

The Swing of the Pendulum

by beaweasley2

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 14

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As The Smoke Cleared...

Hermione stumbled through the rubble as she, Harry, and Ron tried to make their way to Gryffindor Tower. Hermione was more than tired; she was sore, upon sore, upon sore. She felt old, arthritic, bone weary, and every muscle, every joint hurt. It even hurt to think, especially to think or remember. So, she let Ron guide her by the hand to their destination. All Hermione could think about was to fall into a bed...any bed. She didn't even care where or which one, as long as it was flat and had a pillow. She didn't even think she had strength for a bath...she'd probably only drown herself in the water anyway. As they approached the end of the corridor, or what was left of it, something didn't feel right. The Fat Lady's portrait hung askew on her hinges, and she was slumped on the lower part of her frame as if she'd been hit with the Killing Curse. "Do you think she's all right?" Hermione asked as Harry tried to lift the portrait back into place.

"Who cares," Ron said, yawning. "As long as we can get in and get some sleep."

Hermione scowled at him, wondering why, after all this, he was still so uncaring and selfish.

The huge portrait gave way and nearly fell on top of Harry, if it hadn't been for Hermione's quick reflexes in levitating her up. Together they set her aside, propped her up against the wall, and turned to enter the common room. Ron was staring at the portrait hole as if he'd never seen it before. Hermione followed his gaze and gasped at what she saw. Harry, standing next to her, gasped as well. Instead of the port way to the Gryffindor common room, there was a huge gaping hole with the view of the castle grounds: rocks, sky, grass, mud, and the remnant scene of the battle below. Ron eased out onto the ragged rock and had to be pulled back as some of the stone that made up the wall crumbled beneath him, enlarging the hole.

"Whoa! It's gone!" Ron articulated, clarifying the obvious.

Gryffindor Tower was gone. The entire turret, all eight floors of it, was gone.

They stood there, only heaven knew how long, before the sound of someone clearing her throat made the three friends turn around. "Kingsley is looking for you," Luna said, reaching out and handing Harry two vials. "He said that he needs your help."

"What's this?" Harry asked, looking from the vials to Luna and back again, his exhausted mind not processing very well at the moment.

"Invigorating Draught; my own brew," she replied, handing Ron a pair of vials, too, "and Mind Clarity Elixir. I know how tired you are, and I know that you are still needed. This will help. There is enough to help you get through the day." She handed Hermione two as well.

"Thank you, Luna, but I think we need sleep," Hermione said.

"I don't think you should right now," Luna said, her gaze focused determinedly on them. "Seamus and Neville are being sworn in as Hit Wizards to help round up the last Death Eaters. I think you should come too. There are still rogue wizards and witches in the castle who have to be found."

Harry and Ron both nodded, swallowing mouthfuls of both potions.

"You'll need another dose in six hours," Luna said, turning and skipping away, hopping over a rock in her path.

Hermione swallowed a mouthful of each potion and immediately felt alert and refreshed. "Like a drunk on ten cups of coffee," she mumbled, running after the boys and Luna.

Lucius Malfoy sat at the end of the Slytherin table, holding Narcissa's hand and staring at his son, his surviving heir and a chip off the old block, as so many of his friends called him. Lucius had never seen himself in Draco; the boy was too spoilt, to self-gratifying, weak, whiney, and unmotivated. Even now, he was leaning on his mother for comfort instead of steeling himself for what was about to come...and Lucius knew what awaited them, even as assuredly as he knew where his Gringotts key remained hidden. The three of them would be arrested for their associations and questioned...regardless if Lucius had desperately wanted out of the obligation in which he'd been trapped. From which his whole family had succumbed. All their friends...well, the Death Eater and Loyalist ones...had thought he'd been so proud to learn that Draco had accepted the Dark Mark. They'd been wrong.

Sure, he'd played his role, done what was required of him, done whatever the Dark Lord had demanded, but only to keep his family alive. Secretly, although he did agree that purity of blood mattered, that wizards should rule over Muggles, that Mudbloods should know their place and accept that the pure-bloods were the autocrats of their world, even wished to establish a nobility ranking system, he'd been happier without the Dark Lord. Those thirteen years of peace, thirteen years without fear for his life, fear for Narcissa's, fear of upsetting or disappointing the Dark Lord, had been the best years of his life. He'd flourished, had a handsome son, a family. For all his wild youth, Lucius loved being married, having a family and being a father.

Narcissa pulled her hand away as Gawain Robards approached. "Lucius, I have to take you in. No getting around it now, you are a Death Eater, and you're under arrest." He turned to Draco. "Son, pull up your sleeve." Draco complied and an Auror moved to stand behind Draco, clasping a hand on his shoulder. "You too, son, I'm afraid. The Mark is as clear as day." His gaze turned to Narcissa. "Mrs. Malfoy, you too, if you would."

Narcissa pulled up her sleeve, revealing the Dark Mark marring her perfect arm with a fading skull and snake. Lucius felt his heart fall into the pit of his stomach. He knew what Azkaban was like and regretted that now Narcissa would suffer the dreadful place with him...well, not likely with him, but in a dark, dank cell. He prayed that she'd be spared the rough treatment or any abuse. But Lucius knew he wouldn't be spared. He was an escaped prisoner and confirmed Death Eater now. *At least Azkaban might toughen up Draco.*

"That's it, guys; we're taking them in," the Auror called out to his companions.

Shackles were conjured and magically used to clasp the family together.

As Lucius expected, Draco was mortified, trying to pull out of the binds, while Narcissa simply sat there, resolved and serene.

"But I didn't...I never... I had no choice," Draco said as the Portkey in the center of the shackles started to glow.

"Save it," the Auror said.

As the last known Death Eater in the castle was bound and sent to the holding cell in Azkaban by Portkey and the fighting was all over, the Healers started to collect the wounded for transport to St. Mungo's. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Gawain Robards enlisted Harry, Ron, Neville, and Seamus to aid the Aurors in rounding up the last of the Death Eaters who had escaped and to help ferret out their supporters. Kingsley had asked Hermione and Luna as well, but both girls had declined. Ginny had been outraged that she was not included, but Molly had clamped an arm around her daughter and glared warningly at Kingsley.

Hermione sat down on a broken bench and looked around. All she saw were the remnants of her life, broken and shattered all around her, pain and suffering, feeling helpless, homeless, and alone. Her mind ran through a checklist of everyone this war had affected: her friends, schoolmates, families she knew or heard about, even the helpless Muggles like her parents. She saw a house-elf trying to sweep up the rubble and rocks in the corridor. If she wasn't so exhausted, she might have walked over to help the cute little house-elf. *It is so sad the way house-elves are treated, taken for granted, ignored, or cast aside as if... as if... AS IF!*

"Hermione, are you all right?" Luna asked from beside her, but Hermione's thoughts were focused on a tragedy that had been going on under her very nose and, until now, one she'd ignored for having more urgent things to do.

She jumped to her feet and hurried down to the kitchens. The house-elves all rushed over with eager, expectant faces when she burst into the kitchens. "I want to see Winky," she said, and nearly every happy face took on a look of disappointment.

One male pointed to the place by the fireplace where something lay, covered by tea towels and a tablecloth.

Hermione removed the pile, uncovering a tipsy little house-elf. "You need to get hold of yourself! You are a disgrace to house-elves, sitting here, pitying yourself when you should be serving someone."

"I iz a d-disgraced...no onez to s-serve," Winky slurred and stammered, then hiccupped, and then looked up at her with huge watery eyes. "I-I'z a disgrac-zed houze-elves, miss."

Hermione drew her wand before she changed her mind. "I, Hermione Jane Granger, hereby charge you, Winky, with my welfare."

Winky sat upright, her eyes huge and her ears fully extended.

"Wouldn't miss want a proper house-elf?" a house-elf asked on her right.

"She *is* a proper house-elf," Hermione said as imperiously as she could muster through her exhaustion. "I charge you, your children after you, and your descendants, here, now, and ever more, to serve the House of Granger diligently and respectfully, to honor my family, and to hold my secrets for as long as your bloodline lives."

Winky tried to climb to her feet, stumbled, and then nodded, her huge eyes brimming with tears.

"Do you, Winky, accept my charge? Do you feel that the house of Granger is worthy of a house-elf?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes, miss," Winky said, clasping her hands tightly and looking at Hermione in complete disbelief.

"Are you willing to accept me as your master, to serve me, keep my secrets, and be a dutiful house-elf?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes, miss," Winky said ecstatically, trying to rise again and falling on her bum. "Winky does!"

Hermione looked around, not sure what she was supposed to do next. That was as far as she could remember from the book she'd read. She turned to look at the congregated Hogwarts elves, hoping for a clue.

"Oh, we is witnessing this, miss," a female said, her pale blue eyes brimming with tears, others beside her were openly crying with joy.

"So, is that it?" Hermione asked them. "Winky is now my house-elf."

Winky sniffed, her eyes now worried, several of the elves shook their heads. "No, miss, you has to seal its," an old male house-elf said.

"How do I seal it? That wasn't in the book," Hermione said imploringly, hoping one of them would know.

"You touches her with your wand, miss, and proclaim it," another elf said, who looked so old Hermione was uncertain of the elf's gender.

Hermione turned to Winky and placed her wand on her head. "Then you are my house-elf. I proclaim it." Instantly, a light seemed to infuse Winky and spread rapidly up Hermione's wand, along her arm, and into her body. It felt both warm and loving, as if the bond came from love, not obligation, which truly surprised her.

Winky was looking at her with such pure joy that Hermione's heart nearly broke. "Winky serves the Noble House of Granger," Winky announced with pride. The light flared and seemed to sink into every pore of Winky's and Hermione's bodies. The house-elves around the room burst into applause and ran to congratulate Winky on being once again bound to service.

"Winky," Hermione said, swallowing nervously when a hundred pairs of eyes looked up at her expectantly. "As you know, we've...I've been fighting in a war since...well, I'm not too sure where I'll be until school starts again. So, I'll call for you as soon as I am settled and know where I'll be staying. Until then, you can stay here or..." She looked around, thinking about the places she could go and wondering if they still stood. "I'll call you. You'll hear me, right, no matter where I go?"

Winky nodded. "Oh, yes, miss. Winky will hears you."

When she turned to go, both Luna and Ron were standing in the doorway, Ron looking gobsmacked and Luna smiling dreamily. "So that's how you get one?" Ron asked. "It's that easy?"

"Winky needed a purpose and a family to serve," Hermione said, sliding past him into the corridor.

"It's good that you accepted her. She was homeless and needed someone," Luna said. "Of course, having a house-elf is a responsibility, and you'll have to register her now."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, first thing. Let's find Harry."

Both Luna and Hermione accepted Harry's invitation to stay at his house. Ginny told her parents that she wanted to stay with Hermione for a while, and they accepted. Aurors Robert Manning and Roger Holman escorted the girls to Grimmauld Place. "You can see it?" Ginny asked, her brows furrowed.

"Yes," Mr. Manning said, momentarily surprised at her reaction. Then he stared at the house and turned to examine the street with a serious scowl. "The house was under the Fidelius, wasn't it? Well, we'll have to get it back under again when Mr. Potter gets here tonight." He turned to his partner. "We'll have to stay until he does." Mr. Holman nodded and staked out his position on the front step. "Well, get inside, you lot."

Ginny sucked in her breath at her first sight of the house. "Oh, my, Merlin's stars...who? Did you and...no. There's no way my lazy brother helped clean this place up this good."

Hermione laughed. "Nope, it was Kreacher. Dumbledore was right; we needed to be nice to him..."

Kreacher poked his head out from the drawing room. "Is master coming home? Can Kreacher be home now, too?"

"Yes, Kreacher, Harry is coming home, although I'm not sure when exactly," Hermione said, and his ears drooped. "I would assume that he will want you here."

Kreacher's mouth stretched into was the largest smile Hermione had ever seen on him before he vanished, assumingly to the kitchen. Hermione followed him to ask if it was all right to have Winky come stay at Grimmauld Place until she started school. Kreacher was reluctant, but after a few days, both house-elves were working alongside each other happily.

Over the next few weeks, as reported in both *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet*, many people were held under suspicion of Voldemort and Death Eaters sympathizers, which left the Ministry in shambles. Pius Thicknesse was held under suspicions of conspiracy and coercion with the Death Eaters, but was sent to St. Mungo's for treatment of residual effects from being under the Imperius Curse for so long. Marcella Brinkendorf from the Oblivator's office, Traylor Grweynewoud from the Floo Regulation office, and Hamilton Rackley from the Portkey Registration Office were among those arrested as Death Eaters, and Umbridge was arrested and charged with crimes against humanity.

As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Tiberius Ogden stepped up as interim Minister of Magic while Pius Thicknesse was under investigation and Healer care.

Although the prison guards were under strict guidelines regarding the treatment of the prisoners, Lucius received treatment from the Azkaban Healers for a busted jaw, broken wrist, bilateral ankle sprains, and a torn ligament in his shoulder. Likewise, Draco had broken ribs, two loose teeth, and both of his shoulders had been dislocated. At least Lucius didn't see Narcissa in the infirmary ward. He and Draco were both fitted with a tracing device on their wand arms that would detect any use of magic, wandless or not, and alert the guard on duty. Then they were taken to the medium security level and placed in adjacent cells. Lucius scoffed, *Medium security being that two trolls are set on guard in the corridor of the cellblock when the prison guards were elsewhere.*

For the first three weeks, any accused Death Eater who didn't have evidence of the Dark Mark on their left forearm could have their statements taken down in a manner of expediency, cross-referenced against each other and submitted to the Wizengamot as evidence. By the end of July, even those with the Dark Mark found themselves escorted to the interrogation rooms to give their confessions. Most statements were taken under the influence of Veritaserum. Secretaries were hired...that was to say anyone who graduated Hogwarts and could prove that they were not in league with Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle by way of showing their left arm for examination *and* showing proof of their blood heritage as having a Muggle parent or grandparent, sat in to take down statements using a Ministry approved, legitimate Quotes Quill. Memories were also collected for verification and reviewed by three members of the Wizengamot in a Pensieve if the accounts were questionable, but such memories could be deemed inadmissible if the memory wasn't clear enough to substantiate the accused claims.

Lucius knew that Narcissa was eager to have her confessions taken and was among the first to have her statements recorded. After a week, she was released to her own cognizance under house arrest and the confiscation of her wand for a year. The guards were none too subtle when they taunted him about how docile his wife had been and that she had been fitted with a tracing device similar to theirs, which would report any attempted magic with the Improper Use of Magic Office as if she were an adolescent again. Their taunting even implied just how much they'd miss his lovely wife.

Lucius was fuming.

Across the corridor from his cell, Paullina Avery screamed relentlessly, struggling pitifully against her shackles, cursing and cussing at Lucius where he stood near his bars. In the cell next to her, and not directly in Lucius' line of view, unless he stood at his bars as well, was Rabastan Lestrangle, who was currently sleeping on his cot, still recovering from injuries from his interrogations. In the next cell on Paullina's other side, and in full view of Lucius' cell, the werewolf within was pleading to the guards for the Wolfsbane Potion. Lucius could see the moon from his small window. Tomorrow it would be a full moon. *That is going to be quite a show*, he thought as he threw himself down on his cot.

To say that immediately after the war the Ministry of Magic as a governing body was barely able to function was a gross understatement, even though the *Daily Prophet* continually reported the opposite, saying that it was simply reorganizing and regrouping. However, Tiberius Ogden's first act as interim Minister of Magic was to evoke martial law and appoint Mafalda Hopkirk, the new Head of the Department of Law Enforcement, to oversee the MLE since all Aurors were desperately needed in the field. Gawain Robards, as Head of the Auror Department, became the Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, and Percy Weasley was appointed as Junior Administrative Assistant to the Minister and thus formed the interim head of the Ministry. Kingsley Shacklebolt was made Head of the Auror Department, and his first act was to immediately officially hire Harry, Ron, Seamus, and Neville to the Auror Department as Hit Wizards to help round up the remaining Death Eaters that had gone into hiding. Many of the Death Eaters and Voldemort's supporters started calling themselves Loyalists. Although ironically, there were some who used the word 'Loyalist' to infer that they had stayed loyal to the Ministry as well.

Harry and Ron were offered both honorary N.E.W.T.s in all their subjects and guaranteed placement in the Auror training program. Of course, the Wizarding Examinations Authority protested, but considering that the boys were credited for repeatedly standing up to Voldemort and his Death Eaters, they were overruled. Neville and Seamus were likewise offered their honorary N.E.W.T.s and credited for their role in the Dumbledore's Army during their seventh year, although they didn't finish their coursework due to having gone into hiding. The four young men were also accredited for their work as Hit Wizards over the summer hols.

Hermione had been offered honorary Outstandings in all her subjects, as well, but she had grown up in a household that valued education and learning, believing in earning what marks you received through diligent revision, research, and hard work. So she'd declined.

Draco had been eager to give testimony and have his confession recorded. However, being that he was a key witness to several other accounts and a pertinent witness in numerous other trials, he hadn't accounted for the long drawn out days it would take and the numerous nights spent in the infirmary recovering from the ordeal he'd committed to. For quite a few of the interrogations, the investigators required Draco to extract the memories for incidents in question, wanting to see it for themselves in a Pensieve. The down side was that as the memory was forcefully returned into his mind, Draco had to mentally relive the events, each one, with perfect recollection and for what seemed to be in slightly slower than real time as they settled back into his brain. He would be strapped to on a reclining chair until he was coherent again as if woken from a restless nap. Unlike in a Pensieve, the memories were seen as if out of body, second-hand, and in third person point of view perspective with practically an omniscient perception; having to see, touch, feel, smell, and hear every single aspect of the memory with perfect recollection, retention, and clarity. In many instances for Draco, the reliving of the memory was agonizing.

Each day for weeks, he gave his testimony to the two Aurors who came to speak to him. His complete memory of the night when he'd led the Death Eaters and Greyback into Hogwarts was extracted and viewed by twelve members of the Wizengamot, possibly more, before they were copied and returned to him, albeit painfully. As the long, silver thread was forced back into his head, all five hours of it, extended into what felt like eight, as every aspect of the events that had surrounded him, assaulted his senses, and pounded against his conscious. All the regrets of the act came to him, adding to the feelings of regret and guilt, making the reliving comparable to a horrible nightmare that he couldn't wake from until the end.

"Now, Mr. Malfoy, we have a list of memories we'd like to observe, beginning with the eighteenth of January, nineteen hundred ninety-six. You were accused of collaborating with Dolores Umbridge and her Inquisitorial Squad." The old witch with the long grey braid said calmly and then related the events that she expected Draco to remove for their perusal.

"Yes, ma'am," Draco said, placing the wand at his temple and drawing out the required memory. As the long, silver thread-like substance fell into the Pensieve, Draco sagged in his seat, knowing that in thirty minutes, he'd be reliving the memory again, just like all the others he'd shown the investigators.

Seamus, Neville, Harry, and Ron entered the Auror training program the same day that Hermione, Luna, and Ginny took the train together to Hogwarts. There was an air of anticipation between the girls. They hadn't seen the castle since its reconstruction, except in pictures. The renovations were supposedly incredible and new improvements had been added. Hundreds of boats were clustered on the lake on either side of the docks. Everyone, all year levels, took the boats to the castle in waves, seventh-years first, then sixth, and so on. As the boat Hermione, Ginny, and Luna were in neared the castle, Hermione felt the same awestruck wonder she'd had all those years ago during her first approach across the lake.

