let alone captaining the Gryffindor team, would only interfere with that.

Ron had therefore been offered the Captaincy in Harry's stead, although that fact had never been formally stated. Whether or not Ron had known that, he had suggested that Harry be given his position as Prefect, leaving them both school leaders. It was true that Ron had gone for the position that Hermione was certain he was more qualified for, but she was touched that he had chosen to help Harry gain a position of honour rather than hoarding both of them to himself; she still remembered the personal glory he had seen in the Mirror of Erised in first year.

As far as upholding the Prefect duties went, Harry was somewhere between Ron and Hermione. The position put him on equal footing with Malfoy, which made life easier on everyone. Hermione and Pansy Parkinson, the other Slytherin Prefect, had finally joined forces of necessity and convinced the two boys that gratuitous point loss between the two of them only evened out and made it likely that Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff would win the House Cup. For the sake of their Houses, Harry and Malfoy had declared an unofficial ceasefire.

Ron had evinced no surprise when she and Harry were named Head Girl and Head Boy this summer and had even gone so far as to say that he had anticipated it since first year. Both she and Harry were deeply relieved by this show of maturity and intended to run with it for as long as they could.

Just as Harry's status as Prefect last year had made it easier for him to get about the castle and do whatever he needed to do to prepare for the fight against Voldemort, his position as Head Boy would function in that capacity as well. In fact, it was better-suited in many ways, as it afforded Harry his own quarters and gave him the autonomy to be almost anywhere in the school at almost any time without having to answer to any student. It also gave him a ready excuse for any professors who might question him.

Hermione intended to keep an eye on him to make sure he didn't get into too much mischief, and otherwise they would be able to complete their extra training sessions without resorting to detentions or elaborate excuses...which meant no more Remedial Potions to make everyone cross.

They arrived in Hogsmeade, and the fifth- and sixth-year Prefects went off with Hagrid, Tonks, and the first-years, ready to defend them in the unlikely event that they were attacked while on the lake. This left the seventh-year Prefects, Harry and Hermione, the Aurors, and the professors to see the rest of the students into the carriages and up to the safety of the castle.

Neither Harry nor Hermione ventured an opinion when the second-year students gawked at the seemingly horseless carriages, just climbed in and let the Thestrals pull them up to the castle.

Hermione had been able to see the winged, horse-like creatures since the beginning of sixth year. The summer after fifth year, Voldemort, either annoyed at his inability to access her parents or hoping to flush them out, had sent Death Eaters to attack her neighbourhood, and the Aurors and the Order had not been able to arrive quickly enough even with warning wards in place.

The Brophys, the lovely old couple who lived right next door, had been some of the first to be attacked, and Jim Brophy had died in her arms crying out for his wife who lay dead beside him. Hermione now knew why Harry didn't much want to talk about Cedric Diggory. They both knew that what had happened was because of Voldemort, but that couldn't alleviate all their guilt.

It didn't help that Hermione was desperately grateful that it wasn't her parents who had been attacked that night. Unfortunately, as everyone had taken the time to point out to her, it was impossible to put the Fidelius Charm on an entire neighbourhood who didn't know about the charm; the Muggles wouldn't have been able to get home without being told where to find their houses by the Secret Keeper, postmen wouldn't have been able to deliver the mail because they wouldn't have been able to find an entire neighbourhood, and it would have been a complete disaster.

What many people didn't know, however, was that Hermione's parents hadn't actually lived in that neighbourhood since the summer after fourth year. Whatever anyone else had thought, Hermione had immediately believed Harry's tale of what had taken place in the graveyard. She believed Voldemort was back, and that meant he would start killing Muggles again.

She had marched home and told her parents that they had to change their names and move.

They hadn't liked the necessity, although they had come to believe it when she had elaborated further. What had really rankled with them was the fact that Hermione intended to stay.

"This is my fight," she had told them. "You Know Who is threatening my world and everything I stand for. I can't leave."

"We could take you," her father had threatened with, she knew, desperate concern for the safety of his baby girl.

She had squared off with him and spoken with dead certainty: "I could make you forget that you even have a daughter."

She would have done, too, if they had forced her to it. She refused to lose her parents because Voldemort wanted to hurt her or Harry. Retrospect had led her to understand full well why Harry had always tried to push her and Ron away at the dangerous moments; he wanted to protect them from danger even if it meant alienating them because at least they would be alive.

When it came to her parents, if she hadn't been their daughter, they would have run the risk of being randomly hit like other Muggles, but her existence in their lives increased the danger exponentially. That meant she had a duty to get them away from the war that wasn't theirs and the danger that she represented.

They had acquiesced, finally, and she had relocated them with Sirius's help. He had been the only Order member she had been certain would help her without informing anyone else, and she was unwilling to jeopardize her parents' lives in any way; ever since third year, her naïve faith in the absolute trustworthiness of institutions like the Order had been shaken. She didn't personally know every member, and she wasn't risking her family on another Peter Pettigrew.

With Sirius's guidance, she had become the Secret Keeper of her parent's old house and cut off all communication with them in the new location after having spelled them so that owls and other messenger birds could not find them. This way, a cursory inspection would show nothing suspicious or worthy of deeper investigation in England.

Closer inspection would reveal that her parents were no longer practising in the UK, but she had rightly assumed that Voldemort would be too dismissive to investigate the details of their Muggle lives, and as soon as their old house was conspicuously absent from the neighbourhood, Voldemort assumed he knew approximately where they were hidden.

By Easter of fifth year, her research into Occlumency and Legilimency had allowed her to safeguard the secret in her mind such that were it ever in danger from a Legilimency attack, it would be wiped from her mind. Once Fawkes had discovered the quandary this placed her in because it could mean her parents were left forever wondering, he had promised to retrieve them once the war was resolved should she be unable to do so.

Fawkes had also taken Crookshanks to them during the summer after fifth year, as Hermione had not wanted her parents to be completely defenceless. Although they could work no magic, she now had the relief of knowing that they were living with an excellent judge of character; Crooks wouldn't be fooled by an Animagus transformation or someone who looked innocent but wasn't.

She'd sent an explanatory letter, swore up and down that her half-Kneazle pet could save their lives, and made them promise to pay attention to him. She'd explained it all to Crookshanks, too, and he seemed to understand and be willing to go where he would be the most helpful. She missed him, especially when she was alone in bed at night and could have used a warm bundle of fur curled up at her feet, but that loneliness was a small price to pay to increase her parents' safety.

Their arrival at the castle shook Hermione out of her introspection, and she and Harry made sure that they were the last of the students to enter the castle; as soon as Hagrid had finished ferrying the first-years across the lake, he would come to feed and release the Thestrals.

She and Harry seated themselves at the foot of the Gryffindor table, as close to the doors and the back of the Great Hall as they could get. This was not where Hermione would normally elect to sit, but it afforded the greatest opportunity of keeping an eye on as many students as possible given that all the professors were on the opposite

end of the room.

Although this was the last time that Hermione would ever be in the brightly lit hall with all these chattering students for the Welcoming Feast, she paid only half a mind to the Sorting, Albus's opening remarks, and dinner, focussing instead on the students she and Harry were supposed to be investigating.

They would need to be able to make periodic progress reports to Albus, and she and Harry, if it became necessary, would need to be able to obscure the truth. Until the truth was leaked from the Ministry, they were fortunately hampered by not revealing their object themselves: if three famous Gryffindors suddenly started questioning everyone in their year on their sexual habits, someone would get suspicious.

There were thirty-two seventh-year students: nine Slytherins, eight Gryffindors, eight Ravenclaws, and seven Hufflepuffs. Hermione found it rather odd to sit there and know that every single one of them had had sex before they turned seventeen. All the pure-bloods and wizard-raised children had likely known and accepted this from an early age, but she wondered how other Muggle-borns had reconciled the wizarding world norms with their non-wizard upbringing.

Still, it was hardly out of the common way for Muggle teenagers to have sex before they were seventeen, and learning to adapt was a large part of the Muggle-born's life at Hogwarts.

Now, at least she knew why Madam Pomfrey had put such an emphasis on "natural urges" and the fact that having sex once didn't mean immediate repeat performances were necessary. To a Muggle-born witch such as Hermione, a recommendation of "do it once and then stop" made far less sense than arguing either abstinence or safe sex. The nurse hadn't really been interested in the sorts of questions Hermione had, and while the Gryffindor girl had intended to do further research, she had thought it amounted to only idle curiosity, and she had never got around to it.

Here was yet another situation that proved that the more one researched, the better life was, but she supposed that there was no use now in wondering about what would have happened if she'd already been aware of the state that she and Harry were in. She hadn't known, and now they had to deal with the situation as it was, meaning that she and Harry had to come up with plausible alternatives to the two of them.

Thankfully, if all else failed, there was the uncertainty of age to fall back upon; despite what Remus thought, there was no guarantee that the Pure Adults weren't graduates; had her birthday been three weeks earlier, she would be an excellent case in point. But most attention would be focussed on her year-mates, and that meant learning more about them than Hermione really wanted to know.

Working in their favour was the teenager's propensity to lie, fabricate, and exaggerate when it came to his or her sexual exploits. They'd heard more stories than could be easily verified, and she strongly doubted that all of them were true. That being said, her house was pretty straightforward. The only member she wasn't sure about was Neville, and Harry or Ron might have a better idea there. Whether Ron wanted to know or not, Dean and Ginny had had sex by the latter's confession to Hermione.

Seamus and Lavender were a verifiable fact, as Hermione had walked in on them once. He was rumoured to have slept with the entire seventh year of Hufflepuff for a bet, but Hermione was sure that was nonsense, especially since Ron had revealed that Susan had turned the Irishman down. She had heard all about Ron and that girl from Beauxbatons from Viktor, who had heard it from Fleur, and Ron's behaviour had confirmed it. In the doubtful case that that rumour was false, Lavender had taken the time to advise Hermione that she had had a go with the redhead. It was rumoured that Lavender had bedded the entire seventh-year dorm, but in the case of Harry, Hermione knew it to be a lie, and she suspected the same of Neville.

Parvati, Padma, and Lavender had all been linked to Jacob Sinclair at the same time, and Hermione strongly suspected the truth of it based on the nauseating amount of details she couldn't help but overhear when Lavender and Parvati had giggled about it late at night for several weeks on end. Parvati and Lavender had enjoyed it so much that they had subsequently skipped the Ravenclaws entirely, and Hermione had once again heard far more than she wanted to. She had become exceedingly skilled at Silencing Charms, but she was very much looking forward to Head Girl rooms of her own.

Hermione focussed her attention on the headmaster as he announced the appointment of the new DADA professor: Nymphadora Tonks. The Golden Trio had known since mid-summer and were rather excited about having in the post not only someone they knew wasn't going to try to kill them but a friend and a skilled Auror. The Ministry had agreed to loan her out since she would double as more security for the school, the Order benefitted by the addition of one more of its members to the Faculty, and Hogwarts received a competent professor. There were definite benefits to having Kingsley as the Head of the Aurors.

Tonks, in all her violet-haired glory, rose and managed to knock her full goblet of pumpkin juice into Severus's lap. Of all the people in the Hall, Severus was one of the few who knew how genuinely clumsy the woman was. Hermione smirked to herself. It would be interesting to see how many students underestimated her as a result and had their arses handed to them in class.

As the burst of noise died down from this untoward occurrence, Hermione turned her attention back to her appointed task. Once her examination reached the other Houses, the situation became murkier. Such details were not ones that Hermione cared much about. Her friendship with Ginny kept her apprised of some of it, but Hermione had always tried to block out what her roommates had been nattering on about when it came to relationships.

From what she had seen, the Ravenclaws tended to date in-House, and she didn't hear many unfounded rumours about them; they tended to date people openly or not at all...or they were very good at hiding it. Hufflepuffs tended to date other Hufflepuffs as well as Ravenclaws and Gryffindors but avoided Slytherins. Slytherins avoided Hufflepuffs as well as Gryffindors.

The Slytherins were likely to be the real problem as what they did in their own House tended not to be shared, and their inter-House liaisons were similarly discreet. It would be very difficult for Hermione and Harry to separate the truth from the rumour. Which, in this case, was all to the good. It wasn't as though she and Harry couldn't be faulted for not chatting up Draco Malfoy and working out whom he had slept with.

Hermione couldn't quite believe that she was sitting in the Great Hall actively contemplating this subject. She desperately hoped that it didn't occur to Ron at some point that they could sneak around in Harry's Invisibility Cloak and try to catch people in the act. She'd make use of a Skiving Snackbox before she submitted to that ignominy.

Thankfully, the Feast was coming to an end, so she was able to put the topic out of her mind for a little while longer. She took care to smile at the newest members of Gryffindor. Ginny and Andrew Kirke, the two sixth-year Prefects, were ensuring that the students got up to the dorms safely, allowing Hermione and Harry to stay behind and wait for Minerva; unlike everyone else, they did not know where they would be living for the year.

The Head of Gryffindor made her way over to them once the Hall was empty of students, her fierce pride evident in her expression. She had known of their appointment before, of course, but their new capacities were now official.

Although Minerva might be very proud, her words were no-nonsense as she reached them: "I'll show you to your quarters."

They followed her out of the Great Hall and surprisingly, down the stairs into the dungeons. The older witch answered their unspoken question.

"While there are several Head Girl and Boy quarters spread throughout the castle, Albus informed me yesterday that these were the only ones not currently ... out of commission."

They both nodded, Hermione wondering if the headmaster had actually done damage to the other rooms. This location would facilitate their training sessions with Severus because trekking very obviously up and down more than seven levels had always been the most risky part of their lessons last year; it was Severus's life if Voldemort found out what the Potions master was teaching them.

They turned in the opposite direction from the Slytherin dorms and made their way through a handful of corridors until Hermione was pretty sure they were in the vicinity of Severus's own quarters and his private laboratory. She wondered how much grief he had given the headmaster over the choice or if the wily old man had managed to keep it from him thus far.

A gargoyle that most nearly resembled a grizzled and enraged dragon guarded the entrance to the rooms, and Hermione began to approve the headmaster's choice in

earnest. Putting them in rooms that were normally given to Slytherins meant that they benefitted from all the Slytherin paranoia and safeguards including no chatty portrait to tell tales either in the corridor or at the door. Harry would have to get the Marauders' Map out later so they could explore.

The gargoyle didn't do anything so uncouth or potentially noisy as jump out of the way of the door; instead, it simply melted away, allowing them to pass through the unobstructed doorway. Once they were inside, it instantly reformed.

"At the moment, you need only touch it or cast the standard Opening Charm to get through from this side," their Head of House informed them. "You may set a password of your choice once I leave."

They nodded again and looked about their new quarters. This room was only slightly smaller than the Gryffindor common room and managed to avoid being unbearably Slytherin because it was done in tones of earthy brown as well as forest green. There was no hint of red or gold anywhere, but that was to be expected.

The room featured a large fireplace crackling with a cheery flame in front of which was a thick area rug, two comfortable-looking armchairs with small tables at their sides and ottomans at their feet, and a large couch with a low table in front of it. There were two desks and chairs on the wall opposite, accompanied by several bookshelves and cabinets for storage. The ceiling was high, but frequent wall sconces in regular intervals around the room chased the shadows away. Several beautiful seascapes...nary a painted person in sight...decorated the walls. Their luggage was currently piled in the middle of the floor. Doors punctuated each wall in the room: one straight ahead of them and one on either side.