The castle, while still appearing very much the same, was gorgeous with its strong battlements, new towers, and turrets. The Great Hall was magnificent, not that it hadn't been before, but the carved arched buttresses that lined the walls, the huge windows, and new floor appeared fit to be in a king's castle. Even the tables, benches, and the chairs at the head table were all new or looked new. Hermione remembered reading in the *Daily Prophet* that Professor McGonagall was Headmistress now, Professor Flitwick was Deputy Headmaster, and Sturgis Podmore was introduced as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Also, all students who were in seventh year during the war, pure-bloods (and Slytherins in particular), were being required to take a proper Muggle Studies class, as well as Ethics and new History of Magic classes to receive their Hogwarts diplomas. She looked over at the Slytherin table and noticed that Draco was back at Hogwarts, as was his friend, Goyle.

The sad thing was the number of students was drastically reduced from what Hermione remembered there being, even with many of those from Hermione's year returning. All along the tables, especially at the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables, huge gaps between students showed evidence of those students who'd died in the war. Even Slytherin table had fewer students, although not as many.

Hagrid led in the first-years for sorting. The Sorting Hat congratulated the students returning, admonished the ones who had 'shied away from their duty and showed such cowardly lack of honor,' and even told the hall, as a whole, that from now on, blood would not determine his choice any longer, but placement would be determined by talents, strengths, character, and personality from now on.

The next two days, students wandered the castle, looking at all the renovations, greeting friends, and congregating in groups. Hermione was being treated with a kind of awed reverence, stared at, whispered about behind her back, and many students shied away from her. A few asked her to sign autographs. If Ginny and Luna weren't getting the same treatments, she'd have stayed hidden in the library or her dorm room.

Hermione was pleased to be sharing a room with Ginny. Besides herself, Shelia Margulies and Valerie Harness, Muggle-borns who'd had been in her dorm before the war, had returned to finish their N.E.W.T.s. Of all the girls in the room, only Kim Wong, a girl from Ginny's year, was unhappy to have returned, her parents both having been arrested and were in Azkaban. She tended to avoid Hermione and Ginny as much as she could.

Hermione and Ginny started classes the following Monday. Hermione knew that Draco Malfoy was in the castle as well, but except for meals, she didn't see him much. He was taking the new Muggle Studies from a Muggle-born, Mary Raines, the Ethics lessons, and History of Magic from renowned historian Gregory Wright (who was taking over from Professor Binns, who'd just realized the morning after the war that he had died and no longer had to teach).

However, as both Harry and Neville had written in their letters to the girls, the Ministry was in shambles.

By September, the *Daily Prophet* was once again announcing the changes happening in the Ministry of Magic. Pius Thicknesse (who had been released from the Imperius) was reinstated as the Minister of Magic, and immediately the *Daily Prophet* began a campaign to win him favor with the war ravaged public. The public response was divided between those who didn't favor Pius being reinstated, who thought he should have been arrested for being in league with Voldemort, those who were glad to have

him 'well,' and back in the office, and those who were of the mind of 'let's see how he does this time.'

The Ministry was very busy trying to repair its reputation, reorganize, restructure, and revoke all the laws set forth to segregate Muggle-borns, dispense with wartime and unnecessary committees, rout out personnel that were of what was being called the 'Death Eater' mindset, and had declared itself the New Ministry of Magic. Kingsley Shacklebolt remained Head of the Aurors, Percy was now Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, and Mr. Weasley was made Head of the new Department of Muggle Relations. But little had changed.

Prompts used:

1 The Marriage Law

5. Coping in the Aftermath

a. Many people were affected by Voldemort his followers, his victims, etc. After the war is over, how are they dealing?

After all, for people like Harry, Ginny, the trio, and especially the Malfoys, he was a huge part of their lives. How are they dealing with his demise and are there any repercussions?

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

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A Question of Good Breeding

Shelia Margulies and Valerie Harkness walked into the Great Hall and promptly joined Ginny and Hermione at the table for breakfast. "Hermione, have you heard about Healer Creswell's paper about natural magical selection?" Shelia asked as she reached for the pumpkin juice.

"Yes, I read something about it," Hermione admitted, reading her *Daily Prophet* as she ate some toast. "There was an article about it in the paper this morning. His hypothesis is that Muggle-borns are free of deformities, both magical and physical and therefore are supposedly able to produce stronger offspring. What of it?"

"Do you think it's true that Muggle-borns are 'pure of defects' and thus more favorable than those of pure blood, inbred pure-bloods for marriage?" Valerie asked, stirring her porridge absentmindedly. "It's what the article said."

Hermione looked at her, wondering what had made the girls bring up the Healer Creswell's publication. Surely, no one was taking it seriously. "It's just one wizard's opinion that he published and was republished in the Bonham-Derwent National Healers Journal."

"Well, that's not the only place it's being published," Shelia said, her expression concerned. "My dad sent this to me. It's an article by Rita Skeeter that was submitted to the *Daily Prophet* and in Ireland's *Sorcerer's Sun*. I heard that even *Witch Weekly* is going to run it."

"So, he's getting a lot of attention," Ginny said, shrugging.

"Maybe you should read this," Shelia replied, handing a parchment to Ginny. Ginny scanned it and passed it to Hermione.

Hermione read it aloud, drawing the attention of Bernice Witherspoon on her other side. "'I, Rita Skeeter, have had the extreme pleasure of being invited to the home of Healer Evenard Creswell to discuss his latest publication in the Healers monthly journal Bonham-Derwent monthly Healer's journal. As many of you are aware, Healer Creswell's ongoing study of the significance of the increase of Squibs and the surprising decrease of Magical offspring among wizard society has been causing quite a stir.' Well this is rather complimentary for Rita actually," Hermione said.

"Keep reading," Valerie said, pointing her spoon at Hermione.

Hermione shrugged and continued reading the article aloud, "Healer Creswell attributes the increase of Squibs, seen by him as a magical deformity, which he has unfavorably compared to physical deformities, and actual inbred deformities as resulting from a continual insistence of eligible aged pure-bloods marrying only other eligible pure-blood spouses. His argument is that with the decrease of true pure-blood families, the selection of eligible partners is decreasing, causing an increase of inbreeding. Healer Creswell quoted Healer Brumfeild earlier this week, stating that he agrees with Healer Brumfeild's studies regarding the increase of Muggle-borns and half-bloods, stating that it is the natural order of the universe to create a balance, that since strong, capable pure-blood offspring are decreasing, the universe is creating new-blood to offset the old-blood..."

"See, it's all about blood again," Valerie said, sounding worried. "Why is one's blood so important in the wizarding world? I mean, I could understand prejudice against someone of another religion or ethnic background...that is a real difference, but to hate someone for something that isn't their fault...it's sick."

"And hating someone or, as you say, being prejudice against a person because of their religious or ethnic background is any different?" Ginny asked, affronted by Valerie's statement.

"No, I didn't mean it that way," Valerie said defensively. "It's just that being judged by your blood is so sick."

"Prejudice against someone for something...anything...that is not of their control is the same thing, no matter what category or reason you contrive. It's still wrong," Hermione said, disappointed in the girl's opinion.

Shelia held up her hand. "Look, it's just that, they are adding new definitions and new distinctions on the old prejudices: new blood, old blood, pure-blood, half-blood. Look

at this article," she said. She pulled a copy of a journal from her bag. "He also claims that the real intent of Salazar Slytherin wasn't that only pure-blood witches and wizards should receive magical schooling...but pure-blood wizards and Muggle-borns should be segregated until such later generations have assimilated into wizarding society. Listen to this: 'It is in my opinion that Salazar Slytherin has been misquoted by the Sorting Hat for years. In a journal uncovered in the archives of one Mendleton Wenlock, all Muggle-borns should have been sorted into Hufflepuff and not his house of Slytherin. It was in Salazar Slytherin's opinion that Helga Hufflepuff, who was more wizened about the trials and confusion Muggle-borns face upon entering the wizarding world and in turning away from their Muggle lives, was better equipped for meeting the needs, proper guidance, and encouragement for those of non-magical upbringing, something Salazar Slytherin didn't have the patience for.' According to this article, it's something that the Sorting Hat actually confirmed! Therefore, we should have all been placed in Hufflepuff. 'Until significant generations had made them fully assimilated into Wizard society and its norms,' meaning our children or even our grandchildren simply because we are Muggle-born. Andie Luga said that is the reason Hufflepuff was given the entire basement for her house...the entire basement, so she'd have room, unlike Gryffindor and Ravenclaw who have towers."

Hermione reached for the journal, and Shelia handed it to her. As Hermione read the article, Ginny quoted the Sorting Hat's song from her first year and what was mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History* about the falling out between Salazar Slytherin and the other founders. Hermione pointed out the part of the article that Shelia had mentioned. "Someone is trying to reword Salazar Slytherin's statements, rewrite it to fit this theory of Healer Creswell's."

"Why?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I dunno, but I think that Valerie and Shelia are right in that we should be concerned," she said and looked up at Shelia. "If your dad sends you anything else on this, will you show it to me? I'm going to go to the library and look up the Sorting Hat's book. Each song he contrives is recorded, maybe there will be something in there."

Ginny waved Hermione off with a smile. "Don't be late for Charms."

"I won't," Hermione said, grabbing another slice of toast and hurrying off.

Draco read the *Prophet* as he tried to eat his breakfast. He sneered at the inane idiocy babble from that quack, Creswell, about pure-bloods being all inbred degenerates and that they necessarily produced deformed offspring. Wasn't he himself a pure-blood, and he wasn't deformed or magically inept. And the only reason Healer Brumfeild had half-bloods to study was because witches and wizards chose to marry Muggles and Muggle-borns and then have babies. It wasn't any natural selection of the universe at all...it was horny wizards and loose witches.

Goyle sat next to him as did Nott, but Nott was ignoring Draco. From what Draco had heard, Nott hadn't spent his summer holed up in Azkaban since he'd never taken the Mark and hadn't followed in his father's illustrious footsteps. Nott had enlisted his Great Aunt's help to get an apprenticeship in Greece on Dark Enchantments last year.

Since all the Slytherins who would have graduated the previous year were denied receiving their N.E.W.T. scores until they could show proof of completion of a 'proper' Muggle Studies course, Slytherin House was more crowded than normal...or so it seemed. Draco hated that he was required to receive a N.E.W.T. in Muggle Studies in order to receive the N.E.W.T.s he'd already earned...it was like being punished for being a pure-blood.

The students in Draco's year, the hold-backs as they were being called, were being housed in two old unused rooms across the corridor from the common room, one for the boys and one for the girls. Not that the professors hadn't made it feel homey by putting tapestries on the walls and carpets on the floor, it wasn't exactly the same as being in his old dorm. But the housemates of his year didn't want to share space with the students they considered a year below them, so the alternate living space had been created as the solution. It was only for one year anyway. That wasn't the only punishment opposed upon the Slytherins...well, for all the returning hold-backs of Hogwarts.

Well, that wasn't accurate; everyone who attended school last year was required to take the new Muggle Studies class *Everyone* who was not a Muggle-born that is, and since many of the Death Eaters had been in Slytherin, all Slytherins and any child who was related to a Death Eater were required to take an Ethics class and the new History of Magic. At least a respected pure-blood historian of some repute was teaching the History of Magic class.

He turned the page to see the Quidditch scores.

Goyle leaned over, trying to see the page. "What's it sayin' about Brenda?" he asked.

Draco sighed. He knew that the Holyhead Harpies were Goyle's favorite Quidditch team, only because they were all girls. He told him the score and promised to give him the page with the picture of Brenda Paulino, the Harpies' Seeker, when he was through with it.

Goyle looked at him, confused. "So when will that be?" he asked.

"Tonight, okay?" Draco said, turning the page in disgust. Goyle was just so thick. Maybe natural selection was an argument in his case.

It was several weeks before Hermione bumped into Draco in the corridors. She was leaving Potions, having stayed back to talk to Byran Pendergast, the new Potions professor who had taken over for Professor Slughorn. He was a stern professor, demanding and exacting, expecting the students of all years to work quietly, diligently, and precisely. But unlike Slughorn he didn't show favorites, and unlike Snape he was more even tempered, although he rarely smiled or allowed joviality in his classroom. As seventh- and eighth-years, they were brewing month-long potions as well as their daily potions, and if the potions were of an acceptable quality for either Madam Pomfrey use or the Healers at St. Mungo's, then the student brewing them was given house points.

Hermione had been held back in class so that Professor Pendergast could tell her that once again, her potion was of acceptable quality to earn her house seventy-two points, one point for each Sickle her potion gained the school.

"So what are you doing down here?" a seventh-year Slytherin sneered as Hermione stopped to adjust her books in her bag.

"Potions has been over...you're snooping around the dungeons, aren't you?" his friend sneered.

Hermione stood and squared her shoulders. "Oh, lay off," she said, trying to walk around them.

"You're in our territory, so, no," the first Slytherin said.

"Oi, Benders, what do you think you're doing?" Hermione heard Draco say from behind her.

Hermione turned her back to the wall so that she was able to see all four of them, wondering how she was going to get out of this one, and hoping that Professor Pendergast would come out.

"Yeah, whatch ya think you're doing," Goyle said, cracking his knuckles and glaring at Hermione and Benders. Goyle had grown into a large guy with broad shoulders, a bit of a gut, and a few scars from the war. In other words, he had grown from looking like a trollish bully into rather an intimidating guy.

"I was..." she started to say, but Draco cut her off. "Not you, Granger, him."

"Standing up for mud, are we, Malfoy?" the second seventh-year sneered. "Just because you got off clean and are now an *eight*-year don't make you better than us, 'cus it don't."

"You know what Professor Wright said, we have to watch ourselves. Everyone is watching Slytherin to see if we are going to retaliate," Draco said, walking over to

Hermione. "And you cannot just accost the Gryffindor princess without repercussions and you know that."

Hermione bristled at his comment and was about to retort, but Draco cut her off again as Goyle rubbed his knuckles while smirking in a menacing way. "I'll deal with her. That way you don't sully your hands. Now split before you get caught." He grasped her arm and pulled her with him as he turned to go.

Hermione tried, unsuccessfully, to jerk her arm free. "Let go of me," she snarled.

"Hush," Draco hissed, trying to silence her. "Play it my way for a bit, please."

It was the please that made her stop struggling.

As they turned a corner, he let go of her arm.

She watched as Goyle stopped, looked behind him, and nodded before turning the corner as well. His face was calm and impassive, the cruel smirk gone, as if he'd dropped the use of a mask. "Draco, what was that all about?" she asked, confused by their behavior.

"You and your friends' actions in the Ministry last year caused Bender's dad to end up in Azkaban. He wants to get even...look, don't be down here alone, all right. It's the same for Weasley and Lovegood, you girls are not safe down here. There are a few who'd like to send you to the long-term residents' wing of the Spell Damage ward."

"So, why are you telling me this, Draco?" she asked suspiciously.

Goyle looked at toe of his boot as Draco smirked. "You and Potter saved my...our lives," Draco said and Goyle nodded. "I don't expect you to understand, but in Azkaban they made us... Well, I had time to think, to reflect, and reevaluate things, and I might have been wrong about a few things. Is that good enough for you?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but he seemed sincere. He was only giving her warning about the attitudes of the others, and she realized she should take him seriously. "All, right, I'll be careful. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Goyle said and Draco nodded. Draco turned around to go, but Goyle remained, looking at Hermione expectantly. Draco stopped and crossed his arms, shaking his head, no.

"Did you want something, Goyle?" Hermione asked a bit curter than she meant to. He turned his head as he inhaled sharply, and she could see that he'd wanted to ask her something and was now feeling hurt. "Goyle, I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. What did you want to ask me?"

Goyle looked at her as if deciding if he still wanted to. He slowly uncrossed his arms, letting his hands fall to his sides. "You're a Muggle-born."

"Yes, well spotted," Hermione said, her mind racing over what he'd meant by that. It hit her and nearly made her laugh. "You want to ask me about something you heard in Muggle Studies, don't you?"

Goyle's gaze swept the corridor and back to her face, obviously expecting her to reject the idea. "Yeah. And not just me, but if you don't want to..."

"If you and Malfoy want to meet me in the library once a week, sure, I'll answer questions about Muggle stuff," she offered, pleased to see a look of relief on Goyle's face and a slight smile on Draco's. She suddenly realized that they might ask questions of things she didn't know about, not knowing what the new Muggle Studies professor might cover in lessons. "At least I'll try to answer questions; you might learn stuff I don't know."

A side of Goyle's mouth pursed as if he wasn't happy with the offer.

She tilted her head and wondered... "What?"

Goyle blushed slightly. "We have a test today and I was hopin' you'd...can you explain Muggle money? I got the pound one, I think, and a shilling is like a Sickle, right? But I get confused on a penny and a pence and a half one. Which one is like a Knut?"

Hermione smiled. "Do you have some time after lunch? If you eat quickly, we can go over it then."

"Yeah," Goyle said, smiling and looking relieved. "I'll see you then. Thanks."

"Yeah, thank you, Granger," Draco said, also looking relieved.

"No problem, I'll see you at lunch," she said, hurrying for the stairs.

By October, the articles in the *Daily Prophet* and the *Sorcerer's Sun* reported on redevelopment or new businesses opening, but the financial pages showed a decrease in the number of trading scales and Galleon bonds or the silver shares. Unemployment had risen, even though the *Daily Prophet* ran advertisements for job openings, but the pay offered was dismal. Nevertheless, as the month progressed, it seemed that the *Daily Prophet* more and more kept reassuring its readers that things were fine, the Ministry was strong, and that people were prospering, whereas the Ireland's *Sorcerer's Sun* did not paint such a rosy picture.

The truth was that the economic recovery after the war was varied depending on locations. Even *The Quibbler* printed articles on how to transfigure things like leaves into bread and how to charm milk into cheese. Tildon Toot's gardening tips for planter, bathtub, and window box vegetable gardens were regular features in all the papers and on the wireless. Euell Theophilus Gibbons, who'd moved to Hideburg Vale in Wales in December of 1975, was giving tips on edible plants, both the magical ones and mundane in *The Quibbler* and how to locate and harvest wild edibles and potion ingredients. Guidelines on how to keep a coop of chickens and rabbits in a spare room was published in *Witch Weekly*. And Walker Firestone published home distilling techniques for brewing beer in the *Witches Home Journal*. On the wireless, 'How to with Tilly Twoheys,' a call in help show that offered 'how to make it yourself' advise, had really gained popularity.

Wales was hit fairly hard in certain areas, but their economic recovery showed a level of stability and high economic growth. Scotland rebounded well after the war, many of the businesses and farms doubled in productions and growth. Ireland had been lucky and rebounded quite quickly, and enjoyed rapid economic growth and the establishment of a wizard shopping center that was even more prosperous than Diagon Alley. But in England, London, Manchester, Devon and many of the ports were hit hard by the after effects of the war. Diagon Alley was slow to recover, although Hogsmeade, Grandiliers Way, and the Promenade Lane were able to rebuild and recover more quickly, but there were still many advertisements for premises to rent for small businesses.

The attempted eradication of Muggle-borns and their families had a devastating effect on the wizarding world. Thousands of the Muggle-borns, half-bloods, and sympathizers who were prisoners of war that had been sent to Azkaban were greatly traumatized, suffered malnutrition and illnesses, and many had been cursed or hexed so badly they had never recovered. Nearly a third had died in their cells, and hundreds of the suffering had been given the Dementor's kiss prior to the battle at Hogwarts.

The War Crimes Trials were in the papers constantly.