"The facilities," Minerva said, gesturing them to the room opposite.

The bathtub put the Prefects' to shame; Hermione was certain that it would be possible to do laps in it. The room appeared to have two of everything else: showers, commodes, sinks, cabinets, mirrors.

"Those doors," there were two more, again on either side of the bathroom, and Minerva gestured to them, "lead to each of your bedrooms. The bathroom partitions itself off if you try to enter at the same time. The main door," she gestured back the way they had come, "is charmed to lead to whichever half of the bathroom is unoccupied or remain locked if they both are."

Hermione and Harry grinned at one another. Leave it to Slytherins to come up with such a clever room. Minerva led them back to the common room.

"I will leave it to the two of you to choose your bedrooms. I feel it incumbent upon me to point out that any untoward altercations with other students, especially Slytherins, would be detrimental to your standing as Head Boy and Head Girl."

"We realize that unity is one of the most important goals that we can have this year," Hermione spoke up for both of them, not certain Harry's response would be as appropriate. "And we're both very proud of our positions."

Minerva's stern expression softened, and she allowed a rare smile to grace her features. "You have certainly been a pride to your House, Hermione, Harry. Now," she turned brusque once more, "make sure you get a good night's sleep, and remember that you receive your timetables tomorrow morning at breakfast."

They both wished her farewell and watched as the gargoyle disappeared at her touch and reformed behind her.

"I can't believe they put my mum and dad in a place like this. It was practically an invitation to shag all the time."

Hermione stared blankly at Harry, stunned that this was the first comment to come out of his mouth, and then she dissolved into laughter. Harry soon joined her, and they managed to collapse on the couch in front of the fire.

"Not the first thought to cross my mind," Hermione confessed when she'd finally drawn adequate breath to speak. "Although I guess it will only further our plan when we need it to. Good to know the school isn't against such liaisons."

"You mean, you didn't read about it in *Hogwarts: A History*?" Harry demanded with mock shock.

Hermione's lips tipped up. "There was remarkably little on the sexual exploits of the Head Boys and Girls."

He almost achieved the deadpan delivery he was going for as he said, "Have you considered writing to the publishers and asking for an updated copy?"

She subdued the urge to clear her throat, saying evenly, "The very negative response I received surrounding the absence of house-elves suggests that such an attempt now would be equally useless."

Harry gaped at her, clearly caught between laughing and wondering if she was serious. There was no need for him to know that she was in deadly earnest. Their rudeness had been quite unwarranted. She rose from the couch.

"Shall we see what we're offered for bedrooms?"

The two of them traipsed into first one bedroom and then the other; they were virtually identical and both quite lovely. There was a large four-poster in dark wood, at least twice the size of the ones they had used in the Gryffindor dorms, another fireplace, several woven rugs, wardrobes, shelves, and cabinets.

The nicest feature, and totally unexpected, were the gloriously large windows that took up almost the entire wall opposite the door. They were evidently enchanted like the ones used at the Ministry, perfect for underground locations. They made their decision arbitrarily, given the nature of enchanted windows: Harry took the bedroom with the window that looked towards the Pitch, leaving Hermione with the room featuring the window that looked east to the Forbidden Forest.

They levitated their trunks into their bedrooms, Harry laughing at her expression when he suggested summoning Dobby and having him do it for them. Hermione got him back with a jibe about his using his superhero status to get out of the manual labour the rest of them had to perform.

Once Harry had finished with his own belongings, he came to help her with her books. Hermione was blissful about all the space she had to properly shelve her collection. Despite the numerous times she'd been in the boys' dorm, she couldn't quite fathom how they had all lived out of their trunks for six years. She, Lavender, and Parvati had promptly unpacked, their trunks had disappeared into storage, and chests of drawers...larger and infinitely more orderly than the trunks...had appeared at the ends of each of their beds. They each had a wardrobe, as well.

When Hermione had first been to the boys' dorms after being befriended by Harry and Ron, she had gone so far as to quiz Minerva on the apparent inequality. The professor had replied that the boy's dorms used to contain both chests of drawers and wardrobes, but as these tended to remain empty while the trunks were used instead, they'd done away with the superfluous furniture. Considering Ron, Harry, Seamus, Dean, and Neville for a moment, Hermione had withdrawn her complaint.

Back in their common room afterwards, the two of them examined the wards that were already in place. As anticipated, it would be difficult for even the headmaster to eavesdrop, and they reinforced the permanent privacy wards that would ensure that no hint of what they were doing reached the rest of the dungeons or anywhere else in the castle, blocking out all of the insidious eavesdropping spells that Severus favoured.

Blocking portrait-people was their next task; this was rather difficult to do if a portrait normally had a person in it, but empty seascapes and landscapes would generally accept the restriction easily, as people did not belong in their scenes. Nosy headmasters were thereby thwarted once again, and they didn't have to worry that he would get curious enough to send some poor painted person through in a little boat.

Rather than using a traditional password for the entrance, Hermione wove name runes into the wards. This was safer than an actual word, because it couldn't be guessed; when she was finished, she and Harry were the only two people who could get through the wards or give others permission to enter.

It took an excellent understanding of runes and a fair amount of power and finesse to properly modify a spell in this manner. If it was done improperly and no name was correctly recognized, not even the caster could break the spell. Or if the runes and the magic expended were too weak, anyone who identified themselves as the name in question would be accepted. Needless to say, Hermione made sure that neither of these potential disasters occurred, and to make it even more difficult for anyone to break through the wards, she'd combined several different kinds of runes.

Harry liked the added security and didn't seem to mind that it came at the price of Hermione being the one who would have to add anyone they subsequently wanted to be able to enter the rooms without their direct permission.

"Are you sure that won't bother you?" she asked again.

"Who exactly do you think I'm going to be inviting *to our* rooms that I don't want you to know about, 'Mione?" He laughed at her concern. He affected an overly contemplative expression. "Hmm. Admit that I'm friends with Ron or study Ancient Runes in my spare time.... That's a tough one."

She already knew his big secret crush, too. She let the matter go.

After a short discussion, they disabled the professor-override that was on the door. If Albus thought he really needed to see them, he was going to have to do so the old-fashioned way: knock or break in. Breaking in, they'd done their best to ensure, would take a small army a considerable amount of time.

Since no one in their right mind would make such alterations to the House common room door and doing so was beyond the ability of all but the most talented upper-year students, there was actually nothing officially written prohibiting such action, although Hermione wondered if that would change by the end of the year. Of course, that would necessitate Albus admitting that they'd locked him out.

After another moment's consideration, she compromised slightly.

Fawkes?

No, I am really a figment of your imagination and you are cuckoo.

Bird, don't get fresh with me, she said as sternly as she was able, narrowing her eyes as she said with false sweetness *You could have been conversing with your ... master.*

He squawked indignantly, and she smiled.

Who cast a Bad Temper Charm on you? he demanded grumpily.

My current state is a direct result of your charming mental presence, love. I've a favour to request.

He snorted. Mentally, birds could snort quite well.

And you've done such a lovely job of buttering me up. What do you want, impertinent child?

Oh, come now. Pure Adult. I think we went to a lot of trouble to establish that Sensing the mental eye-roll, tinged with amusement, she got to the point. *Harry and I have disabled the professor-override on our door. In an actual emergency, you'd give Albus, Severus, or Minerva access, right?*

There was full-fledged amusement now. *I can't wait to see the look on his face. It shall be as you wish, Pure One.*

She mentally scrunched her nose at him. Perhaps impertinent child wasn't so bad a moniker after all. *Always a pleasure.*

When she focussed on the room again, she found Harry looking at her oddly.

"I was having an intense mental discussion with myself?" she proposed hopefully.

He shook his head at her, but didn't pursue the topic.