Ireland's *Sorcerer's Sun* was starting to become a popular paper throughout the United Kingdom wizarding world as being a truly fact-based, unbiased publication, as opposed to the *Daily Prophet* that was now considered as the Ministry's publication and had lost much credibility with the general public.

Inside the castle the seventh- and eighth-years were struggling to keep up with all the work heaped on them by the professors in preparations for their N.E.W.T.s as were all the fifth-years for their O.W.L.s. It seemed that in every subject throughout the castle, every professor was trying to ensure that the graduating class of 1999 would earn

nothing less than Exceeds in every subject. Shelia and Valerie shared their papers with Hermione in the common room or at breakfast, Sheila her *Sorcerer's Sun* and Valerie her *Witch Weekly* and *Teen Witch*. Hermione still received the *Daily Prophet*, and Luna happily gave her a subscription to *The Quibbler* as a belated birthday present.

That and now Hermione's little discussion group with Draco and Greg had become larger with the inclusion of a few more of Draco's friends and some other students who had heard about it and wanted to be part of the discussion group. As the month progressed and things got too big and too loud for the library, Hermione insisted that they all meet in an old classroom on the seventh floor. She eventually invited a few of the Muggle-borns she knew to come help by sitting in small groups with those who had to take the class over.

By mid month, shy Bernice Witherspoon walked up to the girls over by the fireplace. Hermione, Ginny, and Shelia, who were lounging on the sofa in front of the fireplace, looked up at her as Valerie sat on the floor at the coffee table in front of them, determined to finish an essay before bedtime. "Did you see, I'm sorry, but..."

They all looked up at her and Bernice blushed. "What's up?" Ginny asked.

Bernice looked away, scuffed her toe and handed Hermione a *Witches Home Journal*. "I know that you, er, that is that you all have every other publication," she stammered uncomfortably. "But you, that is, that me and my mum, we read this. And there is an article about the Cannons. Did you see it?"

Hermione shook her head as Ginny urged her to open to page thirty-four. Ginny let out a startled exclamation as she read the headline. "They are to be disbanded!"

"NO!" Valerie exclaimed in shock, trying to see the article. Ginny started to outline the first paragraph. "If they don't get more funds or sponsors... They've lost sponsorship? The team will be disbanded! Ron will be crushed!"

"A Quidditch team disbanded?" Shelia asked. "It wasn't in the *Sun!*"

"Nor any of the others," Hermione said.

Bernice worried her thumb. "Gwendolyn Dorkins is the wife of the manager, and she's a journalist for the magazine," Bernice said.

Hermione scooted over to let Bernice sit down on the sofa but she sat on the arm instead. "How did you know that?"

"She's an old dorm mate of my mum's," Bernice said. "Anyway, I thought that since you're following everything, maybe I can lend you my magazines once and a while?"

Both Ginny and Hermione smiled at her as Shelia and Valerie continued to read the article together. "Yeah, you can join us anytime," Hermione offered, making the shy girl beam with delight.

Only a week later, the *Sorcerer's Sun* and the *Daily Prophet* both announced the creation of the Muggle-born Protection Act.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

The Ministry Strikes

The weather in November was the usual cloudy with a light drizzle that wasn't heavy enough to deter Quidditch practices nor keep the students from venturing outside, especially when patches of bright blue broke through the grey. However on Monday, the clouds dissipated, and a clear, crisp morning could be seen from the windows of the castle and on the ceiling of the Great Hall. Hermione laughed at Ginny as she bemoaned being stuck in the dungeons for a double Potions lesson on such a beautiful morning. "Why on Merlin's green Earth didn't I take Care of Magical Creatures instead of Potions? I'd be outside enjoying this," she said, holding up her hand to the gorgeous sky filling the Hall.

"Because you know what types of Creatures Professor Hagrid considers appropriate for third-years," Hermione said with a chuckle, "and we both knew after O.W.L.s that if Hagrid thought Hippogriffs and Blast-ended Skrewts...well, can you imagine what he'd think would be appropriate for a seventh-year!"

"I shudder to think," Ginny said, grimacing at the thought. "Let's see, Hagrid basically introduced us to Hippogriffs his first year of teaching, and he sent Harry and Ron into the forest to face Acromantulas, but that was before he started teach. So that doesn't count, does it? He did take Harry to see dragons his fourth year...okay, not directly, but he did introduce you, Harry, and my brother to a giant your fifth year, and to centaurs..."

"See, Hagrid uses the Ministry of Magic's classification system to determine what is appropriate for each year level: one X for first-years, two X's for second, three X's for third-year, and so on," Hermione teased, nudging Ginny in the shoulder. "You know that!"

"Oh, my gods! If that's the case, you'd be studying five X creatures in fifth-year!" Sheila gasped. "What classification are Blast-Ended Skrewts, do you suppose?"

"At least a four!" Ginny stated.

"Just think, the Ministry doesn't have a six X or seven X category!" Bernice exclaimed softly, making all the girls laugh.

When they entered the Entrance Hall, Hermione spotted Draco and Goyle walking with a few of the other Slytherins. Draco looked up and nodded in her direction in greeting. Goyle lifted his hand, then quickly looked away. Hermione smiled, laughing to herself at how much that gesture meant considering that only a few months ago, he'd have glared at her and crunched his knuckles menacingly.

At the Gryffindor table, Shelia and Valerie sat across from Bernice, Hermione, and Ginny, still joking about which creatures or monsters Hagrid might have requested from the Headmistress. "Graphorns...they aren' all tha' bad, or a Quintaped! Can I hav' one of them? They're nice fuzzy creatures! Greatly misunderstood beasts, used to be people, see," Ginny said, doing her best Hagrid imitation.

"Personally, I'll stick with my crup, puffskeins, and my moke, and leave it at that," Valerie said, reaching for the eggs.

When the mail owls arrived, Hermione and Shelia both received their *Daily Prophets*, Hermione her *Quibbler*, and Shelia her *Sorcerer's Sun* as Valerie unwrapped her *Witch Weekly*.

Hermione unfurled her *Daily Prophet* and read the article on the front page that announced Charles Polister as Dolores Umbridge's replacement in the Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, which was now being called the Head of the Muggle-born Liaison Commission. "Oh, my gosh, are you reading this?" she asked, looking up at Shelia.

Shelia nodded, her eyes huge as she read the article in her own copy of the paper. "Does this mean that the lists of Muggle-borns that the war-time Registration Committee comprised were not destroyed?" she asked.

"It seems so, or why make such an announcement that the office was reopened under a new title?" Hermione asked, then read a bit of the article aloud, "... but used to enact new programs designed to assist Muggle-borns. The first legislative act by Barbara Sterling, newly appointed head of the Political Correctness Committee was announced last Friday... I don't remember seeing anything about that in last Friday's paper."

Shelia picked up the *Sun*. "Yes, here it is, '... in the *Daily Prophet* the first week of October, the New Ministry of Magic's newspaper...' They reiterate the same thing; Charles Polister is the Head of the new Muggle-born Liaison Commission, which is replacing Dolores Umbridge's Muggle-born Registration Commission. 'This was followed by the announcement of the Muggle-born Protection Act,'" she read, looked up, and handed the paper over to Hermione. "Here, you better read this."

Hermione read the article and the supplementary article on the next page that described the Muggle-born Liaison Commission and the Muggle-born Protection Act that on the surface read like the Ministry was trying to guarantee equal rights to Muggle-borns and non-discriminatory practices regarding one's heritage. "Sounds like a type of affirmative action to ensure equality."

"But why?" Ginny asked. "There are loads of Muggle-borns and half-bloods working in the Ministry. The Ministry has always had fair hiring practices, well, not last year, mind, but normally."

"It's like a big swing of a pendulum, Ginny," Hermione said, reading the interview with Barbara Sterling about the plans and goals of the Political Correctness Committee. "From one extreme to another. You know after Fudge's denial that You-Know-Who returned, and Umbridge's taking over Hogwarts, this is just the swing in the opposite direction."

"If that's the case...I hate to think how far the pendulum might go," Shelia said, putting down the *Sun* to eat a sausage.

The four other girls all looked at Shelia, and then Shelia, Valerie, and Bernice turned to look at Hermione. "If that's the case, Merlin help us!" Valerie said as Ginny, who had been looking at Professor McGonagall, turned to look at Hermione too.

"I agree completely, Valerie. Merlin help us. Because who knows if any of our professors are capable of taking on the Ministry when even Dumbledore hadn't been able to."

Hermione nearly choked on her pumpkin juice. "Oh, my...no."

Over at the Slytherin table, the Slytherins were opening up their copies of the *Daily Prophet*. Almost immediately, their outcries and sneering could be heard from across the room.

"No way!"

"Dragon's dung!"

"They got it anyway! Why do this?"

"As if those blighters needed protection...they won, for an augury's wail!"

"Bugger! That's barmy!"

"What in Merlin's name do they need protection for?"

"Precious Mudblood tarts, all of them!"

Draco read the article carefully, reading between the lines just as his father had always encouraged him to do.

Goyle's hands dropped to the table, making his paper bend just in front of his plate. "I don't get it. What's the Registration Liaison Commission thing supposed to do? I thought that the Ministry was full of Mudbloods now," he said with disdain.

Draco silently scoffed at Goyle. "You didn't get it?" he asked.

Goyle's eyebrows rose and he looked dumbfounded. Well, more than the usual. "Well, some of it, yeah...but not all of it."

Draco set his paper down, turning to face him, noting that a few of the others at the table were either blatantly listening or slyly trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. *Well, that's fine...let them.* "You do remember all the laws and regulations that Dolores Umbridge passed as Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, right? The Muggle-born and Heritage Registration Regulations... the lists of Undesirables and blood-traitors that she had compiled... the list she used to arrest Muggle-borns and those with Muggle blood, remember? Well, apparently this Charles Polister has reopened her office doors only this time calling it the Muggle-born Liaison Commission, to enact new programs designed to assist Muggle-borns."

"So, this Charles Polister is Dolores Umbridge's replacement in the Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, right?" Benders asked, and Draco exhaled a snort in derision.

"Possibly. Yes, it would appear so. Only they are calling it the Muggle-born Liaison Commission so that it sounds nicer and more politically forward with the times," Draco said, smirking.

"So, that means that the Commissions list of Muggle-borns was not destroyed," Goyle said, finally cottoning on.

"That's my guess, yes," Draco said. Ripples of what was just said rolled down the table as the other Slytherins passed on the information of Draco's assessment of the *Daily Prophet's* announcement. Draco smirked as he turned his attention back to his paper. It reminded him of the owl game that was popular among kids when he was growing up. One person made up a fact and whispered to the person sitting next to him, and then they told it to the person on their other side, and so on. The goal was to see if the original message would come out the same. If the circle contained Slytherins, it generally did, or remained fairly close to the original statement; if there were Hufflepuffs or Gryffindors in the circle, it didn't. It amused him to think that was what was happening right now, the owl game, and he'd started the fact being passed. It made Draco laugh softly.

"What's so funny?" Goyle asked.

Draco leaned over and whispered his comparison to Goyle, who chuckled himself. "Astoria is down there, I'll ask her later and see if it's changed," Goyle suggested.

"Nah, I want to," Draco said and smiled when Goyle looked put out. "But you can come, too, and hear what she says."

That made him smile. Draco smirked at how easy it was to manipulate Goyle's expressions and feelings. He really should stop doing it, manipulating his friend like that, but old habits were hard to break. He turned back to his paper and nearly spewed his pumpkin juice all over the page.

"What is it now?" Goyle asked, setting down his fork.

Draco read bits of the article to him, "'The first legislative act by Barbara Sterling, newly appointed Head of the Political Correctness Committee ... the Muggle-born Protection Act...to guarantee equal rights and non-discriminatory practices to all Muggle-borns'...oh, as if they didn't have them now anyway!"

"Wha' is that for? They got all the rights already, don't they?" Goyle asked.

Once again, Benders and his friends became quiet as Benders tried to listen.

"It means that the Ministry is going to make laws that are aimed at us...the pure-bloods...and to make us, and those who were Loyalists, toe some kind of line. This Barbara Sterling, she might turn out to be another Umbridge, only one that favors Muggle-borns rather than pure-bloods. That's what."

Once again, the whispers and murmurs rippled down the length of the Slytherin table going in both directions from where Draco sat.

In his cell, Lucius received a letter from Draco along with three copies of the *Daily Prophet*. There were small, nearly indiscernible marks on the paper next to several of the articles, as well as a few smears that appeared to be little more than finger smudges. Unless one knew what the smudges meant between father and son. There were also perforations on the margins, as if Draco had been tapping the paper with his quill when he'd been reading it, that was, in fact, a message in code. Old Morrison's code in fact, something Severus Snape had taught Lucius, and he'd passed on to Draco. The code came in quite handy over the years, allowing father and son to pass information without the Azkaban guards knowing about it.

Unfortunately, Lucius had no sharp object to use to answer his son back. He was observed by a guard whenever he wanted to write anything to anyone, and the guards hated the tapping noise when he marked his letter with similar perforations. As it was, all his post was opened and inspected, and then given to him opened, just so he'd know he had no privacy.

As the troll passed and walked to the far end of the cellblock, Rabastan hissed from across the corridor. "What's Draco got to say?" he whispered loudly enough for Lucius to hear.

Lucius wondered if Paulina was awake. The werewolf wasn't; he could hear the beast snoring. He wondered if he dare try the Ventriloquist Charm with the tracing bands on his wrist and decided to chance it. The troll was on guard, and not an Auror. He just needed to place his fingers to his throat to activate the spell, then concentrate his wandless ability there in his vocal cords. It was harder to do it this way. Lucius and Severus had succeeded learning the spell, both with a wand concealed in a sleeve or wandless, so they could whisper to each other in Death Eater gatherings, but it was much easier to do with a wand.

'Dolores Umbridge was replaced by a Charles Polister. The Muggle-born Registration Commission is now called the Muggle-born Liaison Commission. Barbara Sterling is under Polister as the Head of the Political Correctness Committee, which has enacted the Muggle-born Protection Act. Mostly, to ensure fair treatment of those with Muggle parentage,' he sent his voice across to Rab. Lucius waited to see what might happen, if his tracing device would activate somehow. The device vibrated somewhat painfully the whole time, but so far, that seemed to be all.

"I know this Barbara Sterling...she's a piece of work, that one," Rab hissed back.

After several seconds, Lucius tried again, reading a few lines from the *Daily Prophet*. It was risky, but worth the effort. Doing the spell this way for so long without a wand would give him a pounding migraine. After reading only six parts of the paper, his throat became too scratchy and his head began to throb, so he had to stop.

"Thanks, mate," Rab hissed.

"You're welcome," Lucius tried to whisper back, but his vocal cords were strained so that his voice was only a scratchy, throaty whisper, barely audible even to himself. He walked back to his cot and lay down, covered his eyes with his arm, and tried to shut out all the sounds around him. His head hurt, so he knew he'd not find sleep easily, and there was no point asking the troll to get him a Headache Potion.

Hermione walked down to the Great Hall for breakfast with Ginny and Shelia, talking animatedly about the upcoming game between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. As the owls flew in, Hermione noticed that a large number of them were carrying rolled up newspapers in their talons. She herself was now subscribing to both the *Daily Prophet* and the *Sorcerer's Sun*, and she was still receiving Luna's gift subscription of *The Quibbler*. Hermione chose to open the *Sun* first this morning and nearly gagged on her pumpkin juice as she read what was on the second page.

Political Correctness Committee of the Muggle-born Liaison Commission introduces

the Compliance of Bias and Sensitivity Guidelines

In a bold move forward in assuring a cooperative environment for everyone, the Political Correctness Committee of the Muggle-born Liaison Commission passed the necessary legislation for reinitiating the Ministry's use of the Word Association Tracking Charm on the word Mudblood this last Monday. This is to ensure that the negative feelings associated with the term will no longer be tolerated as it is offensive to individuals with Muggle parentage, grand-parentage or great-grand-parentage. As of today, any and all individuals who utilize this vulgar word will receive a warning as to the illegality of its usage. Further usage of the word will result in a fine of three Galleons per offense, and continual usage may result in detainment in the Azkaban Detention Facility. The goal of the Political Correctness Committee is the alteration of language to redress real or alleged injustices and discrimination or to avoid or to bring unconscious biases into awareness, allowing us to make a more informed choice about our language and making us aware of things different people might find offensive. The Ministry of Magic is now issuing a standard of "equalization" ensuring that everyone is being fair by being sensitive to specific ethnic, cultural, and other differences. Please contact the Wizengamot Administration Services if you'd like to receive the *Compliance of Bias and Sensitivity Guidelines* as set forth by the committee.

She quickly set down the *Sun* and unfurled the *Daily Prophet*, which carried the article as well, but unlike the *Sun*, the *Prophet* made the reactivation of the Word Association Tracking Charm seem totally benign and didn't mention anything about the fines or possible arrest for saying Mudblood, Death Eater, or Dark Lord. The article continued on page four.

On page four was another article that made Hermione's blood run cold. Hermione picked up the *Sun* to see if they carried a version of the article. The article in the *Sun* explained it far more bluntly and directly than the version in the *Prophet* and once again had information that the *Prophet* didn't report.

The Muggle-born Liaison Commission Tightens Enforcement of the Muggle-born Protection Act

The Ministry of Magic has implemented an interdisciplinary Program Against Muggle baiting, Muggle-born slander and any prejudicial or acts of hate against anyone half-blood or less. Individuals who commit such offences of Muggle-born slander or any unlawful act against a Muggle or Muggle-born will receive a three Galleon fine for each offense. Further offense will result in a fine of twenty Galleons per offense, and continual participation may result in detainment in the Azkaban Detention Facility.

Hermione finished reading the articles in the *Sorcerer's Sun* as she ate her breakfast. According to Warren Brent, special correspondent for the *Sun*, the Ministry's attempts at creating a viable Muggle Protection Act was causing more problems in the Ministry and in the magical community than the original intent was meant to solve. Hermione was not the least bit surprised.

She set her paper down, and Ginny looked up at her expectantly having read the articles in the *Prophet*. Hermione handed Ginny her copy of the *Sun*, pointing out the three articles she should read first, and then picked up her copy of *The Quibbler*. From nearly every table in the Great Hall, there were murmurs and angry retorts from the students and professors as they all read up on the Ministry's newest changes of policy and law.

Three weeks later, the girls all sat in their favorite chairs by the fire Saturday morning, discussing the current events going on outside the castle walls. Hermione sat on the end of the sofa, one leg curled up under her as Shelia grumbled about the latest fiasco the Muggle-born Liaison Commission contrived. "Oh, and the Muggle-born Big Wizard... Adopt A Grandparent Program! That was another brilliant idea. I thought that it was supposed to give Muggle parents of magical children a witch or wizard they could turn to for answers, help, and babysitting. But nooo! Somewhere in the process of 'fine tuning the details,' the adopted part was turned around, allowing the grandparent or the 'Big Wizard' to take the kids for adoption instead."

"I thought that program was shelved for further review," Ginny said, curled up at the other end of the sofa and sipping on a mug of hot cocoa.

"But the Muggle families of magical children are still being assigned a magical grandparent, much to the child's parents' confusion," Hermione argued. "It hasn't stopped the program at all... only the adoptions. According to the *Sun*, the adoptions are all pending the review of the Wizengamot as to what would be in the child's best interest."

"What does the *Prophet* say?" Bernice asked from the floor between Valerie's and Hermione's knees. She was still finishing up her Charms essay at the coffee table.

"That the program is a huge success!" Hermione said in a huff. "Of course!"