They blocked the possibility of all incoming Floos and warded their bedroom doors against intrusion, making it possible for them to lock each other out, along with everyone else, if they wished. Hermione had refused to let Harry put up a Silencing Charm around his bedroom, insisting that she be aware when he was having a nightmare.

She suspected that if she double-checked tonight, she would find the charm in place. She knew he didn't like to be a bother, but she had grown up in a household where she was welcome in her parents' bed if she woke from a bad dream, and she couldn't fathom anyone being forced to suffer through nightly horrors alone.

He was underestimating her if he thought that she would just give up; she could be more stubborn than he was if the situation warranted it, and she would get through to him eventually if she had to dismantle the charm every night once he'd gone to sleep; with her course load, she'd frequently be up later than he was, and she didn't have to sleep nearly as much as she used to.

Once their bedrooms were done, they finished with the complex ward Severus had taught them which hid the use of magic; this would prevent anyone from becoming aware of large surges, unusual disturbances, or any use of Dark Magic, which could be a necessary part of learning defence against it.

They performed their nightly ablutions in a bathroom that had obligingly split into two, said their goodnights, and crawled into their respective beds.

She considered all the tasks that she would need to perform in the upcoming days. At the end of the week, perhaps, she would write the quarterly letter to her parents which the phoenix obligingly made impossible to track. This was the only communication they were allowing themselves while the war was ongoing. She wanted them to know that she was alive and well but didn't want to burden them with details that they would be helpless to do anything about; she could talk copiously about school but was hardly going to mention attacks, battles, and hours upon hours of special training for a Final Battle that they wouldn't want her to fight. Her first week of classes would therefore make useful filler for the letter.

Hermione spared a fleeting thought to wonder what Ron would think of their rooms, but her last thought as she surrendered to sleep was one of certainty that Severus would surely prefer this new location to the Gryffindor dorms.

Author's Note: I know that it's the "Marauder's Map" in the books, but since my fic is in Hermione's POV, I've decided that she automatically corrects it to the grammatically correct "Marauders' Map". It's just one of those things ;)

Chapter three, in which the trio survives their first week of seventh year, will hopefully be posted with a week or so^_^

Three: The Classes

Chapter 4 of 4

In which the trio survives their first week of seventh year.

Anti-Litigation Charm: It all belongs to JKR; I play for non-profit amusement.

Author's Note: Neither *HBP* nor *DH* compliant.

Conversation in Italics signifies *MindSpeech*.

I'm delighted to announce that *The Problem with Purity* has been made one of the Featured Stories here on TPP for the month of May. *beams*

Sorry for the delay in getting this next chapter posted to you guys here on TPP. The admins here are amazing grammar gods so I like to look over the chapter one more time with a fine-toothed comb before posting to get rid of stray commas and what have you. I've been really busy the last few weeks, so the comb fell by the wayside. I will try to do better from here on in.

Reviews make me smile. Many thanks to those who have reviewed thus far. ^_^

The Problem with Purity

Chapter Three: The Classes

They met Ron for breakfast the next morning.

"I thought the two of you might at least say goodnight," he complained as he piled food onto his plate as though he hadn't eaten in several weeks.

Hermione and Harry exchanged amused glances and served themselves at a more sedate pace. Harry raised an eyebrow at her, indicating that she got to field this one.

"Our quarters are ... a little further away from the Gryffindor dorms than we'd anticipated. By the time we finished unpacking, it was pretty late. You didn't really think I'd not get a good night's sleep before my first day of school, did you?"

Ron instantly dropped the topic, years of experience having taught him not to get between Hermione and her schoolwork unless he wanted to get into a fight.

A few minutes later, Minerva came round with the timetables, giving Hermione hers before the rest were distributed alphabetically.

"Why does she always...?" Ron unwisely began to complain, showing that perhaps she'd been too generous in according him an allotment of common sense.

Hermione glared at him. "Because it takes me longer to read than it takes you, as I have roughly twice as many classes."

This was the simple truth. All of the N.E.W.T. classes were double periods, running for three hours from nine to noon or one to four. Hermione's schedule was quite full:

Monday: 9am, Potions and 1pm, Charms

Tuesday: 9am, Runes and 1pm, Muggle Studies

Wednesday: 9am, Transfiguration and 1pm, Arithmancy

Thursday: 9am, History of Magic and 1pm, Herbology

Friday: 9am, DADA

Harry and Ron's schedule, by contrast, had a great many more blank spaces:

Monday: 9am, Potions and 1pm, Charms

Tuesday:

Wednesday: 9am, Transfiguration

Thursday: 1pm, Herbology

Friday: 9am, DADA

They had theoretically agreed to disagree about their course loads, as Harry and Ron thought Hermione was insane to be trying for nine N.E.W.T.s, and she thought the two of them were wasting their education in only going for five. Since the Ministry required a *minimum* of five N.E.W.T.s to qualify for Auror training, she thought it would be wise to take at least six. Harry and Ron had argued for taking the minimum but doing really well in them, which she thought was a fine argument but unlikely to be the real reason for their decision.

To give them their due, it was mildly ludicrous to think that the Department might not seriously consider Harry and Ron after all they'd been through from ages eleven through seventeen. Their childhoods had been quite effective pre-training, and it would be impractical not to take that into account. On the other hand, Harry hated to be judged by his Boy Who Lived status, so if he was really looking at his future career as though he had the same background as everyone else, it would surely make more sense to have an excellent education....

Realizing that she was having the argument she'd agreed not to have out loud in her own head, Hermione forced it out of her mind. The choices were made.

Since the first had been a Monday this year, Harry and Ron were jubilant about two things: they had no classes today, and they didn't have to suffer through Potions until next week.

Hermione thought they should be bloody grateful they were in Potions at all but barely refrained from saying so. She knew that deep down, they were grateful, but that didn't mean they weren't excited about a random free day.

When they had received their O.W.L. results in the middle of July after fifth year, both Ron and Harry had received Exceeds Expectations in Potions. Realistically, this was

an extraordinary achievement given their day-to-day work in the class, but Severus had been adamant about only accepting students who had received Outstanding O.W.L.s to his N.E.W.T.-level classes. Exceeds Expectations had therefore dashed the boys' hopes of becoming Aurors and solidified their dislike of Severus into something resembling glittering hatred.

It was like that moment when Umbridge had declared that Harry was unsuitable to be an Auror or when she had banned Harry from Quidditch for life; being a horrible teacher was bad enough, but actively trying to quash the life goals and dreams of students was outrageous.

When Hermione had broached the subject with the Potions master, he had cut her off, stating that if Minerva hadn't convinced him to admit the two boys, a fifth-year Gryffindor student had no chance whatsoever. Hermione understood standing by principles, but she suspected that this particular decision owed itself more to vindictiveness than righteousness. Given the number of Harry's potions that had been sabotaged...usually by Slytherin students and occasionally by the Potions master himself...she didn't think this was about making an exception for the Gryffindor Golden Boy, either.

She could still remember the conversation that had ensued word for word. It had taken place in the Grimmauld Place library two days before Harry's sixteenth birthday. Severus hadn't looked as though he wanted to be disturbed, but she had been determined.

"In the entirety of your almost twenty-year career, you've never admitted a Slytherin student who had less than an Outstanding?" she asked sceptically.

His expression sharpened. "I hardly see how that relates to the current discussion."

She knew he understood quite well. "You've made exceptions in the past."

"With good reason," he said coldly.

The pleading of Minerva, Albus, and herself did not even approach a good reason, apparently.

"If the reason were good enough in this case?" she pursued doggedly.

"I sincerely doubt that possibility."

It sounded dismissive, but she could tell that he was listening to her.

She threw caution to the wind. "Here's my offer: re-test Harry and Ron at the end of the summer. If they achieve the equivalent of an Outstanding, accept them in N.E.W.T. Potions."