"NO!" Bernice and Ginny both exclaimed in unison.

"Yes!" Hermione exclaimed sarcastically. She sipped her hot cocoa, then looked up to explain. "They say that the Muggle-born Adopt A Grandparent Program works! There was nothing about the adopted part being turned around to allowing the childless couples to be able to adopt the children from their natural families. Since most Muggles didn't know about the Ministry, they didn't know how to find the Ministry or the Wizengamot... the parents had no legal recourse... because they didn't show up for the case hearings! Or if they did know, they were not informed about the hearings in a timely manner, so they didn't show up for the hearings and therefore lost their cases."

"And the Ministry supports the program! So I bet the families are Oblivated or something," Ginny sneered. "I bet Dad's having a fit, although he hasn't said anything yet."

Valerie turned around to look at Hermione. "That's an outrage. How do they find these grandparents and wizarding families?"

"So, what's being done about it?" Bernice asked, holding her mug of tea tightly in her hands and staring into the golden brown liquid. "Don't the parents report the adoptions to the authorities? I'd think they'd do something about it?"

"A letter champagne, mostly," Shelia snorted and sighed heavily. "Thanks to my father's connections, Hermione and I got a hold of the proposal, and with Luna's help, we submitted the articles to *The Quibbler*. My father sent a copy of it to a reporter for Ireland's *Sorcerer's Sun*, and they will run it as well. So for now, we've been able to help expose the fraudulent intent of the program and it was shelved for further review."

"Won't your dad get into trouble sending articles to the other papers?" Ginny asked, over the rim of her mug.

"Well, yes, but both Xeno Lovegood, of *The Quibbler*, and Kieran Rooney, editor in chief of the *Sorcerer's Sun*, have offered my dad a place on their staff. If things go bad, Dad will go work for the *Sun*."

"That's too bad," Hermione uttered and then placed her hand on Shelia's knee when she glared at her. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean... No, what I meant is that with your dad on staff at the *Prophet*, he's getting a lot of this first hand... even if he has to change the facts around to appease his editor. I hope he doesn't lose his job."

"Sorry, I'm really edgy right now," Shelia said in way of apology.

"I bet. I'd be worried, too, if my father's job depended on appeasing the Ministry of Magic right now," Hermione said with a smile. "Don't worry, I'm sure your dad is capable of doing both, and if it helps any, have him send stuff to you and you and I will write it up for *The Quibbler*. Luna already told me that her dad is more than happy to print our articles for us. He even offered us pin money."

Down in the dungeons, in the Slytherin common room several of the guys lounged around the fire and laughed about the latest development in the *Daily Prophet*. Aaron Danes had received his copy of the *Sorcerer's Sun* and had read it aloud to the guffs and chuckles of his housemates. Seventh-years Aaron Danes, Charles Harper, Thomas Knightly, and Cecil Benders had joined Draco, Goyle, Adam Davis, and Blaise Zabini for drinks of Ogden's spiced pumpkin juice in brandy sniffers, the Ogden's having been smuggled in by Knightly for his birthday.

"Can you believe this nonsense, families wanting the Mudbloods?" Danes said over the top of his weekend edition of the *Sun*.

"Careful, mate, you'll be fined for saying that," Harper warned him, holding his sniffer casually in his hand on the armrest of his chair.

"Well, since we can't drown the brats... might as well bring them up properly," Blaise scoffed and took a sip of his spiked juice.

Davis chuckled as he watched the juice swirl in his glass. "But to have to raise them as your own kids... really, whoever these grandparents are... they must be desperate."

"I know the Kinleys are; they have three of them now," Knightly said, turning away from the girls to look at his dorm mate. "Mrs. Kinley can't have any so this was the only way for them to have kids."

"It's not the same, in my book," Harper said, his jaw set tightly so that a tick showed in his cheek. "Besides, who's to say that they are going to grow up knowing what they are supposed to, eh? None of the right families are stooping so low."

"What is the world coming to when your blood is no good unless you are tainted with dirty blood?" Goyle said, cracking his knuckles of his right hand and took a drink of his juice.

"Cheers to that, mate," Blaise said, raising his glass and then taking a drink.

Benders scowled as he pointed two fingers of his hand at Harper. "I tell you one thing, I ain't worried about no Tracing Tracking Charm neither, telling me what I can and can't say," he said defiantly.

"You should be. Dregden's father was carted off to Azkaban," Danes warned him, looking up to watch appreciatively as Daphne walked across the common room.

"Well, I ain't worried," Benders sneered, his attention half on Daphne as she approached a ring of girls not far away. "They have to prove it first."

"Don't need any proof, it's a tracing spell, just like saying the Dar-k," Draco caught himself in time, or so he secretly hoped. "You know *Him*. He used the same spell on his name last year. It works, believe me."

"My brother was released last month...finally cleared his name and now he's back in Azkaban for calling a girl a Mud...you know, whore," Knightly said, catching his slip and sneering as he changed the insult to whore.

"So get this," Danes said, drawing everyone's attention. "'The Emancipation Commission for Fair Marriage Contracts, provides for a couple in which one applicant is of legal age of seventeen to marry without parental permission. This will allow witches, age sixteen, who are pregnant or who want to get married and have a child, to get married without parental consent or interference, although any union arranged with an underage witch, a person sixteen years of age or less, will require court approval of the Wizengamot under the Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act. Any and all pure-blood witches and wizards applying for a marriage license will have to provide significant proof that the marriage partners do not belong to the same descent group.'"

"Shite," Draco said, reaching for the paper. "Give me that!" He couldn't believe that he'd missed that article. "That wasn't in the *Prophet*." He was certain of it; he'd read the paper thoroughly.

Danes handed him the *Sun* with a smirk. "I suppose the *Prophet* isn't reporting all the facts."

"What a shocker," Knightly said. "Even that rag, *The Quibbler*, is printing stuff the *Prophet* isn't."

"What are they doin'?" Benders sneered.

Draco finished reading the article aloud.

"Damn," Goyle said as Benders snarled, "Before you know it, this Muggle Registration Liaison Commission will be tellin' us who we should be marryin'! It's an outrage!"

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Things Progress Forward...

Hermione rose late, dressed, and packed her bag with the items that she'd need for the day. Across the Room, Ginny's and Valerie's beds were empty, and Bernice sat crossed-legs on hers, drafting a letter. "Want to go down to breakfast with me?" Hermione asked.

"Sure!" Bernice responded, quickly adding a last bit to her letter. "Shelia's in the showers and said she'd come down after. I just wanted to finish this..."

"I can wait until you are through," Hermione suggested, pointing at the letter.

Bernice didn't look up as she scribbled away. "Nah, almost... there. Done. It's to my mum, telling her not to worry about the stuff in the *Sun*. We get it now ever since my fourth year because mum wants to know what is really happening, and the *Prophet* doesn't always tell the truth. Look what they said about Harry...and you... Well, you know," she said as she folded it up and tucked it into her pocket.

Hermione laughed as she picked up her bag. "Yeah, I do know."

Bernice blushed. "I never thought that you and I...you're so nice. I always looked up to you, but you were always with Harry Potter."

"Harry is just a regular guy, you know," Hermione pointed out, and Bernice's eyes went huge.

"Potter...the Harry Potter! Are you kidding! He's Harry Potter! The one who killed You-Know-Who!"

"And my best friend," Hermione said, laughing at Bernice's apparent hero worship of her best mate. "He really is just an average guy...the same guy who played Seeker for the house team and hated writing his essays. If you like, you can come visit us over Christmas. We're all getting together for a weekend. I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

Hermione didn't think it was possible that her eyes could get any bigger, but Bernice's suddenly did. "Visits...like in visit...at his house? You live with him, right? Ginny said that...can I...I mean, may I?"

Hermione burst out laughing. "On one condition."

"Name it," Bernice said shyly, her anxious anticipation coming out clearly in her nervous tone.

"You have to actually talk to him. No staring at him from across the room, okay?" Hermione said. "Besides, you'll find that he's really pretty average. He talks about Quidditch, brooms, his Auror stuff, and oh, yes, Quidditch. Mention your favorite team and you're in."

"I can do that," she said, scrambling from the bed. "So do you really live with Harry Potter? I thought that Ginny was his girlfriend."

"Ginny and Harry are engaged, well, mostly. She has to finish school, and he has to finish Auror training. It's complicated. I'm engaged to Ron Weasley, or I'm going to be when I finish school. He lives there, too." As they walked to breakfast, Hermione explained that her parents were still in Australia, so until she got her own place, she stayed at Harry's. "It's a really big house. His godfather left it to him. You'll see Neville and Ron as well, and most of the Weasleys. Harry and I are like extended family members...have been since my third year. In fact on Saturday during hols, we've inviting all our friends over."

When the post arrived, Hermione opened up the *Sun*, scowling when she read the article of the Ministry's push on the Emancipation Commission for Fair Marriage Contracts.

Shelia sat down and snarled, "Have you seen this?" as she handed the *Prophet* to Hermione, folded to page ten. "Now my sister and I can legally get married, *and pregnant*, without bothering to ask permission from Dad. Just as long as we obtain court approval from the Wizengamot under the Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act and can prove that our spouse is not a close relative."

"The Emancipation Commission for Fair Marriage Contracts," Hermione read aloud to Bernice, who was leaning over to see the article as well. "... although any union *arranged* with an underage witch, *age sixteen*, will require court approval of the Wizengamot under the Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act... Any and all pure-blood witches and wizards applying for a marriage license will have to provide significant proof that the marriage partners have significant differences in their ancestral backgrounds..." Hermione looked up. "They are implying that pure-bloods cannot marry other pure-bloods. I saw the Black family tree. Sirius Black was related to nearly everyone I know. Do you think that this is to enforce that pure-bloods marry half-bloods, Muggle-borns or those with Muggle grandparents? That would definitely be significant differences in bloodlines."

"Seems like," Shelia said and read from the parchment that her dad had sent her. "...limits those whose mating are of similar relations... Restricts who may receive a legal sanction.' Can you believe this? The Ministry is dictating who you can marry. '...only if lineage can determine that neither of the party is of close the relation to the other by relationship of: brother, sister, child, parent, grandparent, grandchild, uncle, aunt, niece, nephew, or first, second or third cousin, or to have three or more common ancestors of close relation to the other party is forbidden.'" She looked up across the table at Hermione. "They say that you have to have totally different backgrounds."

Bernice's brows knit in confusion. "So if you have a family tree with...but most pure-bloods have... oh. OH!"

"Yeah, exactly," Shelia sneered, frowning as she grabbed some toast. "Pure-bloods cannot marry pure-bloods is what they are saying, unless you don't have common ancestors." Shelia stabbed a sausage with her fork. "Keep reading."

Hermione tuned back to the article. "Potential wizards wishing to marry must show that they: can give sexual monopoly to the intended witch; can give right to labor or continued education (if said witch is in her sixth or seventh year of schooling); can give rights over spouse's property and establish funds for children, can establish social ties that are not those related by marriage or from the same family line or kin." Her hands dropped to the table with a thud as she looked over at Shelia in shock. "Rights over spouses' property, establish funds for kids...that's so antiquated! It's like bride prices and dowries! How can they suggest? Muggles don't do this kind of thing!"

"Hermione, it's not the bride's family that is paying...it's the pure-blood's family that has to show proof of financial viability," Shelia pointed out figuratively and with her fork pointed in Hermione's direction.

"If the witch has any property, then yes, it becomes her husband's," Bernice said.

"It's the same as the law for an application and registration of an arranged marriage, but with the blood line stipulations," Shelia said, grimacing. "Any bloke whose family can show that he can support a family can ask for a young bride to produce children. Only now he can ask for a bride as young as sixteen, as long as he's willing to wait until she finishes school."

"That's sick!" Hermione gasped.

"It's now the law," Bernice said and excused herself.

Hermione turned to look at the Slytherin table and was shocked to see many of them scowling and fuming over something.

"Seems like the Slytherins are unhappy about the article as well," Bernice said, standing beside her, watching the Slytherins, too.

Over at the Slytherin table, the morning edition of the *Prophet* was being passed around as many of the older Slytherins snarled at the article on page ten. Even the girls were all anxiously reading the article or asking their friends what it meant.

"In the back so we wouldn't see it," Charlie Pucey sneered.

Benders' hands holding his paper fell to the table with a loud thud. "Not only are they insisting to see our family trees, we have to give them access to our vaults!"

"No!"

"Proving our lineage... like crup breeding..."

"Of all the nerve..."

"They have twisted it all around to suit them...those Mudbloods."

Fifth-year, Maryanne Gelds' shriek could be heard across the Hall. "Are they serious? I'm sixteen!"

"And eligible for marriage. What do you say, shall we?" Rogers, a sixth-year sitting next to her, asked, and Maryanne gave him a smack on the arm.

Draco tried to tune out all the conversations, the indignant groans, outraged exclamations, and cursing going on around him. He read the article carefully, knowing that far more was happening than just the statement that lineage was to be a deciding factor in granting marriage licenses.

"So, Brenda, this makes you fair game. Maybe I should have Dad verify our compatibility," Knightly said with a smirk to Brenda Smythe, a sixth-year a few seats away from him.

"Oh, you wish," she snapped, turning back to her friends.

"I dunno. We aren't related; I got funds, and I can handle *your* property just fine," Knightly suggested with a lascivious gleam in his eyes.

"Too bad you can't promise sexual monogamy," Maria Crowe, another sixth-year, said dismissively.

"It says monopoly not monogamy," Knightly teased.

Draco knew that his own family tree had many prominent pure-blood families on it...his mum's family tree was a register of wizarding elite. She'd told him about it...that it hung in the Black house in Grimmauld Place. He'd always wanted to see it, but now it could be used against him in his choice of wife.

Likewise, down the table the same conversation was going on. "Can you believe this shite?"

Adeline Jenkins, a fifth-year, shrieked, "I can be married..."

"By anyone who can afford you," joked another fifth-year boy sitting across from her, laughing at her.

"What does that mean!" Astoria Greengrass snapped.

Draco looked up and saw Aaron Danes, Charles Harper, and Blaise Zabini all glaring angrily at each other as they debated the ramifications of the guidelines set forth in the Fair Marriage Contracts Act. Draco quickly stacked a poached egg and sausage on toast and excused himself. He was going to let his dad know about this latest development, even though so far, his dad hadn't sent back any advice. The letters Draco got had the expected smudges but not the perforations. Nevertheless, at least

come Christmas, he'd be able to visit him. With any luck his dad could help him work out what the Ministry was working itself up to.

If Draco didn't know better, the Ministry was going to start enforcing who could marry whom and possibly evoke the old matchmaking charms or worse...Seers as matchmakers. That practice had gone out centuries ago, but that old law was still on the books.

Draco smiled as his mind mulled over other ridiculous laws still on the Ministry's Law books. Like the one about not allowing your Abraxan to sleep in the guesthouse. That 'it was unlawful to wrestle ghouls,' or that 'it was considered an offense to feed alcoholic beverages to a pixie,' and that 'Apothecaries cannot sell the milk of any species,' or that you cannot 'tie your crup to a tree on the pavement of public streets in London.' Draco especially liked the 'it's illegal to wake a troll to take his picture' one best. He scoffed at himself for thinking about the Colin kid and his camera. The little twerp had tried to take his, Crabbe's, and Goyle's picture once, and Crabbe had hit him with a Horny-Cantankerous Curse.

But the old laws had a way of popping back up. Danworth's Dairy and Secretions tried to sue Slug and Jiggers in Diagon Alley over the milk law when they opened up, claiming that it was illegal for the Apothecary to sell Porlock and wildebeast milk, and that thistle, dittany, and shrivefig milk all classified as being from 'a species of plants,' which was against the law as well. It had caused quite a stir, but eventually the owners reached an agreement. Nevertheless, it did get Danworth's Dairy noticed and off to a good start. His mum did like Almond and Hazelnut milk occasionally in her tea.

Only this new drudging up and revising of the old laws could be far more problematic than who had the right to sell Porlock and wildebeast milk.

In the small classroom that Hermione used to tutor several of the pure-bloods, Draco sat glaring at the wall as she explained about electric household devices. So far they were going through the sections of Muggle household devices and electronics in the Sears and Roebuck catalogue Professor Raines was using as a schoolbook for her class. Sears Roebuck and Co. apparently was a department store that sold everything from clothes to vacuum cleaners, sewing machines and jewelry to power, automotive, and gardening tools and supplied everything for the bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens. The catalogue even had carpet, aluminum siding, and paint... Hermione had laughed the first time she saw the catalogue, thinking, *I suppose the Muggle Studies professor had been to America and found the catalogue somehow.*

Hermione sat on the larger professor's desk, holding Ginny's copy of the catalogue on her lap. "A vacuum cleaner is used for light cleaning of carpets. A steam cleaner is used to get deep ground in dirt and grime..."

"But why not just use a shampooer cleaner?" Goyle asked, still having trouble understanding some of the Muggle household equipment in the catalogue. His *How Muggles Live* by Richard Scarry was opened to the chapter six, *How Muggles Keep House*. It was, in reality, a children's book since all the characters in his books were animals in clothes and uniforms. They had his other books as well: *What Do People Do All Day Cars and Trucks and Things That Go A Day At The Fire Station* and *Busy, Busy Town*. Ginny had been insulted at first, but it did seem to make taking Muggle Studies fun, and the books had loads of information.

"Because the steam cleaner proved to be better. The steamer would remove dirt and oils missed by the shampooer, and the shampoos left residues on the carpet," Hermione explained patiently, occasionally glancing at Draco, wondering what had him so distracted the day before his test. "Sometimes it felt sticky or the carpet felt stiff and crunched under foot as you walked. The steamer didn't do that, but you couldn't do it all the time because the carpets got wet and had to dry."

"Is there that much steam? Wouldn't it just evaporate like steam from a cauldron?" Goyle asked. He'd had a much better time understanding the kitchen appliances.

"Yes, there is a lot of water. It's called a hot water extraction system. The steamer uses high pressure sprays of alkaline detergent, water, and a strong vacuum to reach down into the carpet, but the carpet gets wet...or very damp... and if done too often, mold can grow under the carpet. Besides, a vacuum is sufficient for weekly cleaning," she explained as a few of the others made notes on their copies of the catalogue. She was not looking forward to having to explain about the tools or the things in the automotive section and really hoped that Kevin Whitby, a fifth-year in her house, knew as much about them as he claimed.

"But it gets the dirt out, right?" Knightly asked. He'd joined the group once he had heard Muggle-borns were willing to help explain all the stuff and answer questions.

"Yes. It gets the dirt out, just not all of it," Hermione said. "Most Muggles only steam clean their carpets once a year."

"Because the carpet gets wet," Goyle said, still looking confused, but maybe not as much as before. "But why not just use the steam cleaner and then dry the carpets with that hair dryer thing?"

Hermione suppressed the laugh that threatened to escape. "The hair dryer is too small to do the job."

"So, are you saying that Muggles need bigger hair dryers?" Knightly suggested, his head resting on his fist and his brows creasing as he struggled to follow along.

She did laugh at his suggestion. "That would be one answer, but a bit impractical. If Muggles vacuum once or twice a week, the carpets only need steam cleaning once a year. That answer will suffice on your exam."

"Okay, lawn mowers, weed whackers, edgers, ride-on-mowers, and tractors..." Knightly said, flipping the pages of his catalogue to a marker.

Hermione looked up at Draco again, realizing he was still lost in thought. "Draco, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, still staring off into space.

"Did you get the answer to vacuums and steamers?" Hermione prodded.

"Yeah," he said noncommittally, but his focus was somewhere over her shoulder. Draco turned in her direction. "Did you see the stuff in the *Prophet*?"

"Yes," she replied, setting down her copy of the catalogue.

Draco's attention was finally on her, and the intensity of his stare startled her. "And you're not bothered by it?"

"Not at present. Why?" she asked. By now, everyone in the room had set down their quills or were holding them loosely, listening intently.

Draco looked at her like she was as dense as a troll. "You do realize what it means, right?"

"The Ministry is trying to prevent inbreeding among wizards," Hermione said, not really wanting to offend anyone, but that was the simplest answer that she could come up with.

Several of the Slytherins' eyes narrowed, a few sneered derisive remarks and two turned their heads.

Draco snorted at her statement. "The Ministry wants pure-bloods to marry Muggle-borns."

Hermione was worried that would be their take on it. "That's not what was said..."

"As good as!" Davis exclaimed, walking over to sit near Goyle, who, like the rest of the Slytherins, was listening to the exchange with rapt attention.

"What did you think it means?" Karalee Winters asked, a sixth-year Muggle-born Gryffindor who was helping Hermione with the tutoring.

"And you are supposed to be so bright!" Knightly sneered at Hermione.

Draco turned his head slightly and snapped. "Stop it! She wouldn't know, but she can inform the others." He turned back to Hermione. "Look. Many of us pure-bloods are related in some way or another. This Emancipation Commission for Fair Marriage Contracts brings back some very old laws, ones that pure-bloods know about because they were used when it was convenient to do so. The Emancipation Acts of the 1070's were designed to allow the engagement arrangement of witches as young as fourteen and fifteen to wizards who needed a wife to produce an heir. It hasn't been used since the Wizard Reformation of 1612 when legal age of maturity was set at seventeen. The Fair Marriage Contracts is little more than a butchering of the Lawful Bridal Contracts from the Middle Ages when life spans were only seventy years and girls were married young in order to produce loads of children, so wizards had to show proof of the ability for viable support in order to get married. During the Spanish Inquisitions, it was reinstated for obvious reasons. Potential suitors had to show proof that they could protect their prospective bride and children from persecution."

Hermione nodded, already aware of some of this from reading *Hogwarts: A History* and her History of Magic classes. "During the Reformation, young witches, in order to attend school had to be promised right to continued education if their families had all ready arranged their betrothal, especially during the Middle Ages the Spanish Inquisitions, and the Renaissance, as you said, because girls were betrothed so young. In order for them to be able to finish school, the law was passed to ensure that they could graduate, to fully learn how to do spellwork properly. Older witches generally asked for the right of labor to maintain their own means of income should their spouses die. So that is where this comes from?"

"Exactly," Knightly stated. "It's like the clause 'can give rights over spouse's property and establish funds for children'; the wizard was required to be able to show proof he could support and protect his wife and kids. Those were dark times, though."

"I thought that this Emancipation and Marriage Contracts Act was only to show potential couples were not related from the same family line or kin?" asked Winters, still apparently unsure of the implications Draco was explaining.

Draco and Knightly turned to look at her. "No, it's just the start of it, I'm sure," Draco stated. He turned back to face Hermione. "Look, Hermione, the Malfoys have been involved in politics for ages. Dad had me tutored in Magical Law since I could read. Some of the old laws are hilarious, some not so. I see a repeat of some ones that are not, well, good."

Hermione gripped her knees and leaned forward. "So where exactly do you think that this is going?"

Draco's expression turned sour. "The Ministry is going to tell us who we can marry."

"They couldn't! They have no right!" Karalee exclaimed, turning to Goyle as if he would deny it for her. Goyle only shrugged noncommittally.

"Funny what the Ministry thinks it has a right to do or not do and what it has the right to meddle in," Knightly sneered.

"No way," Hermione stated adamantly. "People wouldn't stand for that."

"Hermione, open your eyes," Draco sneered. "You think it won't happen, but something is going on. This Emancipation Commission for Fair Marriage Contracts was set up for a reason. Healer Creswell and Healer Brumfeld are still getting a lot of attention about their Squib research. People believe them."

Hermione's eyes become wide at Draco's statement. "But that's...is it real? It can't be! It might be due to genetics, but..."

"I don't know about this genetics stuff...that must be some Muggle science thing, but I do know that Mr. Weasley is Head of the Department of Muggle and Muggle-born Relations. Charles Polister is Head of the Department of Muggle-born Liaison Commission. Why the overlap? Not that I'm all that fond of Mr. Weasley, but why isn't this Muggle-born Adopt a Grandparent program under his department, for example? Wouldn't he be more understanding to what Muggle parents of magical children need? Or why put the Tracing Charm on mud, er, blood, or dark and lord... you know what I mean...anti Death...er, followers. I mean, we cannot even say it or we go to jail! I've been hit with dines already and given a warning. This is all bullshit! And why was the Muggle-born Registration Commission simply renamed the *Liaison* Commission? Why didn't all the Muggle lovers in the Order and in the Ministry abolish it all together?"

Hermione stared at Draco, unsure of what to say.

"Exactly," Draco sneered. "No one knows; at least no one I know."

Over the next few days, nothing more was said about the Fair Marriage acts or any engagements that had been denied by the Wizengamot. There were the normal engagements and a few wedding announcements from the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee in the *Daily Prophet*, but everything seemed to have quieted down.

By Friday, Draco sought out Hermione as she descended the stairs to the Entrance Hall. "Got a minute?" Shelia and Ginny looked at them, as if to say 'see you later,' but Draco didn't move to the side or make any indication that he cared if they stayed or not. "Did you see this?" he asked, thrusting a copy of the *Daily Prophet* at Hermione. "It's from yesterday."

"Yes, I read this," Hermione said, taking the paper. "Sure. I've been reading all the articles and those from other papers as well."

"No, I mean did you read this?" he said, tapping the paper at the *Happy Tidings* column.

Both Shelia and Ginny leaned around Hermione as she glanced at the birth announcements, then scanned down to the wedding and engagements. "I don't... wait, Percy is marrying Audrey Ranklin," Ginny said, her eyes bulging. "Wizengamot approved the match of... Oh, my gods! I wonder if Mum knows?"

"She's a half-blood, isn't she?" Draco asked, standing firmly with his arms crossed.

"I don't know. I know he was seeing her, but I had no idea it was serious," Ginny said, looking up at him, confused.

"Are you blind?" Draco asked. "Look at the names of the couples."

Hermione read down the list. "Neville and Hannah are engaged! Miss Cynthia Thomas and Mr. Reginald Newton..."

"She's Muggle-born," Draco interrupted. "So is Hannah Abbot...well, half-blood."

Hermione looked at the other names from the announcements, reading the names aloud, "Oliver Wood is engaged to Alice Newhall, and a Mr. Wesley Drake to a Miss Margaret Carter... Mr. Brandon Brentnall and Miss Jessica MacDowell..."

"Do you see a pattern?" Draco asked.

Hermione handed him back his *Prophet*. "The only couple I know is Neville and Hannah. I knew Wood, of course, barely. He was captain of our house team my first three years."

"Circe, you're dense," Draco snapped. "I checked. Abbot is a half-blood...Longbottom is a pure-blood. Likewise, Alice Newhall is a Muggle-born...Wood is a pure-blood, and I know Mr. Drake, he's a pure-blood friend of Father's, but Mrs. Carter...she has Muggle grandparents. She was living in America last year. I also know the Brentnall family; he claimed to be a fourth generation pure-blood. He was cleared as 'acceptable' by the Muggle-born Registration Commission, but his fiancée Miss MacDowell wasn't. She was arrested, and after the war, she was in St. Mungo's for a couple of weeks following her release."

"Are you sure about this, Draco?" Hermione asked as Shelia said, "So?"

"So, do you remember what I said about the Ministry taking Creswell and Brumfeild seriously? The S.H.M.R.C. had these engagements approved by the Wizengamot. I know that Marcus Flint wanted to marry a Celia Asks, but they were denied. They are both pure-blood. I also know that Theodore Nott and Rosaline Drinkwater were engaged, but their parchmentwork for their marriage license is still pending approval. She has a great-grandmother who is supposed to be a Muggle-born." He nodded to Bernise and Valerie as they hesitantly walked up behind Shelia and Ginny.

Shelia didn't notice her friends' approach. "That's only two out of six that we know of," she stated. "Surely..."

"Draco, do you think that this has anything to do with the fact that Mr. Nott and Mr. Flint were in Slytherin?" Ginny asked, unintentionally cutting off Shelia.

"I think Draco may be right," Hermione interjected before Draco could answer. "With the latest bit in the papers about the Wizengamot needing to approve all couples who wish to become engaged under the Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act, what other conclusion is there?"

"I'll tell you this: if I'm right, you are going to become very popular as a potential spouse; brightest witch of her age, heroine, brain of the golden trio that defeated ~~him~~, Potter...the Chosen One's best mate, member of the Order, top of your class all through school... Oh, yes, you're going to be considered a prime match," Draco said suggestively, and Hermione recoiled in shock. "Of course, Miss Margulies and Miss Harness will be considered as well...friends of the golden trio and all. If finding a wife means turning to Muggle-borns, you girls will become targets for pairing. Mark my words."

Hermione and Shelia started rebut him, but Draco had turned on his heel and strode away. "What's he talking about?" Bernise asked nervously.

Hermione turned to face her friends. "I'll let you know as soon as I see the papers this morning," she said, hoping that Draco was wrong.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

The Marriage Law

Lucius paced in his cell, furious that the guards had taken his *Prophet* that Draco mentioned he'd sent him in his latest letter. In fact, there were sections of Draco's letter that had been blacked out so he couldn't read it. It was censorship, pure and simple. There was something going on, something that the Ministry didn't want the inmates of Azkaban to know about. The perforations on the margins and throughout the letter told him a little of what was going on. He held his letter to the light and reread the secret code, 'Just like in the emancipation acts in 1070, eh, Dad?' Lucius swore. *Why would the Ministry lower the age for girls to marry? Surely, parents will not approve of their teenage daughters getting married before they finish school? That archaic practice had been abolished!*

He turned the page so he could make out the other message: 'Reinstated the old Bridal Contracts Act and annuls the legal age set during the Reformation, doesn't it?' He squinted his eyes and turned the parchment in the sunlight. 'Just like during the Inquisitions... all over again... Wizengamot denied Nott and Flint to marry their girlfriends, but Longbottom is able to marry Abbott.'

He let his arm drop and stared at the wall. *The Ministry is up to something, controlling who gets married to whom and allowing young witches to marry. What are they up to?*

He tried reading Draco's handwriting through the ink the guards used to black out his letter. He couldn't make out much. Frustrated, he threw himself on his cot and covered his eyes with his arm. Whatever was going on, the Ministry didn't want him to know. Draco would come to visit during Christmas hols. He'd find out what was going on then.

Hermione and Ginny ambled down to the Great Hall Monday for breakfast as usual, talking about the Hufflepuff game the first Saturday of December and wondering why Mr. Weasley had insisted that Ginny and Hermione stay at Hogwarts for Christmas hols. When they entered the Great Hall, they both noticed that Headmaster McGonagall and the Heads of the Houses, Professors Flitwick, Sprout, Wright, and Podmore were suspiciously missing from the High Table, as were several other professors including Professor Pendergast and Hagrid. Hermione took her seat, reached for the toast, spread some marmalade on it, and stared at the nearly vacant table. As the Hall filled up, murmurs and chatter became louder as everyone started speculating or commenting on the professors' absence.

"What do you suppose is going on?" Ginny asked, her head turned away as she stared at the High Table as well.

Hermione shrugged, unseen by her friend. "I have no idea."

"I know," Luna said from behind them. Ginny and Hermione had been so preoccupied by the empty chairs at the High Table that neither saw Luna until she spoke.

"You know what, Luna?" Hermione asked, making room for her to sit down between her and Ginny.

"Hi, Ginny. You flew well last Thursday in practice. I hope you win this weekend against Hufflepuff," Luna said, helping herself to a sausage as if she'd had all her meals at the Gryffindor table. "My dad wrote to tell me that Mr. Margulies sent my dad a letter. I was hoping to talk to you about it. He is printing a special issue of *The Quibbler* for everyone at Hogwarts...well, every fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-year, and the eighth-years too, I suppose. You and Ginny aren't going to like it."

"Why? What's going on?" Hermione asked, feeling her heart drop into her gut.

"The Ministry of Magic is taking a census," Luna said as casually as you please.

"THEY'RE WHAT?!" both Ginny and Hermione screeched.

"Over Christmas, everyone fifteen and older will have to fill out a census form," Luna stated blandly.

"NO!" Hermione gasped as Shelia and Valerie sat down.

"What's going on?" Shelia asked, looking questioningly at Hermione, then curiously at Luna, and back.

Ginny sucked in her breath and then exhaled. "That's why he doesn't want me to come home! Do you think it has something to do with the S.H.M.R.C.'s Muggle-born Registration Commission?"

"That's who is conducting the census. Hi, I'm Luna Lovegood. Our fathers are friends," she said, extending a hand to Sheila.

Sheila accepted Luna's hand. "Nice to...what's this about a census?" she asked, letting go of Luna's hand and plopping down in her seat.

Luna explained what her dad had told her about the census. "It'll be in *The Quibbler* today."

The professors entered the Great Hall just as mail started to arrive. Hundreds of owls swooped in carrying what looked like a bright yellow rolled up newspaper that was delivered to every single fifth-, sixth-, seventh- and returning eighth-year. Hermione unrolled the magazine and gasped at the bold black headline type on the vibrant yellow front page.

The Ministry of Magic Approves A General Census Of All Citizens, Wizarding Residents with a Visa, and Permanent Magical Residents.

The Muggle-born Registration Commission and the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee has ordered to effectuate the Census Act under the guidelines of their charter to assist in the enactment of the Emancipation Act and the Fair Marriage Acts set forth by your Ministry of Magic.

Everyone age fifteen and up, and any fourteen-year-old whose fifteenth birthday is before March of next year, are required to register with the S.H.M.R.C. by the end of December.

For details see page three.

The rest of the mail was forgotten as the rustle of the several hundred students quickly turned the page to read the article about the census.

"May I have your attention, please," Professor McGonagall's voice rang out in the Hall over the commotion caused by *The Quibbler*. "All first- through third-year students will please return to your common rooms until further notice. All fifth-year through N.E.W.T. level students will remain in their seats. If you are fourth-year and will have your fifteenth birthday before the end of March, please remain; those who will not, may join your housemates in your common rooms."

There was a general scramble of students rising to their feet, whispering 'byes' and 'good lucks' to their friends as the younger students left the Great Hall. Hermione felt a sense of dread at their departure. She looked over at the Slytherin table and caught Draco's eye. He looked angry, but nodded to her all the same and held up his copy of the special edition of *The Quibbler*.

"As you are all aware," Professor McGonagall spoke up after the doors finally closed, "the Ministry of Magic is conducting a census. The Ministry informed me of the census early this morning, and I have held an emergency meeting with the staff in preparation of your questions and concerns regarding this matter. The announcement of the census, as I was told, wasn't to come out until Friday. However, I can see that you all have been notified prematurely. The Ministry official is not due to arrive until later this morning to apprise me of the details, but what I do know is that everyone of you *must* register."

Outraged and confused murmurs spread among the students.

"Quiet, please," Professor McGonagall shouted over the growing discontent of the students. "All of you will be dismissed from your morning lessons, and we will all reconvene after I have a chance to question the Ministry official personally. Please be assured that your professors and I will make ourselves available to you to discuss any and all of your concerns over this matter. You may go now to your common rooms or, if you prefer, the library. Please do not wander elsewhere."

Hermione and her friends rose to return to the common room, trying to speculate on the ramifications of the announcement in *The Quibbler*. As she reached half way up the stairs, Hermione felt someone grab her elbow. She turned around, surprised to see Draco, Greg and three Slytherins on the stairs behind her.

"Got a minute?" Draco asked, letting go of her arm.

"Yeah, sure," she said, indicating that they follow her.

Draco and Greg took the lead at the top of the stairs, heading for the Room of Requirement. Several of the Gryffindors followed, Hermione, Ginny, and their friends. Draco rounded on her as soon as they entered the room. "So you see what's going on, right?"

Hermione stopped a few feet from the door as everyone who'd followed them filed into the room. "Draco, it's a census to enable the Muggle-born Registration Commission to update their lists..."

"To make lists of all wizards and witches of marriageable age, according to the past actions of the Commission," he sneered, holding his hands up with his fingers wide in agitation. "They will start telling us who we *can* and *cannot* marry."

"They're doing that already," Benders hissed from behind him.

"Only those who we cannot, you prat," another boy said behind him.

"No, they *are* letting anyone marry a Muggle-born, but pure-bloods are not allowed to marry just anyone," Ginny stated as she moved forward through the group to stand close to Hermione and Draco.

"They are gearing up to make good on Healer Creswell's paper," Draco stated, running his hand through his hair as he paced back and forth, then stopped.

Hermione watched him, knowing there was little to nothing that they as students could do in the situation. "Draco, I think you may be right, but until..."

"May be?" he snapped, rounding on her again.

"Yes, you're speculating...although, I agree with you, it seems the most likely thing. So far, they are only telling us who we ~~can~~ marry based upon Healer Creswell's paper. But I see your point, things are escalating in that direction. However, until we know for sure, there isn't anything we can do about it," Hermione tried to reason with him. Several of the other students began to voice their dissent. "No, wait, all of you. Hear me out. Let's say we do know that the Ministry is going to tell us who we have to marry...until we know for sure there is nothing we can do. Even if and when they make an announcement about some program that meets with Healer Creswell's theories, the public...our parents...will not stand for such nonsense."

Draco wiped his face with his hands, and Goyle and Benders looked ready to argue with her.

"Well, the Muggle-born and Muggle parents won't," she stated firmly. "I know my parents wouldn't!"

"Yeah, like those Muggles were able to stop wizards from taking their magical children from them," the boy behind Benders sneered. "Them kids have not been given back, Granger."

Hermione turned on him, her mouth gaping open. "But I thought..."

"Okay, look, Hermione and I, we have connections," Sheila said, stepping in between Goyle and Benders and nodding to Hermione. "Let's see what's going on...really going on. If I can, I'll get the legislation on this census. But for now, Hermione's right...what can we do? Most of us are still kids! Even those of us of legal age are still

looked at as merely students."

"Of legal marriageable age!" Victoria Combs, a fifth-year Gryffindor, whined.

"Let's see what happens. Professor McGonagall said that a Ministry official is meeting with her today to tell her the details. Once she knows something, I'm sure the Heads of Houses will tell us. But until we know anything definite, there is no reason to panic," Hermione said, hoping that she sounded far more assured than she felt. "Draco, how can I find you if I need to?"

Draco's eyebrows shot up for a second before he lowered his head and rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "I might have something." He looked up at her. "Do you still have that coin thing for the DA?"

"Yes," Hermione stated, "but you don't have one."

"But you can make them, right?" Draco asked. "You can connect one of my Galleons to yours for me."

"Yes," Hermione said, nodding.

"So here, use these half pence ones," Goyle said, pulling two two-pence coins from his pocket. "I certainly don't need them."

Hermione pulled out her wand and connected the coins with the Protean Charm. Several other students pulled out coins both Muggle and wizard. "Let's keep it simple for now. Draco will be the Slytherin contact, Luna Lovegood, Ravenclaw, and I'll ask Susan Bones if she wants to be lead contact for Hufflepuff. If the Ministry does pull what you think it will, Draco, we will be stronger if we all stand together on this."