"And if they fail?" he demanded imperiously, eyebrow raised, clearly doubting that she could come up with anything even remotely tempting.

She swallowed but forged ahead, keeping her voice even: "Then you'll have three fewer Gryffindor students in your sixth-year Potions class."

Black eyes narrowed to veriest slits, he regarded her for several long moments, and she actually checked to make sure that her Occlumency shields were still in place.

"You would truly risk your place on their Potions acumen?" he asked doubtfully.

She regarded him steadily. "I would do what is in my power to help my friends towards the career of their choice."

He continued to regard her intently and then declared abruptly, "They will be tested on the twenty-ninth of August. You will pay the price for their failure."

Convincing Harry and Ron to spend the month studying Potions had been no easy task, especially as she had not wished to divulge how her own scholastic career now hung in the balance.

The beginning of August had not been pleasant. She had dragged them to the basement of Grimmauld Place day after day, bought them ingredients, given them detailed notes, and done her best to bully them into learning properly, but despite the brilliant second chance they were being offered, they were squandering it with complaints against Severus's unfairness and sneaking out for impromptu Quidditch matches.

She had suffered through a week of this grudging compliance before their attitudes had undergone an abrupt about-face. They had become positively studious, with the result of their actually learning and soon completing their work on the first or second attempt. This, in turn, meant that they often finished earlier in the day and could then have their fun. Hermione could have wept for joy.

She did cry in earnest when Severus informed her on the thirtieth that, to his horror, he would be accepting three Gryffindors into his N.E.W.T.-level class. Harry had needed to pry her out of Severus's arms when she'd lost all common sense and flung herself at the man. She'd sobbed on Harry's shoulder instead. Once Severus had left in a flurry of ruffled robes, Harry had confessed that three weeks earlier, the Potions master had made a snide comment about how lovely it would be to have no Gryffindors in his sixth-year class. Harry's immediate leap to Hermione's defence had resulted in the revelation as to why she wouldn't be there. Suddenly, they had a reason to take this chance seriously.

Severus had informed Minerva and Albus after the Order meeting the next day that he was accepting Harry and Ron, and Fawkes's bird's-eye view had allowed her to see the utter shock on Minerva's face. Albus had looked pleased, but Hermione was pretty sure he had been taken aback as well.

Minerva had demanded to know why, and Severus's response, "Because Miss Granger offered me something I wanted," still saddened her. She knew she'd seemed a bit of a pill those first few years, but she'd improved, hadn't she? And it wasn't her fault that she had been a Muggle-born tossed into the wizarding pool; she had been desperately determined to swim rather than sink and that had meant knowing everything that wizards knew. That gap was still there, but at least she had learnt to be less ostentatious when trying to catch up.

As breakfast finished this morning, Harry and Ron were deep in discussion about what they could do with their newfound Tuesday freedom when a shadow fell over them. They looked up to find the Potions master staring down at them with a glint in his eyes. Uh oh.

"Mr Potter. Mr Weasley. Minerva was kind enough to inform me that you are at liberty today. I am in need of assistance, and she recommended you."

Hermione had to hide a smile at their instantly woebegone expressions, but they knew better than to argue with the Head of Slytherin, especially when he was backed up by their own Head of House. Garnering sympathetic expressions from the rest of their housemates, they trailed disconsolately after the Potions master.

Smiling to herself, Hermione headed off to Ancient Runes. She was both deeply excited and mildly terrified by the fact that she was in her final year at Hogwarts. N.E.W.T.s had never loomed so close and that was alarming, and yet it was the culmination of what she had worked so hard to accomplish in the previous six years of schooling. It was her chance to prove her worth...scholastically at least...with finality.

The bigotry that pure-blood families like the Malfoys expressed bothered her. She didn't believe any of their "Mudblood" nonsense for a moment, but the fact that they could honestly hold such beliefs was disturbing on a fundamental level. She knew her doing exceptionally well on her N.E.W.T.s wouldn't likely change their minds, but it would become one more fact that proved their reasoning was invalid.

Today's classes showed that the professors and most of the students were quite serious about this year's course load; they were only months away from N.E.W.T.s and the results that would impact their futures. This attitude fit Hermione's frame of mind quite well.

With the exception of Tonks, all of the professors had taught Hermione before, and she and her fellow students had all taken the sixth-year N.E.W.T. classes together, so after just one class this year, it pretty much felt as though they'd never left. Bathsheba and Charity had both started with the lectures they had promised at the end of last

year: the added security of warding with runes and glyphs worked into the spells versus the dangers of doing so, and a debate on the reaction of the Muggle population were the wizarding world to be revealed to it in the present day and age.

Harry and Ron hadn't been at lunch, and they were late for dinner. When they finally arrived, they positively slunk in, dusty, dishevelled, and looking thoroughly disgusted with their day. They sat down on the bench next to her with two heavy thumps, and she smiled.

"Look what the cat dragged in."

They glared at her, but having survived six years of death glares from a master, this didn't faze her.

"There's no need for unholy glee," Harry grumbled. "You'd feel the same way if you'd been tortured like we had."

Ron was already inhaling an unholy amount of food.

"I'd hardly call it unholy," she responded dryly, eyeing them critically. "I'd have been happy to help sort the Potions stores, but I had class."

She was subjected to a mouthful of half-chewed food as Ron sputtered to a halt and then complained, "Would you not do that?"

"Use a process of deduction to establish with reasonable certainty what was occupying your time and include such gleaned knowledge in my everyday conversation?"

He swallowed, seemed to take a stab in the dark: "Yeah, that."

She made a face and then addressed the two of them. "The two of you have realized you're wizards?"

They looked at her cluelessly. With a sigh she took out her wand and cast Cleaning and Neatening Charms which left them looking perfectly presentable.

"Huh," was Harry's comment.

Ron sort of gestured at her with his fork before continuing on with his meal. With a shake of her head, she gave up and went back to her own dinner.

Afterwards, they invited Ron down to see their rooms. It was difficult to gauge what he found the most upsetting, because he became speechless somewhere around their initial descent down the stairs. He gawked at the gargyle, gaped at the common room, goggled at their bedrooms, and glared at the bathroom. From the look of him, he hadn't quite grasped that they would be living as together as they were living, but both she and Harry refused to address that issue unless he explicitly brought it up.

The Slytherin colours probably didn't help.

When he finally found his voice, Hermione was hugely impressed that what came out was a strangled, "It's lovely."

"We like it," they answered in unison.

This, to Hermione's surprise, seemed to snap Ron out of it.

"Oy," he protested. "I get enough of that at home with the twins."

They smiled, and Ron flopped onto the couch and pronounced his final verdict: "Location's the pits, but it's not half bad otherwise."

The next morning, they met for breakfast before heading off to Transfiguration together. Minerva's extremely high standards continued to rule in her classroom where they were moving on to increasingly difficult transfigurations. In both the sixth- and seventh-year classes, Hermione had noticed a marked increase in what could be termed "defensive transfiguration": transfiguring common objects into physical shields for protection, dirt into mud to slow down an opponent, water into ice to trip someone up, and so on. Since these spells were self-sustaining and couldn't be quickly stopped by an opponent with a simple *finite*, they could be very useful in battle.

At its most advanced, this could even mean objects that actively defended someone, as Albus had done for Harry during the battle in the Department of Mysteries. Most wizards either weren't strong enough or couldn't react quickly enough to make this useful in a battle situation, but Hermione believed strongly in her magical and cognitive abilities, and she would use every advantage that the Hogwarts staff was offering.

To Hermione's amusement, Harry and Ron refused to come to lunch, worried that Severus would find them and draft them for work that afternoon. They made a quick kitchen run and then escaped outside with their brooms. Severus, Hermione was amused to see, did note the boys' absence from lunch and fleetingly met her smile with a smirk of his own.