"And get the facts of what they are planning early," Shelia stated.

"So for now, if you hear anything, tell me, Draco, or Luna. We'll tell everyone in our houses. Agreed?" Hermione asked everyone at large. There was a mumbling and general uttering of agreement. "Good. Now, Draco," she said, pulling him aside. "Our common room is at the end of the hall at the portrait of the Fat Lady. How do I find the Slytherin common room if I really need you fast?"

"Just activate the coin and come down to the dungeons," he said. "I'll find you."

"Good enough," she said, turning to go.

Later that morning Professor McGonagall entered the Gryffindor common room and asked all the students who needed to register to follow her to her classroom, as did Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and Wright in their respective houses, although Professor Sprout used a large room on the first floor. Hagrid and Professor Podmore stood by as Professor McGonagall explained to the Gryffindors that each and every one of the students who met the age requirement had to comply with the census, writing down the name of the fourth-years on a list.

By noon, it was all anyone was speculating about: why the Ministry was doing this and who would fall prey for defying the new registration requirements. Between classes, notes were passed, whispers and defiant protesting could be heard in every corridor, nook, and even in the loos.

One week later, the *Daily Prophet*, the *Sorcerer's Sun*, and *The Quibbler* all carried a bombshell announcement:

The Department of Muggle-born Liaisons Commission, The Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee proudly announce the passing of the Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act

In order to ensure the production of healthy and viable children to secure the future of wizardkind, Charles Polister in cooperation with Healer Creswell and Healer Brumfeild have devised the most feasible and plausible way of guaranteeing the health and viability of our future generations.

The Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act as based upon historical wizarding laws, any and all single wizards and witches shall be matched by Ministry approved Betrothal Charms to match respectable and desirable witches and wizards based upon specific magical compatibility profiles and magical abilities. All such matches will be considered valid unless reasonable explanations for dissolution can be ascertained, subject to approval of the Ministry of Magic. All those who comply will receive Ministry compensation and a handsome honorarium. Marriages need only last long enough to produce four (4) viable magical offspring, at which time the couple may choose to remain married or ask for an annulment. Any and all current engagements must be approved by the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee prior to obtaining a marriage approval certificate. No marriage license may be obtained without Ministry approval of the persons desiring to wed.

Failure to comply with the Marriage Law will result in sterilization, internment in Azkaban, and having your wand snapped. Therefore, all witches and wizards age fifteen though forty are required to register with Graceilla Warblock Head of the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Commission. Failure to comply will result in immediate internment in Azkaban. A grace period for compliance of two weeks for all students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry shall be in effect or until the end of Christmas holidays.

Below it was another article with a picture of an elderly witch with horn-rimmed glasses, short, curly, salt and pepper hair, red lips, and brown eyebrows she'd apparently drawn on her face.

The Ministry of Magic is pleased to announce the hire of Edithe Havershiems as Coordinator of Betrothal Arrangements for all the eligible young witches and wizards enlisting in the new Marriage Law program. Mrs. Havershiems, a registered Yenta and successful matchmaker for several decades, has agreed to put her considerable talents to the task of helping potential brides and grooms make magically sound choices. "I have a wide knowledge of Pliht and Betrothal Charms at the ready to assist our young people. With the help of the register of Heritage Committee, all members of our society can look forward to a respectable and proper match."

The article in the papers caused an outcry in the Great Hall, as almost all the young girls, ages sixteen and up, realized that they could be forced to marry a pureblood or a Muggle-born according to the Ministry of Magic's new laws.

Bernice was looking at *The Quibbler*. "Oh, listen to this! Then there is that insane attempt of the Ministry to enforce arranged marriages between the pureblood families and Muggle-borns or those with close Muggle ancestry. Once word gets out of what the Ministry is planning, the general outcry will be heard around the continent. Of course, the proposal for the program was in *general committee* for revision for weeks as Mr. Arthur Weasley and Mr. Polister argued in front of the Wizengamot. In the end, Mr. Polister won out. It is this reporter's opinion that Mr. Polister is off his hippogriff. Enforcing our young people to register over their Christmas hols..." But...how could they agree to this?"

"Who wrote that?" Valerie asked, looking up from her own copy of the *Sun*.

"Betty Beetle, I have no idea who she is," Bernice said, her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"It's got to be an alias," Hermione stated. "The article sounds like one Rita Skeeter would write. Get this; 'The Marriage Law Project is a public interest legal assistance program that seeks to reaffirm marriage between a magically compatible couples of no related lineage. Ideal shall be that of the union of a pure-blood with anyone of new-blood, that being of half-blood or less, so as to widen the genetic pool of viable partners for future generations. Permission of a marriage union shall be granted only if the intended couple can establish suitable past heritage and meets the requirement of Register of Heritage Committee...' At least the *Sun's* reporters are cutting through the

Prophet's bull."

"A lot of good it will do us unless we find a way out of this," Shelia stated.

"We'll have to get a copy of the legislation, the exact wording," Hermione said, dropping the Sun on the coffee table.

Over the next few days, nothing more was said about the Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act, or any engagements that had been denied by the Wizengamot. There were the normal engagement and a few wedding announcements from the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee in the *Daily Prophet*, but everything seemed to have quieted down. Still, the general outcry and disgruntlement of the students could be heard around the castle and in every publication except the *Daily Prophet*, which spouted the Ministry's propaganda in favor of the law and its reasons.

Every morning, many letters of assurance were sent from caring parents in regards to their daughters and sons, especially the sixteen-year-old girls, concerns about having older wizards requesting marriages through the S.H.M.R.C. For the few girls who had beaux who'd already graduated, a few of the families had submitted the required information to receive approval of the matches. The Wizengamot had apparently considered the engagements, and those who met approval of the S.H.M.R.C. were published in the *Daily Prophet*. But those who did not were sent letters from the Department of Muggle-born Liaisons Committee that stated that the approval was 'pending confirmation.'

By dinner, owls arrived from parents telling their daughters that they are unable to circumvent the law and that each girl must register and abide by the regulations or face loss of their wand, magical sterilization, and imprisonment.

Hermione used a penname to the Ministry of Magic Office of Magical Regulations, and Legation Archives Office and the Administrative Offices of the Wizengamot, requesting a copy of the Marriage Law legislation. Likewise, Draco and two other Slytherins contacted their family solicitors and barristers, trying to obtain copies of the Marriage Law. Hermione met with Draco twice, to discuss getting a copy of the original bill.

Friday when post arrived at breakfast, an owl carried an official packet to her with the Wizengamot seal. Another packet arrived the next morning from the Archives Office. During her break that morning, Hermione pored over the documents, highlighting various important key elements, and managed to decipher the poorly written legislations and break down each component in her search for any loophole that they students could use to get around the law.

Draco sought her out in the library with a thick folder from his solicitor and a copy of the Marriage Law. The barrister had added tabs and highlights of the key elements as well as a brief explanation. "Draco, this is great, but I have two copies already. Give me until tonight to go through this," she requested.

"Sure, we're meeting for Muggle Studies tonight, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, tonight...right after dinner," Hermione said as she tucked the folder in her bag and hurried to class.

Hermione read as much of the material during her break as she could, her eyes widening at the annotations made by the solicitor as she did. That evening, Shelia, Ginny, and Bernice came with her to her Muggle Studies tutorial.

Draco, followed by several Slytherins, approached her before Hermione had time to drop her bag. "Did you read the folder my solicitor sent us?" he asked.

"I perused it, yes," Hermione said, pulling out the Sears catalogue and the books: *What Do People Do All Day Cars and Trucks and Things That Gq* and *Busy, Busy Town*.

"Did you read the part he'd underlined about the previously agreed engagements clause?" he asked, placing his hands on the desk Hermione generally sat on.

Hermione stood up and looked at him. "Skimmed it, but the Emancipation Commission for Fair Marriage Contracts and the Marriage Law and Proper Unions Act both annul any previously arranged..."

"Except where bridal dowries have been formalized and all parties involved have signed the contracts," Draco said smugly.

Hermione gave him a quizzical frown. She sat down at the desk, pulled out the folder and turned to the marker Draco indicated. She withdrew her notebook with her notes, the articles from the newspapers, and her copy of the Marriage Law. The room filled up with students from all the houses, all waiting, watching as Hermione finished checking the annotations and comparing them to her notes. Her brows creased, then rose, only to crease again as she scowled at the parchment.

"Okay, give," Draco snapped at her. "Am I right about the previously agreed engagement clause or not?"

"I think you're right, except it won't help anyone pure-blood who wants to marry another pure-blood. Even if you have a previously arranged engagement, the Wizengamot is, under this new law, forced to invalidate it. Only any engagement between a half-blood or less to a pure-blood, preferably a pure-blood and Muggle-born or new-blood, is acceptable," she looked up at the four Slytherins who'd come with Draco. "I'm sorry. However, I might be able to figure out a way of surmounting and evading the Ministry's attempts of forced marriages."

"All right, give," Thomas demanded, looking at her intently.

"It isn't really something to help the guys, per se, but will in a round-about way. If the girls were to become pregnant, then there is a clause, poorly written and easy twisted around, that states that she could insist on marrying the baby's father as long as the child was deemed healthy and sound. The engagement would be allowed as long as the offspring showed no magical deformities. However, until the child demonstrated significant magical abilities, they cannot actually *get* married. It's a long shot, but feasible."

"You mean we have to have sex and get pregnant?" Miss Bowers, a sixth-year from Hufflepuff, screeched.

"My father would kill me!" another girl cried out.

"The Bastard law?" Cecil asked, clearly affronted by the idea.

"You're kidding," Greg sneered.

"I might, in time, be able to formulate ways of surmounting and evading the Ministry's attempts of forced marriages. There is always the Pseudopregnancy or Pseudocyesis Potions. They are supposed to imitate a false pregnancy. That is if any of the girls want to take it. I saw the potion directions in the Restricted Section once. If I can find it again...I can make it. That might buy us some time to figure out a better idea," she suggested. "But I'll have to find the book again and get all the ingredients."

Bernice broke out in a huge grin. "Oh, I can help with obtaining the ingredients, and as much as you need."

"Really?" Draco asked. "How's that?"

"My father and uncle are Searchers! They run a supply business for the Apothecaries. I can get you anything," she said, blushing and lowering her head.

"That takes care of the ingredients," Hermione said, looking up at Draco. "How about helping me find the book?"

"You're on," he said, grinning.

Greg looked confused. "How's that going to help us not get roped into marrying someone we don't want to?"

Cecil snorted a laugh. "If all the girls are pregnant, none of them will be eligible. If there are no eligible girls...there can't be anyone to force us to marry."

"Well, almost. If each girl claims that she is pregnant, and names a 'boyfriend' who is the father, that might tie things up for at least a few months. Or, until we are discovered," Hermione said and turned to face Greg. "Either way, it will effectively eliminate half of the equation. If all the girls are ineligible, there's no one to match the guys up with, and they can't match up a guy who is already charged with a paternity claim."

"So we use the Bastard's Law against them," Cecil said, apparently pleased with Hermione's solution.

"I think it's brilliant," Draco said, grinning mischievously. "We just make the potion, get every girl to drink it and match everyone up."

"What happens if they make us marry the girl?" Greg asked.

Draco clapped a hand on his shoulder. "They can't. The Paternity Charm cannot be used until the third trimester. So, it's the girl's word against the bloke's kind of thing. They always side with the girl until paternity can be ascertained. Under the Bastard Law, the responsible bloke cannot be betrothed to anyone else until his responsibility for the baby is proven or disproven. It's perfect!"

Shelia didn't look convinced. "As soon as the Healers find out the girls are not pregnant and therefore the guy is obviously not responsible...we're back at square one."

"But that gives us six months to come up with something else," Hermione stated. "And believe me, I will find some way out of this. I *am* not about to let the Ministry pick my husband for me."

Hermione had never seen a larger smile than the one that appeared on Greg's face.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Rebellion In the Halls...

Hermione, Luna, and Ginny spent Friday evening after the meeting, searching for the Pseudopregnancy and Pseudocycosis Potions and met up again on Saturday morning to continue the search. Draco joined them after his Quidditch practice. The book where Hermione had remembered seeing the potions only had a description of what they did and a sampling of the directions with warnings about the interactions of a few of the potion's primary ingredients, but it did not have the entire recipes. Both potions utilized many sources of Progestagens and Progesterone hormones. The Pseudopregnancy Potion had, at one point, been developed as a means of birth control while the Pseudocycosis Potion had been developed to encourage the witch's breasts to lactate. Witches who used the Pseudopregnancy Potion found that it actually gave them the symptoms of pregnancy: morning sickness, swelling of the breasts and ankles, sore backs, and the feeling of puffiness of the abdomen as well as stopping the monthly cycles from occurring. The Pseudocycosis Potion, however, didn't make the witch suffer morning sickness, but she suffered a slight weight gain and swelling of the legs, arms, and, occasionally, the lower abdomen. Neither potions' side effects sounded pleasant, but they would be very helpful in carrying out the ruse.

"Nothing! It's not in any of these," Hermione said, closing the book in front of her. "The potions are considered restricted potions, so unfortunately, none of the books seem to have it."

Luna stared wistfully at the window, one hand resting on the book in front of her. "Have we checked all the books in the Restricted Section?"

"Yes," Draco replied, setting the book he had on a pile next to him. "Most of these are from the Restricted Section."

Hermione pulled *Magical Potions: A History of Magical Drafts and Potions* by Ranulph Ballard to her and opened the page to the best description they had found of the Pseudopregnancy Potion. She looked up as Susan, Bernice, Shelia, Thomas, and Cecil joined them in the corner table of the library.

"Any luck?" Susan asked, eyeing the books lying open and piled in stacks on the table.

"We know what the potions do, how they work, and the side effects. But I cannot find the actual directions in any of the books here in the library," Hermione said, slamming the book closed.

"But we have a partial list of what's in them," Luna said, handing Bernice the list.

"Too bad it's not a Hogsmeade weekend," Draco moaned. Everyone's head turned in his direction. "I might have the potions in my family's library."

"If not yours, it might be in mine," Cecil said. "Lot of good it does us, holed up in school."

Hermione and Ginny suddenly grinned. "Desperate times require desperate measures," Hermione said, winking at Ginny. Ginny and Luna both smiled just as mischievously.

Both boys narrowed their eyes at Hermione. "What are you going on about? Has the dust and mildew gotten to you?" Draco said scornfully to her.

"I have to at least try. We won't know if we don't look. C'mon," Hermione said, jumping up. Luna, Ginny, and Susan smiled in anticipation as they rose to go with her. "Are you coming, Draco? Cecil?" Thomas, Bernice, and Shelia looked at each other and turned to follow, too. Hermione hurried from the library, glancing back to see if they followed her. She turned to motion them to follow her down the corridor toward a classroom.

"If you're thinking about Professor Pendergast's office, aren't we going the wrong way?" Cecil asked when Hermione turned and started to run down the corridor.

"Nope, that's not what I had in mind," Hermione said over her shoulder.

Ginny, Susan, and Luna quickly followed. Draco and Shelia shrugged and chased after her.

"I'm going to regret this," Thomas said as he tugged Cecil's sleeve to go with him. "We might as well see what she's up to."

"In here. Hurry," Hermione said, grinning mischievously as she ducked into an empty classroom. She turned to Draco when Luna closed the door. "Okay, Draco, do you really think you have the directions to the potions at home?"

"We have an entire section of books on potions," Draco said, crossing his arms. "My family has one of the largest collections of books in the country."

"And you think you may have it, too, Cecil?" she asked, turning to Cecil, who was staring at Hermione with his hands on his hips, but he nodded, looking confused. "So, if we sneak out of the castle, would you take us to your homes to get it?"

Draco's eyes went round. "Sneak out. Leave the castle? Just who are you?" he asked, and Hermione smiled back.

"Hermione Granger, Muggle-born, one third of the golden trio, Harry's mate, and a thorn in your side since first year," she said, smirking. "Or should I slap you like I did in third year..."

"No, thanks! It was a rhetorical question, Granger," Draco snapped. "Okay, presuming you can get us out, how are we getting to my house? I can only Side-Along two people."

"I've done two as well, and I've been to your house," Hermione said and then turned to Cecil. "Are you able to Apparate?"

Cecil looked at the ground. "I haven't taken my test." He looked up, clearly embarrassed. "They didn't give us the test because they must have thought we'd use it to leave the school, I suppose. We had the lessons in the Great Hall, but that's it."

"I can Apparate as long as I know where I'm going," Luna said, her gaze roaming around as if she was watching a fly. "I can do Side-Along, too. I took the test over the summer. Dad and Mr. Twycross are good friends."

"I can Apparate, but I've never done such a long distance," Ginny stated. "After the, er, wedding...you know, I Apparated to London. So I know I can...I've just never tried to take someone with me."

"I took the test, too," Susan said. "Dad showed me how to take someone on Side-Along after I got my license, so I know I can, but I've only ever taken one person."

"Perfect!" Hermione exclaimed. "If we slip into the Shrieking Shack, we can Apparate from there. Draco and I will go to his place; Luna, you, Susan, and Cecil can go to his. We'll find the book or books I need and be back way before dinner. Is that all right?"

"Oi, what about us?" Thomas asked, indicating to himself and the other girls. "I can Apparate! Well, I did it in the Great Hall. Aren't we going?"

"Sure, let's all go!" Draco sneered, still looking dubious. "The Shrieking Shack. Are you crazy? It's haunted!"

"Draco, it's not haunted. That's just a myth initiated by Dumbledore to prevent people from finding the entrance to the tunnel we'll be using," Hermione explained. "I've...my friends and I have been in there loads of times...no ghosts, ghouls, or goblins!"

"Thomas should come with me. He's been to my house before," Cecil suggested, still eyeing Luna apprehensively.

It took some convincing, but Draco finally caved in, agreeing to take Hermione, Ginny, Bernice, and Shelia to Malfoy Manor, and Cecil would take Thomas, Susan, and Luna to his house.

"Tell, me again, how are we going to pull this off?" Draco asked as they all ran down to the Whomping Willow.

Ginny picked up a rock as Luna cast a Perfect-Aim Charm on her hand. Ginny threw the rock at the knot on the tree with perfect accuracy, immobilizing it.

"Wicked!" Cecil exclaimed, his eyes wide with amazement.

"C'mon, we have to hurry," Hermione said, scrambling into the tunnel and leading the way to the Shack. Draco complained about the dirt, the cobwebs, and bumping his head as he scabbled through the tunnel after Ginny. Once inside the Shack, he looked around in disgust.

"Okay, Draco, you take Shelia, and I'll take Bernice and Ginny," Hermione suggested, grasping Ginny's hand.

Cecil grabbed Susan's hand and Thomas reluctantly accepted Luna's. "Luna, do you know Swansea at all?" Cecil asked.

Luna stared at a spider web on the broken window and nodded, smiling contentedly.

Cecil didn't look convinced. "Okay, there's an aqueduct over the River Twrch at Ystalyfera. That's not far from my house."

"I think I've been there," Luna said, watching the tiny spider repair his web.

"You think you know or you know?" Thomas asked nervously as Luna said, "I remember an old canal boat in the water... I think it was stuck...it was full of water, and there was this duck sleeping in it."

Cecil sighed in relief. "That's close enough. I'll meet you there, on the shore across from the boat."

Luna turned away from the spider and smiled at him. "I'm glad I get to see it again."

"Meet us at the gate," Draco suggested to Hermione as he clutched Shelia's hand. "Do you remember what the gate looks like?"

"Only too well," Hermione replied.

Draco and Luna Disapparated first, taking Shelia and Thomas with them through Side-Along, making simultaneous loud cracks.

Hermione grasped Bernice's and Disapparated after Draco. Susan went next, taking the others with them.

Draco was holding the gate open when Hermione arrived with Bernice and Ginny in tow. Hermione looked up at Malfoy Manor and felt a shiver run down her spine.

"Okay, it's Saturday, about tea time, so Mum will be at a friend's or in the solarium, which thankfully, is at the other end of the house," Draco said, drawing Hermione back to the present. "Follow me, and keep up." He led the way through a side door, told everyone to take off their shoes, and then ran for the library.

As soon as Hermione entered the massive, high-ceilinged room, she froze in utter amazement.

"Hermione, I'll give you leave to come gape at the books any other day you'd like. But for now, focus! The potions section is over here," Draco said, taking her arm and guiding her to an expanse of wall between a pillar and a spiral staircase that had been carved from the stone of the wall that led to the upper tiers. The sections of the stairs

that curved out into the room had ornate brass handrails decorated with peacocks and roses.

Hermione's gaze followed the stairs up and realized that the potions section went from floor to ceiling and was almost twice as wide as Hermione's arm span.

Draco moved a ladder over and began to pull down tomes of all sizes and age. "Why don't you girls start searching the tier above us? It won't be on the top tier; that's where the poisons and Dark arts potions are kept."

Hermione found the Pseudocycosis Potion in a book of potions that was apparently written in the Middle Ages for wet nurses, and Draco found it in an old Roman tome. Hermione carried the books to a writing table to copy them down as Draco and the girls kept looking for the other one.

When the lamps in the library flickered on, Ginny jumped excitedly. "I found the Pseudopregnancy Potion!"

Draco looked around nervously. "Great, but it's close to dinner time, and we're not too far from the dining room! I don't want Mum to know we came here," he said as he grabbed three more books to reshelf. "We don't have time to sit here and copy it down."

"It won't take me too long," Hermione suggested as she finished copying down the Pseudocycosis Potion from the Roman tome.

Draco looked at the door and back. "Hermione, I know how you revere books. Take it, but be very careful with it. I'll bring it back with me at Christmas hols. Hopefully, Mum won't notice."

Hermione looked up in awe. "Draco, are you sure? It looks very old and valuable."

"It's worth nine thousand Galleons, and yes, it's really old, but we don't have a choice," he said, smirking at her expression. "I know you'll take care of it; now let's go!" Draco led them carefully through the house and through the gardens. "We can Apparate from here, and she won't hear us. Ready?" he asked, taking Shelia's and Ginny's hands. Hermione grasped Bernice's and Disapparated after Draco.

Cecil and Thomas scrambled to their feet as soon as Hermione arrived. Luna and Susan were both holding books, comparing the entries between them.

"Hermione, are you sure that you can brew this?" Susan asked, looking up. "It's awfully complicated, and I don't understand some of the directions."

"How hard can it be?" Hermione asked. "I read the directions of the Pseudocycosis Potion, and I'm sure I can brew that one. It'll just be tricky, what with my schedule and all."

Ginny snickered and turned to Susan. "She brewed Polyjuice Potion successfully in her second year...I have utter confidence that if Hermione puts her mind to it..."

"No way!" Susan and Thomas gaped at her in astonishment as Cecil exclaimed, "No! Really?"

Thomas sliced the air with his hand as he said, "No way! That's a seventh-year potion..."

"Yes, successfully! Harry and Ron turned into, er..." Ginny started to say, then faltered and blushed.

"Crabbe and Goyle," Draco finished for her. "I knew about it, too! It was so obvious when Crabbe and Goyle were found locked in a broom cupboard, and Hermione was spewing up fur balls in the, er, well... Anyway, I know for a fact that Miss know-it-all here can brew the potions. I wouldn't have done all this if I didn't believe she could. So are we ready to go?"

They scrambled through the tunnel to the tree. Hermione reached around the opening and hit the knot with her fist, allowing everyone to climb out safely. They were laughing and talking about their adventure on their way to the castle when they bumped into Hagrid.

"Oi, you lot, wha' are ya all doin'? Yer late for dinner!" Hagrid admonished them, looking at each of them as if trying to figure out why they'd be together, especially Draco and Cecil walking with the Gryffindor girls, all smiles and laughing. "Er, Hermione, yeh okay?" he asked, looking at Draco and Cecil suspiciously, then back at her and Ginny.

"Yes, Hagrid, we're all fine. Thank you for telling us about dinner. We lost track of the time," she said, starting for the door.

"Okay, well, git on then," Hagrid said, encouraging them to go ahead of him. Hermione and Ginny burst into laughter.

"What's so friggin' funny, Hermione?" Draco sneered.

"I think that this is the first time Hagrid has ever seen you and me in the same place at the same time when we haven't been insulting each other or fighting," Hermione said. "Truthfully, I rather like knowing the nicer side of you."

"Well, don't get any ideas, Granger," he said, reverting to his old manners. The girls all started to laugh as he opened the door for them. "Sure, laugh it up."

Ginny turned and made a mock curtsy and Draco smirked.

"Just get inside; I'm hungry."

Hermione turned to everyone once inside the Entrance Hall. "Okay, Draco, pass the word to meet in the Room of Requirement after dinner. Luna, you tell everyone in Ravenclaw who's interested, and I'll let Susan know. We've got Gryffindor covered," she said, indicating Ginny and Shelia.

"How about at eight?" Cecil asked. "Give everyone time."

"That would be good," Luna said. "Gives everyone time to enjoy pudding and change clothes if they want to."

The Room of Requirement looked like a movie theater with its plush red seats; each row elevated slightly, one step up from the one before it, like stadium seating. Ginny, Luna, Susan, and Lenore Tolbert, a girl from Slytherin, sat at a table at the door, making everyone who entered take a wand oath and sign a magical contract of confidentiality. Once everyone was seated, Hermione, Draco, Shelia, Susan, and Luna sat at a table in front. Hermione hadn't had any problem talking Susan into being the liaison for Hufflepuff. In fact, she was delighted and eager to join Hermione in fighting the Marriage Law, as were the other Hufflepuffs, since they all knew that Hermione had instigated and organized the DA.

"As you know, every one of us is going to have to turn in our census forms by the end of Christmas hols to Graceilla Warblock of the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee. Starting sometime around the end of January, Edith Havershiem, the Ministry's appointed Yenta for the Marriage Law, will begin making Ministry-determined matches for Ministry-approved betrothals," Hermione stated. "So far there is no indication if those being matched will be able to decline the match or not. If these matches are like arranged marriages, most likely not."

"How did you find that out!"

"That wasn't in the papers!"

"No way...a Yenta!"

"I didn't see anything about a Yenta!"

"What's a Yenta, anyway?"

Draco stood up. "Give Hermione a chance to explain!"

"Thanks, Draco," Hermione said as everyone settled down again. "We have an inside source at the *Daily Prophet*. The announcement of Edithe Havershiem's appointment as the Coordinator of Betrothal Arrangements is just a politically appeasing way of calling her a matchmaker or Yenta, which is what she's apparently been doing in the private sector for decades. The announcement of why the Ministry hired her and the real purpose of her position is being held for the morning we leave for Christmas hols. From what our sources have said, the Ministry is drafting a series of articles introducing her and extolling her qualifications as a matchmaker."

The students once again started talking to their friends, making a low rumble of discontent and concern in the room.

"Everyone, please!" Hermione shouted, holding up her hands to get everyone to settle down again. "Between my dorm mates and me, we are receiving all the major publications and magazines. One of the girls in my dorm has a father on the staff of the *Daily Prophet*, and others have relatives who work in the Ministry. As you know, Luna's dad is the editor of *The Quibbler*. We are trying to keep up with what's happening as best as we can, and I am passing on to you what I know. So far, all we have to do is register. Draco and a few others believe that the Ministry is going to start matching us up to one another in arranged marriages through this Yenta and her staff. If that happens, we will need to take action to make ourselves ineligible."

"Like what kind of actions," a boy asked in the back as several students made loud exclamations, showing their willingness to fight the Muggle-born Liaison Commission.

The question, "What can we do?" came from a group of Hufflepuff girls as a Ravenclaw girl in front asked, "What do you have in mind?"

Hermione waited until the uproar died down a bit before answering. "I have one week before hols. I'll be brewing the Pseudopregnancy Potion. Any girl who wants to can see me, Draco, Luna, or Susan about taking the potion. That way, I know how much to make. I strongly suggest that we *all* take it, *all the girls*, unless you are engaged to a beau or plan on filing a request for engagement with the Ministry. But keep in mind, the Ministry has already denied many of the betrothal requests that didn't meet the Emancipation Commission for Fair Marriage Contracts Act's criteria. Those who choose to take the potion will need to take it the first day of your next cycle. The potion will make your body think it's pregnant with all the symptoms you'd have if you actually were. When you're supposedly starting your second trimester, you'll need to take the Pseudocycysis Potion in order to carry out the ruse. This potion makes the drinker's body mimic pregnancy as well without the girl who takes it actually having to become pregnant. Hopefully, Madam Pomfrey won't figure out what we are doing and report us. Each girl here should pick a guy, *any guy*, it doesn't matter who, to claim that he is the father of the baby. Under the Bastard Law, the Ministry cannot do anything until the paternity of the baby is established. That will give all of us at least six months to stave off any forced matches made by the Ministry." Hermione sat down again.

Draco rose to his feet. "So, are there any questions?"

About a hundred-fifty hands, give or take, flew up in the air.

Minerva had contacted Mafalda Hopkirk herself, requesting a copy of the Marriage Law and the Memorandum of Understanding and Obligations for the position of Coordinator of Betrothal Arrangements. Her first request had been denied, but late that night as Minerva relaxed with a cup of cocoa before bed, an owl had flown in with a note written on Ministry stationary.

Headmistress McGonagall,

Such information as you requested is at present on a tightly controlled restricted list. As Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, I would be more than happy to meet with you for consultation.

I would be available at six o'clock tomorrow evening. Will that suffice?

If you're unavailable at that time, please be so kind as to schedule a meeting with my assistant so that we can discuss the ramifications of the current laws and hopefully relieve any and all of your concerns.

Hoping you are well,

Mafalda Hopkirk

D.M.L.E.

Minerva had wasted no time in writing to Mrs. Hopkirk, informing her that she was expected to be in the Great Hall at mealtimes and, therefore, unfortunately had to decline. The next morning at breakfast, the same owl had appeared with Mrs. Hopkirk's reply. Unlike before, the second message was on personal stationary with a lovely gardenia scent.

Minerva,

I'd be delighted to visit you this evening for tea and dessert. It has been far too long for such good friends to have not seen each other, and I cannot say how pleased I was to receive your note. Would eight o'clock be acceptable?

I have several briefings to review, and the file on Miss Havershiem must be settled no later than Monday if I am to make the press by Friday. I'm afraid I'll be stuck eating at my desk again. So how fortunate our meeting is to be postponed.

I so look forward to our chat.

Your dear friend and humble servant,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Minerva sat at her desk rereading both letters. She let the hand holding the second letter drop to the desk. "What is she playing at, Albus? Her first letter brushes me off, the second states that she'd be happy to meet with me to discuss my concerns, and then she writes as if we've been close friends for years."

"Yes, well, it is quite possible that she is covering for the true nature of her visit," Albus said from his frame.

"Or more likely, the mail is being searched," Phineas Black sneered. "I wouldn't put it past the Ministry to continue doing that."

"Well, I can certainly find out if they are," Everard snorted. He returned from his portrait at the Ministry only a few seconds later. "Headmistress, it is confirmed. I spoke with that lovely girl on the first floor, and they are monitoring all messages sent by Floo. It started last night, sometime around four."

"Right after I Flooed my letter to Mrs. Hopkirk requesting the copy of the Marriage Law and Edithe Havershiem's job description. Thank you, Everard, for checking on that for me." Minerva turned in her seat to face the portrait behind her. "So, Albus, what do you make of this. It would appear that even sealed official pouches are subject for

censorship. I thought that nonsense was done with already when the Death Eaters were removed from the Ministry."

"Apparently not," Albus said, stroking his beard. "There is a reason why you are being given only partial information, Minerva. The Ministry is trying to avoid tipping its hand. I have been to my small portrait in Arthur Weasley's office, and he is as in the dark as we are. He was most furious about what happened with the Adopt A Grandparent program and has been trying to assist the Muggle parents with the return of their children. His efforts are tied up in red tape, I'm afraid. Not only that but Kingsley is also having little luck capturing the last of the Death Eaters and Voldemort's supporters. With the losses the Aurors took, he is grossly understaffed. Those teaching the training program are the Aurors who were seriously wounded in the war. All other Aurors are spread much too thin. Even Kingsley has been having to do field work as well as run the department. It's why they were so lenient in accepting our students into the Auror training program. I was well aware that Mr. Potter and Mr. Ronald Weasley wanted careers as Aurors, but that Miss Chang, Miss Spinnet, Mr. Finnigan, and Mr. Longbottom were inclined in that direction, I admit was a bit of a surprise. I'd always hoped Mr. Longbottom would pursue a career in Herbology."

"But these questions on the census forms, Albus! They are ridiculous!" Minerva sneered, picking one of the forms up. "They want O.W.L. scores, type of wand wood and magical core, left or right handed, list of hobbies outside of school, favorite food, and the list of questions goes on. Favorite color, favorite book, name of pets by breed and species... It's not a census form as much as one hundred fifty questions on tastes, hobbies, likes and dislikes, beliefs, values, emotional health and skills..."

"You will not know until tonight, Minerva," Albus said softly. "I have a feeling that Mrs. Hopkirk wants to tell you what's going on, but she might be under pressure to keep her mouth shut."

That night when Mafalda arrived, she handed Minerva a packet. "This is a copy of my entire file in regards to the Marriage Law. I have also brought you copies of the pertinent and relevant legislation from the Muggle-born Liaison Commission. Headmistress, may I call you Minerva? May I be frank?" she asked, sinking into one of the chairs as Minerva folded her hands on the desk, nodding at the request to use her given name, although Mafalda plowed on undeterred. "I see a real problem coming. It's a whole new method of perpetuating the prejudices that plague us as a society. Instead of Muggle baiting and bashing, the Ministry is attempting to eradicate pure-bloods all together...or that is a possible goal. If the Muggle-born Liaison Commission gets their way, I can see how...that in one generation...possibly two, there will no longer be any who can call themselves pure-blood."

"You cannot be serious!" Minerva exclaimed. If this was true, Minerva could understand the unusual letters.

"Oh, Minerva, I am. I've been privy to several meetings as Head of the M.L.E., and I can tell you, they are brewing up something big down there, and everyone, and I mean *everyone*, is only getting part of the picture. I was lucky enough to procure these..." She reached into her briefcase and pulled out a long folded cardboard that opened up into a huge chart. "This is Healer Creswell's breeding chart. If Charles Polister follows this, all the children of the wizard race will all be either half-blood or Muggle-born within two generations."

Minerva eyed the chart. Several of the headmasters and headmistresses on the two walls behind the chart asked permission to enter the frames of other portraits so they could see it. "Blue circles are pure-bloods... and does red mean Muggle-born?"

"This chart shows red for Muggle blood and blue for pure-blood. Half-bloods are shown as half and half. With this chart you can see how they intend to control marriages until everyone is a half blood or less," Mafalda said.

"Like the ones in the middle," Dilys said from Everard's frame. "This is really a poor representation of a breeding program, for any species."

"But you cannot simply make people mate and breed like you would a crup!" Minerva said defiantly. "People wouldn't stand for it!"

"Minerva, have you read the questionnaire that the Muggle-born Liaison has compiled for the census?" Mafalda asked.

"I've read through most of it," Minerva admitted. "I haven't read the entire thing, it's pages and pages!"

"Well, let me summarize it then. This is a match-maker's form. I say this because of the types of questions and how they are worded," Mafalda stated. "This census takes into consideration what a matchmaker might consider as key dimensions of a person's personality. Besides values and personality traits, the questionnaire, which takes about an hour to complete, is designed to match couples based on a handful of parameters: including genealogy, religion, cultural traditions, general preferences, hobbies, activities, as well as habits such as drinking, smoking and gambling. Even which Quidditch team the individual prefers."

Minerva stared at the chart and sighed. "This fits in with Healer Brumfeild's thesis. He stated that a mixing of the populace was necessary to ensure our survival. He even went as far as to suggest reinstating Seers as matchmakers, something about a couple's compatibility was the leading indicator of long-term success of marriages and promoted good stable homes for the mental health of their offspring."

"Yes," Mafalda said, folding the chart up and laying it on her lap. "One more thing very few people are aware of; Graceilla Warblock is Healer Brumfeild's niece."

"I see that nepotism is as alive and well in the Ministry today as it was when Voldemort was directing the show," Minerva sneered.

"Too right, you are," Mafalda said, and two of the portraits laughed at her declaration, making Mafalda and Minerva laugh along with them.

Canon Note: The title of the book in this chapter, *Magical Potions: A History of Magical Drafts and Potions* by Ranulph Ballard, is a play on the title of Harry's Potions book from the first book. As per canon: *Magical Drafts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger, (The Sorcerer's Stone, chapter 5) The copying of the name is intentional, using Drafts instead of Draughts, which I know is the preferred.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

It had taken Bernice's father and uncle only a few days to get the ingredients they needed, but that delayed valuable time needed to brew the potion before Hermione had wanted to leave for Christmas. Bernice had included lots of additional ingredients to her list so that her inquisitive father wouldn't figure out what they were up to and had doled them out to her friends to replenish their potions kits. Nevertheless, Hermione planned to brew the Pseudopregnancy Potion first, since she'd have to make several cauldrons at a time each month, and then brew the Pseudocycosis at the end of the school year so the girls would have it before they would need it to fake the third trimester of their pregnancies.

Draco had taken Hermione to an unused classroom in the dungeons, and he had promised her that she'd be able to brew the potions undisturbed and with the protection of Slytherin House. Ginny and Hermione had discussed it, and they had decided to Apparate to the Burrow for a brief visit on Wednesday the twenty-fourth as soon as the potions were completed. The girls had sought out Professor Podmore, as Head of Gryffindor, to get permission for Ginny to leave the castle with Hermione so she could spend the two days with her family. He had asked why, and Ginny had explained to him that she had too much revision to do to leave for hols, but she missed her family too much not to go. Sturgis took some convincing, but he relented in the end after the girls promised to bring him some of Mrs. Weasley's Christmas biscuits.

The potions were extremely time sensitive and had required steps that took a long time to complete. At different intervals during the brewing process, the potion had to be stirred slowly and in a particular motion for a long time. Hermione had had to either skive off lessons or arrive late a few times during the first three days she started brewing the Pseudopregnancy Potion because she'd wanted to have the potion in its final stage before Christmas Eve.

The students going home for Christmas had left Hogsmeade on the twentieth of December. Mrs. Weasley had sent a letter to Hermione, inviting her to the Burrow for Christmas hols, but Mr. Weasley and Kingsley Shacklebolt had both sent her and Ginny warnings to stay at the castle. The good news was that with Hermione's status as an eighth-year, she and the other eighth-years had been given the option to come and go as they liked over the hols, as long as they all returned by the fifth of January for lessons.