In Arithmancy, Septima continued with the plan she had instituted the previous year. In sixth year, they had concentrated on Arithmancy in its pure form. All their work was theoretical. This year, they would be putting the theory they had worked so hard on into practice, using it with complex potions, advanced transfigurations, and upper-level charms.

They wouldn't necessarily be performing all of these potions and spells...her classroom was not a laboratory...but their work on paper would be applicable in the real world. There would be a certain quantity of testing to ensure that their results were accurate, and other projects would offer bonuses for theories that they actually tested.

Hermione was definitely looking forward to the advanced potions portion of the course and was hoping that Severus wasn't going to be too difficult about letting her use the lab to work on them. At worst, hopefully Harry wouldn't mind if she built a mini-lab in a corner of their common room. Or really, she grinned at the thought, that bathroom was huge, and it had a source of running water and everything.... It would have the added benefit of aggravating Severus, were he ever to hear of it, and perhaps he'd be offended enough to let her use the lab after that.

On Thursday, Harry and Ron continued their mission of "Avoid the Snape" and took breakfast in her and Harry's quarters. She left them to it and went off to History of Magic, ignoring their opinions of the subject and her for taking it.

What many students never appreciated because they dropped History as soon as they could was that sixth- and seventh-year History of Magic finally got beyond the witch burnings and Goblin Rebellions of the 1600s and the Giant Wars of the 1700s of which Binns was so fond...or at least as fond as he was of anything, since he managed to make everything from the founding of the Ministry to the institution of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy sound as dull as possible.

In sixth year, they had learned about the 1800s and the continued changes to the Ministry and the wizarding world through the Romantic and Victorian era, and this year, they would be looking at the 1900s; although the delivery still left much to be desired, the subject matter was fascinating. They would be learning about Albus's defeat of Grindelwald and the Years of Terror, wizarding involvement in the World Wars, and much more.

She was going to have to make sure Harry never knew that he was covered in History of Magic. Of course, since both boys tuned her out as soon as they heard the word "History", she probably didn't have much to worry about. Perhaps it was just as well that Binns strayed so rarely from his lectures, or he might have realized that there was a source for many cold hard facts right in his school.

Harry and Ron reappeared for lunch and didn't once look at the High Table as though that would keep them safe from Severus's potential wrath. Personally, Hermione thought that they had afforded him enough amusement for the day to keep them quite safe, but she refrained from saying so.

After lunch, they trekked outside with Neville and Seamus, and Pomona reminded them straight off that if they wished to submit a bonus project in Herbology, she was only

considering hybridized plants with particular consideration to their ultimate use. The latest she would accept a proposal was the beginning of November.

For their final year at the school, they were encouraged to show their creativity and ingenuity with bonus projects. These projects were not required...although students were *strongly* encouraged to submit at least one...but would supplement their grades in whichever subject they chose to do one for, assuming that the project was a success.

Both Hermione and Neville had taken Pomona up on her offer of having their choice pre-approved at the end of last year so that they could begin the process in a timely manner this year. From the look on Ron's and Harry's faces, they hadn't given it much thought at all. She had the feeling that the two of them weren't going to be submitting a bonus project in this class. Pomona did not belabour the point any further but took them out to greenhouse number three and the most dangerous plant life on the premises.

Friday's arrival and its morning class were heralded with especial enthusiasm by the seventh-year students. As happened every year, there was a furor surrounding Defence Against the Dark Arts that didn't occur with any other subject. Hermione wasn't sure what Tonks had done, but no whisper of what had occurred in the six other years of classes reached the seventh-years, who, being in one of the last time slots of the week, would normally have expected some sort of advance notice of what to expect.

Since no one was supposed to know that Tonks worked for the Order as well as for the Ministry, the vast majority of the trio's interaction with her could not be revealed, so they were spared being pumped for information, answering only to having seen her a time or two at the Ministry and interacting with her very little there.

The Defence classroom this year was in the dungeons. Hermione wasn't sure if this was to facilitate Tonks's coordination with Kingsley, Severus, and Remus or because of her House affiliation. The room was closer to the Hufflepuff common room than the Slytherin one, a fact which lightened the mood of the students who were hurrying down to meet her for the first time.

Speculation was rife, however, many students recalling their previous professor and hoping that an Auror would be a vast improvement. Professor Judex had been another Ministry pick. He hadn't been working for Voldemort like Quirrell or Barty Crouch Jr. He hadn't been a charlatan like Lockhart. He hadn't been a Ministry toady like Umbridge.

He'd known his material well enough, although not brilliantly, but unfortunately, he hadn't been enough like Remus. No, he'd been firmly convinced that Harry was going to be the next Dark Lord. Oh, he believed everything Harry had said about Voldemort being back, but nothing they'd been able to say had convinced him that the Parseltongue-speaking, Dark Lord-defeating Boy Who Lived wasn't going to take over the world the first chance he got.

To be fair to the Ministry, Hermione didn't think that the man had betrayed his prejudices before he got the job. Given the current political climate, it hadn't been a sound idea to have someone who strongly disliked Harry as a Defence teacher for the second year running.

It had been almost amusing at first, since they all found the idea of evil Harry so ludicrous...even those who had been uncertain in fifth year were completely won over by now...and Judex didn't have the clout or the vindictiveness of Umbridge, but by the end of November, Hermione had found herself having to remind the man nearly every class that Harry couldn't be excluded from practical demonstrations just because the professor didn't think the Gryffindor needed any more practice defeating other wizards. She'd had to just as frequently remind Harry to keep his temper, and she was pretty sure that Albus had had to step in and make sure that the Gryffindor Golden Boy was graded fairly.

The students had got over the Parseltongue revelation several years ago, and since DADA included a great many students who were part of the DA...which had been instituted as an official club with Ginny running it and Filius supervising...the class had been almost universally united in their dislike of their professor.

He might not have owned any blood quills or made them read the textbook every class, but he had been messing with their Saviour at a time when everyone knew that Voldemort was back, and they had resented that. The man's practical experience had been adequate but not extraordinary, and this had meant that he was teaching students who'd battled Dark Arts he'd never had to face; the upper-year students had found this gap frustrating.

Judex had seemed to think it his duty to protect the rest of them from Harry's evil influence, making most everyone delight in being especially friendly with Harry instead.

It was never made explicit whether he had refused to come back for another year or whether he had been dismissed, but there had been no complaint from the Ministry when it had become plain that another professor would be required this year.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron couldn't have been more pleased that it was Tonks who'd been chosen. Since Ron already knew Tonks, he wasn't engaged in the gossip with the other students but had slipped up to talk to Neville, questioning him, it seemed, about hybridization options. The two boys made it through the door with the rest of the class before Harry and Hermione had the chance to stop them. They were at the back of the queue of students, and the magical buzz of wards around the doorframe stopped them in their tracks.

Hogwarts was one of the most heavily warded buildings in all of Britain. A huge portion of these wards, however, surrounded the outer perimeter of the grounds. It was these which protected the school from attack, barred Death Eaters from the grounds, prevented Apparition and airborne arrivals, and so on. There were wards around the Quidditch pitch and some of the greenhouses, as well, and there was a whole set of wards that kept away Muggles and changed the appearance of the castle for them. Other wards guarded the castle proper, fortifying the ancient building.

There were also many personal wards within the building. Severus warded his private stores, office, and quarters with his own wards, and many of the other professors did the same; it was a common practice, especially these days. Warding around open doors, however, was far more unusual, and Harry and Hermione found it immediately suspicious. They took out their wands and attempted to discern just what they were up against.

Tonks smiled from her position inside the classroom. Her hair was bubblegum pink today, matching the colour of the Weird Sisters t-shirt she was wearing with dark blue jeans. If she'd been wearing robes at some point that morning, they weren't in evidence right now.

"Are you going to join me or remain in the hall?" she called cheerfully.

By then, they'd a pretty good idea of what the wards entailed.

"We'd be pleased to join you," Harry said with a grin.

Hermione smiled back. "But we'd prefer to be able to speak about it later."

"And we'd rather not have blue hair all weekend."

Together, they disabled the wards around the door, and as they were crossing the threshold, Hermione followed this up with a discreet shielding charm about their persons. Tonks saw, but none of the students appeared to notice, as they were all focussed on their smirking professor. Hermione and Harry took their seats at the front of the room; Tonks was an unknown element, and the rest of the class had apparently left a safety buffer.

Hermione saw that Malfoy and Daphne Greengrass were still here; ever since they'd joined the class last year, she'd wondered how much of their choice was motivated politically. Were they keeping an eye on what the other students were learning, or did they want to learn it as well?

The door closed, although not with the slam Severus was known to employ.

"I trust that many of you remember Professor Moody?"

Almost en masse, the students nodded nervously, since as far as an opening salvo went, it was not the most reassuring ever. Hermione, Harry, and Ron wore smirks that

matched their professor's.

"He was my mentor. And while I'm less likely to bark 'Constant Vigilance!'...there was a gratifyingly large number of starts...than he was, you should all note that it's a tenet I enforce to the fullest." Tonks's hair went bright blue as she smirked at them. "Those of you who are not as paranoid as Mr Potter and Miss Granger will have cause to be practically reminded of this advice. Although this school is meant to be a safe-haven, as several of your younger peers thought to point out to me earlier, nothing that has occurred to you since entering my classroom today is in any way life-threatening."

The nervousness amongst the students seemed to grow, as most of them had thought that *nothing* had yet occurred in the classroom.

Tonks settled back against her desk, standing in front of it with arms and legs crossed casually. "Defending against the Dark Arts is more than fighting in pitched battles or skirmishes in dark corridors. Defending yourself against the Dark Arts means always being aware of your surroundings, keeping your eye out for unusual behaviour, and not letting your guard down.

"I won't make it a habit of warding the door but," she smiled cheerfully at them, "that only leaves you with no idea what *will* do. There'll be no indiscriminate cursing in my classroom, but learning to defend yourselves both subtly and substantially will form part of your weekly Friday morning agenda.

"My name is Tonks. I will answer to Tonks, Professor, or Auror Tonks. Now who can tell me what classifies a spell as Dark?"

In between all her class prep and the homework that had already been heaped upon them, Hermione had also been researching Coming of Age and Pure Adults, and she put her free Friday afternoon to good use. After she, Harry, and Ron went out to have tea with Hagrid...who was in fine form because he had several new and interesting creatures for his classes this year...she speedily researched and wrote two papers before moving on to personal research.

Harry had taken one look at the multitude of books that Hermione had spread out over an armchair, most of the couch, and a fair portion of the floor and blanched, but he had gamely pulled out his own books and took a stab at his work. Ron, Hermione knew, would have run for the hills. Getting the work out of the way now, however, meant that it didn't loom over the rest of the weekend, and Harry knew that they'd be starting training, needed to discuss her research, and would begin their Head Boy and Girl duties in earnest.

The research on Pure Adults was not going as well as she had hoped. The recent stuff was complete nonsense, but some of the older Black tomes and Restricted Section offerings had interesting information, although it was limited in many ways. None of the accounts she read seemed to have been written by Pure Adults themselves, so a lot of it was hearsay, and none of the answers were as definite as she wanted.

After Albus's explanation of the Child Massacre, this ambiguity began to make sense, but that wasn't very helpful when it was her life and Harry's life that she was trying to understand right now. She'd take anything she could get, of course, but that didn't mean she was happy with it.

By dinner time that evening, Hermione saw that the hair of fifteen of the seventeen members of the seventh-year DADA class had turned bright blue. Each student had discovered when they tried to tell anyone *why* their hair was blue that they couldn't speak about the class they had had that morning. The blue was particularly clear on the once-blond locks of Draco Malfoy and Hannah Abbott, and the former was hiding the fact that he was fuming mad with little success.

Hermione thought it was well-reasoned of Tonks to spell the other years not to speak about it but only to make the oldest students wander around with their hair dyed. The surprise was priceless, and they were currently supposed to be the most highly educated students in the building. Lesson learnt, Hermione would wager.

She and Harry finally took pity on Ron's desperate pouting and explained to the nearby Gryffindors what had happened. The news rapidly spread throughout the Great Hall, and Tonks's reputation was made. Hermione wondered how many students were now convinced that she had been a Slytherin and would be surprised to learn the truth.

Tonks raised her glass to Hermione and Harry in toast, and Hermione noticed Severus eyeing the woman warily. Fortunately, no second beverage mishap occurred to risk the health and safety of their second competent and non-evil DADA professor. Hermione wondered how Albus had forced the seating arrangements, because although Tonks was an infinitely more pleasing conversationalist than Quirrell, Lockhart, Judex, or Umbridge, there was a certain hazard associated with such close proximity to the Metamorphmagus. Severus might be one of the bravest people Hermione knew, but he didn't take foolish risks for no reason.

On Friday evening, after realizing that they'd assembled in front of the fire to do their homework for the fourth day running, just as they'd done for the last six years in the Gryffindor common room, she and Harry jointly decided that the desks in their common room were a waste of space. They moved them into their bedrooms where they fit under the window. If they needed some private time to work quietly and effectively on a flat surface, the desk was there; otherwise, they'd be on the couch or on the floor in front of the fire.

This left a wide open space in the room which they turned into a sparring area complete with the clever padding spell Hermione had discovered over the summer. Casting it over the walls and floors would minimize injury without detracting from the decor; walk across the floor or lean against the wall and they both still felt like the hard stone that they were; impact either at an accelerated pace and they gave as though they were cushioned. Picking oneself up off the cold hard stones of the dungeons had become rather tiresomely frequent in their early training with Severus, and Harry was as relieved as she was that this would be minimized in their own home.

They shielded the rest of the room against inadvertent spell fire, projectiles, and other likely destructive forces coming from this area, as well as shielding the area they were in, spelling rugs to the floor and casting anti-flame spells on them and anything else that looked capable of catching fire. They cast protective spells that prevented water and freezing damage and put a Skin Deep spell on the walls so that damage would not penetrate more than a couple of inches into the stone. By now, they were very familiar with how their instructors worked.

When they were done, they had a place to keep in shape and work on the hand-to-hand combat that Remus had been teaching them as well as the duelling they were learning from Severus and Kingsley. The room would pass a cursory inspection as the same as when they had first entered it, and it continued to look pleasant and homey.

They tested their spellwork's efficacy with a fast and furious duel that ended in a draw and left the room unscathed and the two of them gasping for breath as they moved across the room and tumbled onto the couch to survey the room.

"It's kind of an inverted home decoration." Hermione observed the final results. "We could put a new series on the telly: 'How to protect your home and leave it looking exactly how it did before you started in ten easy steps...!'"

Harry laughed. "You could publish a self-help book for wizards. You said you'd worked out a spell for the gargoyle?"

After contemplating their needs, Hermione had worked out a complex bit of transfiguration and charms that would make the gargoyle guarding the door announce anyone who wanted to get in. As the Marauders had discovered, the inherently magical castle made it possible for its inhabitants to be tracked. In this particular case, she and Harry were only concerned with the several feet surrounding their door, and they wanted the results to be reproduced orally rather than visually. With this method, their potentially clandestine visitors wouldn't have to announce themselves in the corridor, but she and Harry would know for certain who was out there, as the gargoyle, like the Map, would in essence "see" right past any disguises to the real individual.

A voice-displacement charm would throw the voice from the gargoyle to right beside their ears, making the announcement discreet inside their quarters. They could either *finite* the announcement, indicating that they'd heard and would either answer or ignore the caller, or, unless they'd specifically shielded against it beforehand, it would get progressively louder at fifteen second intervals until they noticed or were woken, like a polite knock turning into insistent pounding.

She, like Harry, was capable of wandless magic, though she had learnt this much less dramatically than he had, the ability increasing as she had approached and then passed her seventeenth birthday. As a result, the gargoyle would respond to either of their desires for the door to be opened if they did not wish to physically answer it. By the time she'd finished working out exactly what would be most efficient and practical for them, she thought she understood at least one of the mysteries of the

headmaster's office.

"Brilliant," Harry declared cheerfully.

Pleased, Hermione set to work to put her theoretical spell into practice. With parts of the castle that were integral to Hogwarts, as the stone gargoyle was, it was a little more like "convincing" than spelling, but the gargoyle correctly announced both her and Harry when they each took a turn testing it, and they'd have to wait for more visitors to be one hundred percent certain of its effectiveness.

She then made the two of them override the gargoyle's announcement so that they wouldn't constantly be announced to one another. They could decide on a case-by-case basis if they gave anyone else unfettered access whether or not that person would also be announced to them.

"Would you like me to limit the effective distance of the announcement?" she asked Harry.

He looked at her blankly.

"Do you want to know in DADA that Luna's at the door to our rooms?"

A slow grin spread over his face. "Do I ever!"

She had rather suspected that would be his response, and since it was easy enough to modify later if it drove them bonkers, she let the spell dissipate naturally without any predefined boundaries, suspecting it would fizzle round about the wards surrounding the grounds.

Now that they lived in their own room rather than a shared dorm, they could do more than simply make a fancy door. The Map didn't have to be hidden away from roommates any more, and Hermione now felt able to admit to its brilliance and usefulness. She hoped it meant that she'd grown a bit as a person but suspected that it was really just because she understood it now and thought she had a fighting chance of duplicating their work if she wished.

Harry stuck it to the wall outside his bedroom with a temporary Sticking Charm; against the wall, it could be coaxed into lying out completely flat and unfolded, making a fair-sized wall decoration. She cast a Glamour on it so that it would appear to anyone else as an ink-on-parchment seascape, thus blending it in with the established décor.

When she, Harry, or Ron were looking at it, they would continue to see the Map and everyone in Hogwarts. At the end of last year, she had discovered that the Map had different modes, or different ways of displaying its information; rather than showing the location of each resident in Hogwarts, it could display lists of people, such as all the Slytherins, seventh-year students, professors...or non-students and non-professors. With this display ability, they could periodically check to ensure that no one untoward ended up on the list of current occupants, such as B. Crouch in place of A. Moody.

Thanks to a Protean Charm, every time a new person appeared on the list of "others" on the Map, the name was replicated on the bracelets that she and Harry each wore. The bracelets...which were also word-activated Portkeys that would bring them to the headmaster's office...were made of two plain bands of gold and silver which had been twined together, and the metal would heat to advise them when they needed to take a look. She had given Harry's to him for his birthday that summer, and he had been pleased but bemused until she explained what it did. They would have to look at the Map before they knew where this person was, but they would at least be made immediately aware if any rogue Animagi or other potential malefactors were on the grounds.

Last year, she had figured out how to disguise their presence on the Map, a secret she had shared with no one but Harry, given the possible abuses to which the ability could be put. They had removed Ron from the Map as well, but she had not explained to him how to do it. This had been only a half-conscious decision, as he had blown her off mid-revelation, apparently desperately in need of discussing some dire Quidditch move with someone; he hadn't brought the conversation back up and neither had she. Both she and Harry knew how to see one another in emergencies, but they were both pleased with one more way in which they could not be spied upon.

By the time they had finished with all these alterations, it was late, and the long week had caught up with them.

"Since I doubt either of us is at our best at the moment, shall we bump research revelations to Sunday morning?" Hermione suggested hopefully.

Harry grinned. "I was sure you were going to sit me down just now and reveal these really important truths that I couldn't take in for the life of me."

She smiled back. "I'm much more aware of your retention skills than that, Harry. Ron'll be sleeping, I trust?"

Harry shook his head. "He's gone officially Quidditch-mad. He's already scheduling pre-tryouts or some such, as actual tryouts aren't until next weekend. He's determined to have the world's most stellar team come hell or high water. After last year..." Harry shrugged.

Last year, Gryffindor had lost to Slytherin in the Final. It hadn't had anything to do with Ron's leadership abilities, and it hadn't even been Ginny's fault. Both she and Draco had flown extremely well, both teams had played extremely well, but in the end, Draco had caught the Snitch. Gryffindor had still won the House Cup, so it had hardly been a complete wash, but Ron had been inclined to take the loss personally. Very personally.

"I admire his dedication to *something*," she tried to remind herself.

Harry dragged her up off the couch. "To bed, then. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day, too."

Saturday morning, the Prefects were supposed to present her and Harry with a list of the rounds they had established for themselves as well as a schedule for their meetings. When the Prefects were doing their jobs, the Head Boy and Girl rarely had to interfere with them, but it was up to her and Harry to keep an eye on them just in case. They tried to resolve any conflicts before they had to be escalated to a member of faculty and similarly tried to help any students whom the Prefects couldn't help.

They had to perform their own rounds, independent of the others, with emphasis on unpredictability so that if any students worked out the Prefect schedule, there was still a chance of their being caught by the Head Boy or Head Girl. They also liaised with the faculty, meeting with them as needed and disseminating information to the Prefects.

She and Harry had agreed that their rounds would take place as insomnia, homework, and extra training dictated, supplemented by necessity based on what the Map was telling them. Harry had reconciled himself to the Marauders' creation being used in such a way with the intention of being lenient where leniency was permissible. As she had pointed out, they were also in the middle of a war where foolish antics could have unexpected side-effects; being out on the grounds, in the Forbidden Forest, or sneaking around the dungeons could truly put students in danger.

Both she and Harry wondered a little about their early years at Hogwarts sometimes, and they had agreed that Albus must have had a very great hand in much that went on. There was no way, for example, that Charlie's friends on broomsticks could have made it to the top of the tower to rescue Norbert without the headmaster's intervention. Of course, the man must have wanted Hagrid's dragon disposed of nearly as badly as they did, although using eleven-year-olds to accomplish this still seemed a little cavalier. Then again, that whole year had been a "forged in flame" sort of experience, and Hermione suspected that this year was going to be much the same.

Unfortunately, she didn't think anything really prepared one for suddenly becoming a desperately sought after Pure Adult who was capable of bestowing great power on the first person one had sex with, but she was going to do her best to see that she and Harry made it through one way or the other.

Author's Notes: I don't believe JKR actually specifies what grades Ron receives; she says only that he receives seven O.W.L.s and has no O's. Given that he is approved for the same courses as Harry in *HBP*, however, and I'm guessing that Slughorn wouldn't take him with an Acceptable when he has no, er, special talents, I'm extrapolating that he has an Exceeds Expectations like Harry.

Many thanks to Kyerie from Ashwinder who figured out for me that the fic in which I first read about defensive transfiguration is GreenGecko's *Resonance*. All I could

remember was that hallways were transfigured into ice and Dean uses it in battle. I thought the idea was brilliant, so I borrowed it, and I'm very happy to be able to correctly attribute it now.

The Goblin Rebellion of 1612 is canon. I've invented the Giant Wars for the 1700s, but they'll not be mentioned again. It amused me to think of Binns continuing on down through the centuries and ending up with Harry Potter at the end (and Harry having no idea of that fact), so that's how it ended up in fic. I'm sure there are people out there who are sure that Binns would never stray beyond his death (whenever that is), but I'm happily using artistic licence on this one.

Chapter four, in which Hermione and Harry try to discuss what Hermione has researched, will be posted in the near future.