The day before Draco left school for Christmas hols, he wrote to the Aurory to request visitation rights to see his father in Azkaban for Christmas. The first request was denied. Since he was only allowed to send one request a day, he hurried to the owlery the next morning and sent off another request before leaving for the train station. His notification of denial was waiting for him by the time he arrived at home. He sent the family owl off with his third request the following morning. The Aurory once again denied his request. His fourth was denied also.

Draco sent a deeply emotionally written letter to the *Sun* and *The Quibbler*, expressing his concerns that the Ministry of Magic would not allow family members to visit their loved ones in Azkaban, even at Christmas. Both papers ran his letter in the public opinion page. That afternoon, Draco received confirmation that he would be granted a Portkey to visit his father for half an hour on Christmas day.

Draco Apparated to the Apparation site on the cliffs of Dover to take the eleven o'clock Portkey to the visitor's waiting area. The Auror going with him checked Draco's bag thoroughly for any contraband, removing everything but the bar of soap, shampoo, conditioner, clean flannel and the small jar of toothpaste. When he arrived, he waited forty-five minutes for the receptionist to call his name, even though only three other people sat in the waiting room.

Draco was led up several flights of stairs, through three heavily warded steel doors and into a room where his father sat waiting at a table. Two guards stood by the door as Draco walked up to Lucius and sat down. "No touching," one of the men shouted and turned to smirk at his co-worker.

Draco shrugged. "I brought you what I could," he said, looking Lucius in the eye. He nodded once and held eye contact.

Lucius shook his head slightly. "I appreciate anything they would allow through, thank you. How is your mother?"

"She's well," Draco said, nodding slightly, hoping his father would take the hint. Draco smiled at the invasion of Legilimency. He carefully pulled forth the conversations he'd had about the current goings on in the wizarding world as he fidgeted with his fingers nervously on the table. Lucius frowned occasionally when Draco showed him Hermione's Muggle Studies group and the meetings in the Room of Requirement. "Not much has changed at school. Ministry is trying to rattle things up," he said as Lucius fished around in his thoughts to try and piece together what was happening.

"Ain't you gonna talk at all?" the other guard asked.

Lucius nodded, still maintaining his contact with Draco. "They censure our post," Lucius uttered, almost losing his contact with Draco's memories.

"The *Daily Prophet* is reporting all kinds of things," Draco said and quickly started summarizing what was happening until he felt a hand clasp his shoulder, which made him turn his head.

"Prisoners don't need to know nothin' about' wha' goin' on ou' there," the guard said gruffly. "Stick to personal an' family stuff."

Once again, Lucius entered Draco's mind, and Draco tried to push forward all the information he could, as he babbled about school, studies, and Quidditch. Lucius broke contact and sighed. "Your mother's last letter was vague. She apparently spent her time after her release at the beach."

Draco smiled. "I know; she has a healthy glow about her. I think the salt air did her good. I had a talk with our solicitor, and things are stable enough. I signed the papers, and the mortgage is paid up. I had been hoping you'd have advised me...but you haven't written any requests. I miss the fun you usually add *into* your letters."

"We get dull quills," Lucius replied, tapping his finger lightly on the desk. The surly guard admonished him for the tapping.

Draco nodded in understanding. "I have a girlfriend now."

"Anyone I know?" Lucius asked, smirking slightly when Draco had swept his eyes side to side to indicate 'no.'

"Miss Greengrass," he said with a slight nod. "But the way things are now, I won't be able to marry her."

Lucius nodded in understanding. "You treat her right, Draco. I will not have you besmirching the family name of Malfoy by getting the young lady pregnant, you hear me?"

"Yes, father," Draco said as piously as he could.

"Time's up," the guard announced.

"I should be finished giving my testimony in a week," Lucius said as Draco stood to go.

"I'll inform Mother," he said, looking at his dad one last time before the guards hauled him from the room.

Mrs. Weasley was delighted to see the girls, but Mr. Weasley pulled them aside and scolded them for risking leaving the safety of the castle. Ginny emotionally protested that he'd not given them any reason not to spend at least Christmas with the family, and Hermione, feeling hurt and confused, told him that this was the only family she had to spend Christmas with since her parents were still in Australia. Mr. Weasley was so touched, he hugged both girls tightly and kissed their foreheads, saying he understood, but he'd only wanted to protect them. He then adamantly made them promise to return to the castle the day after Christmas, but he wouldn't elaborate as to why. Ginny and Hermione both reluctantly agreed.

Mr. Weasley made a long Floo call to Professor McGonagall that evening, asking Professor McGonagall permission to Floo the girls back the day after Christmas. Afterwards, he pulled Mrs. Weasley over by the pantry to talk. Mrs. Weasley kept shooting furtive glances at the young people gathered around the kitchen table. Whatever Arthur was whispering to his wife, she apparently finally agreed. However, when Mrs. Weasley joined the group, she was all motherly smiles as if nothing was wrong, which

made Hermione wonder what Mr. Weasley was keeping from them.

Ron and Harry were delighted to see the girls, nevertheless, even if it was only for a day and a half. The first night, Christmas Eve, Hermione stole up to Ron's room and knocked on the door. As per the girls' plan to claim that the boys had gotten them pregnant, Hermione had decided to sleep with Ron and Ginny with Harry. All it took to get Harry to cooperate was for Hermione to say that Ginny wanted to be alone with him for a bit. Harry tried to brush his hair and changed into a jumper before he crept down the stairs to Ginny's room.

Ron was shy at first. Hermione kicked off her shoes, winking at him and telling him to do the same as she removed her socks. He stood up after tossing them aside, and she pulled his jumper off, sliding her hands on his skin as much as she could, smiling at his look of total disbelief. She ran her hands down his body and kissed him. "It's your turn," she whispered in his ear.

He got her head stuck in her jumper as he tried to pull it over her head, and he fumbled with her bra hooks while kissing her until Hermione simply removed her bra for him. At least when they kissed, he wasn't trying to suck her tonsils out like he used to with Lavender. Ron's appreciative stare at her breasts when he said, "You are so beautiful," as he tenderly caressed her helped Hermione relax and enjoy his touch. She slid her hand down his body, cupped his crotch and slowly felt his length through his trousers, nodding once when he gasped at her brazenness. He managed to get her jeans unzipped okay, but Hermione slid them off and smiled at Ron's amazed stare as he removed his trousers and pants while gaping at her. Hermione took his hand and guided him to his bed before she lost her nerve.

He was awkward at first as they lay touching, caressing, and kissing each other. Hermione reached down and started to stroke him, enjoying the silky feel of his skin on his hard member. Ron practically came in her hand, grabbing her wrist as he begged her to stop. It took some maneuvering, but she managed to roll and scoot onto her back as he touched and fondled her while adjusting his position over her, straddling her leg. At least his fondling her was amazing. Hermione encouraged him as much as she could while also trying to be quiet so as not to be overheard. But what he did with his fingers was driving her out of control. He smiled at her, watching her face as he brought her near orgasm, making her body pulse and quiver.

"Harry and I cast a spell on the room, Hermione, so we could talk and not be overheard," he said softly against her neck. "You don't have to hold back. No one can hear anything." He nipped her earlobe and stuck a finger in her. "Let go. Let it come."

Hermione sucked in her breath and tried to relax against the building sensations low down inside her. Her breathing quickened as Ron stimulated her beyond control. He was watching in smug satisfaction as she stammered out, "Ohmy, oh, my, gods, Ron," over and over, gripping the bed and his arm as she came.

As Hermione came down from her orgasm, Ron positioned himself between her legs and suckled her breast. He became too eager when he placed himself at her entrance, pushed in, and then froze when Hermione cried out in pain, only then slowing down enough to help her adjust to the intrusion.

In the end, they managed to try sex twice before Harry tapped lightly on the door.

The next morning, after unwrapping their presents, the girls went downstairs. The boys ambled in a few minutes later, looking sheepishly at them. The four of them were unusually quiet at breakfast. Apparently, judging by Ginny's smile and Harry's bashful glances across the table, Ginny had had a better time of it than Hermione had, but that was all right. She wasn't a virgin anymore, and Ron had come twice inside her, although he'd been considerate enough to use the Contraceptive Charm. It didn't matter, in three weeks she'd take the Pseudopregnancy Potion and claim Ron as the father anyway.

After lunch, the girls pulled the guys aside and told them what the plan at school was. Harry took the news much better than Ron did. "So last night, that was just so I'd get you pregnant?" he yelled.

"Shush, Ron, no!" Hermione said, trying to get him to calm down. "I wanted it to be you...no one else. Ginny wanted it to be Harry, and I wanted my first time to be *you!*" She was glad that they'd decided to sit in the orchard and away from the house.

"Sure, so you could get pregnant!" Ron sputtered angrily.

"The potion fakes pregnancy! But I was, as you know, a virgin! How would I be able to convince them I was pregnant if I was still a virgin?" she tried to explain, grabbing his arm when he turned away.

"Look, mate, they had their reasons. You hear the rumors, the Muggle-born Liaison Commission is gearing up, and pretty soon everyone is going to have to get married. I'm glad Ginny still wants me!" Harry said, trying to make Ron see reason.

"What do you know about what's going on?" Hermione asked as Ginny asked, "What have you heard?"

Harry pulled a leaf from the apple tree and began to tell them what he knew. Other than the fact that all eligible childbearing age witches were to be matched up with eligible and fertile wizards, he didn't tell them anything they didn't already know.

"Do you know when they are going to start matching everyone up?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, after everyone finishes the census forms," Ron spat. "They are going to force people to get married, and the Aurors have to arrest the ones that won't cooperate."

Hermione looked up at him. "Don't you see, Ron! This...us...it solidifies us as a couple. When I take the potion, no one can deny that the baby I'm supposedly going to be carrying is yours and Ginny's, Harry's."

"So you wanted to have babies out of wedlock! Is that it?" he asked, still being unreasonable.

Hermione explained the loophole she'd found in the Marriage Law. "This way, you and I are held in question, off the eligibility list. I don't want to be married before I finish school, and no, I don't want to actually be pregnant. I'm just going to fake it for a while. I do want kids, but not right away, and I do want them with you...if we decide to get married. But I want that to be *our* choice, not something shoved down my throat by a Ministry Yenta!"

"So you are just using me. That's it, isn't it! Great!" Ron sneered and stormed off.

Harry hung his head. "Ron and I are both going to be on the first list. We've already had to fill out the census form, and we will be among the first to be matched up. I think I like your plan, it makes sense to me, and I trust you, Hermione. Let me go talk to him. He's just hurt and confused by what's going on, that's all," Harry said. He kissed Ginny and got to his feet. "You'll see. Things will be all right. It's just, well, guys don't like being used, that's all."

Hermione glared at him. "It was my first time, and I wanted it to be with him! Him!"

Harry held up his hands. "I got that. Every witch who is seventeen to forty-five is on the list, and I think they are looking for wizards up to fifty-five, but I'm not sure. I heard rumors that even blokes as old as sixty-five... As long as you are capable of bearing or producing kids, and there are questions on the census form for the guys...something about financial viability and owning a house... Those in their prime are on the first list, including Ron and me. You know Ron was looking to rent a flat. He's changed his mind and is living with me most of the time, now."

"Hermione and I haven't filled out the form yet," Ginny stated. "If you two are already on the Yenta's list, does that mean you'll be matched..." Harry turned his head and nodded and both girls gasped. "Then I'm glad I'm naming you, Harry. If I sue you for the paternity of my unborn baby, you're protected under the Bastard Law, too!"

Harry turned and made a half smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Even if I got you pregnant, I already promised to marry you. I still want to."

Ginny jumped up and hugged him, and Harry buried his face in her hair, squeezing her tightly.

"What about Ron? What if the Wizengamot says he has to get married to someone else? What then? What if I'm ineligible or on a second or third list, or something, and they simply match him up with someone on the first list? Or, they say I can't marry him and match me up to someone I don't know?" Hermione ranted, waving her arm, first in the direction Ron had disappeared and then in a broad sweeping motion. "Or someone finically viable...regardless of his age? I'm not even ready to get married! Let alone breed babies for the next generation of wizardkind! This should be my...our...choice, not some Ministry paper pusher with a God complex!" Hermione hugged her knees and rested her head on her arms.

Ginny sat down next to Hermione and put a hand on her arm. "Hermione, we're all affected by this nonsense. But so far we haven't been able to stop it," she said calmly.

"I think you should know that the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee, the head of the M.L.E. Mrs. Hopkirk, the chief warlock and key members of the Wizengamot, and the Minister have all been flooded with letters and Howlers from angry parents and citizens alike, wanting an explanation about the questions in the census, and about the Ministry's arranged *engagements*. They had to hire loads of secretaries."

"Good," Hermione snapped. "About time they wizened up."

"Let me go talk to Ron. I'm sure things will work out," he said, turning to go.

"At least the parents are trying to do something," Ginny said, getting up. "I'm cold."

Hermione stood up and wiped the snow off her bum. "Gin, the parents who lost their kids under the Grandparent program haven't gotten their kids back. That program is still on, in full swing, just no more abductions and forced adoptions. This census; did you hear what Harry said about the questions? Did you hear him say *forced engagements*? That's what Draco has been saying all along. That's what's going on, and we're not in a position to stop it! All I can hope for is to find a loophole and get anyone who doesn't want to go along...out. If I can do that, then there is hope."

"Well, I'm with you," Ginny agreed.

That night, Harry snuck into the girls' room and asked Hermione if she wanted to be with Ron for a bit. Hermione agreed, more to give Ginny and Harry privacy. Much to her dismay, Ron mistook her visit to mean she wanted to have sex again. When he started to fondle her, she realized that she was still a bit sore. At least the second night hadn't been as painful as the first.

The next morning, Mr. Weasley insisted that the girls return to the castle. Hermione used the coin to find Draco as soon as she left the Headmistress' office. He responded, saying that he was at home, but he had to talk to her the moment he returned on Sunday. In fact, many of the students requested to return to the castle a week early, and the Hogwarts Express made a special run to Hogsmeade on Sunday the twenty-eighth.

Saturday night at dinner, the Great Hall was abuzz regarding the Muggle-born Liaison Commission's census form. All the students who'd spent the week at home had been required to fill out the long questionnaire. According to whomever Hermione asked that day, the form apparently took most of the students who'd filled it out an hour or more to answer all the questions, and many of the questions were repetitious or simply reworded. A lot of the questions had to do with choosing between options, like decision making and preferences, not so much as a normal matchmaker's inquiry.

Professor McGonagall stood up before pudding was served. "May I have your attention, please," she called out. "If you are fifteen or older, or if you will turn fifteen this year, please remain seated. The rest of you may now return to your houses. Desserts and hot cocoa will be served in your common rooms."

Hermione and her friends sat nervously in their seats.

"If any of you have completed the census and have a certificate of completion, you may rise and return also. Your Heads of House will be by to collect your certificates," Professor McGonagall stated. "If you have not taken the census, you are to remain."

Hermione looked around the room to see who got up to leave and then turned her attention back to the Headmistress.

"Those of you remaining, you will be here tomorrow morning after breakfast to fill out the census. A parchment and quill is being placed on each table." She indicated to Professor Flitwick who was doing just that. "You will sign your name and then you may go to your common rooms." She stood a moment longer as if wanting to say more, but sat down after a lengthy pause. When the quill and parchment was passed to her, Hermione signed her name, then passed it to Ginny, and waited until her friends all signed it before getting up to go. At the other three tables, several of the students looked at her with mixed expressions of apprehension, confusion, anxiety, and sadness.

Hermione sent a message through the coins, asking the primary contacts of each house to meet in the library after everyone had finished the census. Hermione, Ginny, Cecil, and Luna finished first. It was the first time Hermione had ever rushed through anything in her life without really caring about the answers to the questions. Draco, Susan, and Thomas arrived a short time later, and Hermione filled them in on what had been discussed.

After spending nearly all morning filling out the dreaded census form, many of the students approached the group sitting in the library about taking the Pseudopregnancy and Pseudocycosis Potions.

Julianna Connery, a seventh-year Slytherin, brought Hermione a list of all the Slytherin girls who wanted to take the potion. "We had a meeting in the common room, and we decided to go along with your plan...all of us. It's better to make our own decisions than have them made for us...especially something as big as this. So, we're in. I have also gotten all our, er, everyone's dates, you know, for when we need to take it."

"Thank you," Hermione said, taking the list. She asked Julianna to tell the girls to meet in the Room of Requirement later that night to learn more about the potion and the side effects. She turned to Susan and Luna.

"I think the Slytherin girls are right," Susan stated. "I'm going to ask all of the Hufflepuff girls and see who's really in and who doesn't have the guts to do something about our situation and wants to take their chances with the S.H.M.R.C."

"I think it's good, asking them to decide. I don't want to force anyone into this," Hermione agreed. "Connery is right; it's best if they decide for themselves."

"I'll make a similar list and to try and get the dates each girl would need to take their first dose in my house as well," Luna said resolutely.

"It's funny, all of us banding together," Julianna stated, watching her finger as she made circles on the tabletop.

"Actually, I'm really glad we have Slytherin with us," Hermione said, and everyone, including Julianna looked at her. "I mean, Draco has been a huge help in planning and everything. Sure I have sources, but he saw what was coming before I did. I'm really grateful."

Julianna smiled. "You're all right, Granger. I'll let the girls know about the meeting."

Susan and Luna promised to pass on the same message and left quickly to find out who was really going to go through with this.

When Hermione entered the common room, most of the girls who'd taken the census were gathered together, talking about it. She asked them to find all the other girls who were being manipulated by the S.H.M.R.C. and bring them to her dorm room. The room was crowded only a few minutes later as Hermione asked them if they were really willing to take such a drastic stand. The pros and cons were discussed at length with only a handful choosing to bow out. Hermione told them they could change their mind at any time. The rest of the girls signed a list and indicated when they'd need their potion.

Hermione enlisted the help of her dorm mates and several other girls after the meeting to fill almost two hundred small vials filched from the Potions classroom.

That night, when the girls all started to arrive for the meeting, each girl was given a monthly dose, which had a small tag on it. Once again, the girls all discussed the pros and cons of trying to fool the Ministry. The Slytherin girls were staunch supporters of taking matters into their own hands, and the Ravenclaws debated the rational choice of thinking for themselves...not a Ministry Yenta. In the end, only a handful backed out. The others were resolute.

"Okay, you all have your first dose. Write the date on the tag when you'll start your next cycle and take the potion. Your cycle might stop, that's expected, but it's okay if it doesn't. When you break the seal of the vial and drink the potion, the date when you should take the next dose will appear. It should be approximately the date of the first day of your next cycle. Be sure to come see me so I can refill the vial and reset the charm before that date. You must take the potion each month for the first five months. Then we take the Pseudocyesis Potion on the sixth month thru your ninth," Hermione explained carefully before they all left. "Hopefully by that time, if not sooner, this horrible law will be appealed."

Ginny saw Draco in the Entrance Hall the next morning on her way to breakfast. "Harry and Ron said to send you their best," she told Draco.

"Oh, I just bet they did," he scoffed at her. "When do the girls start taking the potion?"

"It will vary per girl, but we have it all worked out," she replied. "Hermione was very clear about when we are to take it, and she's going to remind them again. By the way, she wants another meeting with all the girls in the Room of Requirement tonight."

"Good. Me and the guys...from all the houses...we had a meeting too. We've been making a list of who is willing to be sued for impregnating the girls. Nearly all of us have signed the form. Some of them are still hoping that they can marry their girlfriends, though, so they wrote down who they're seeing. Most of us are a little worried about how this will go, but you Dumbledore's Army lot...we decided to trust you. It's what swayed most of us...you standing up to the Ministry like you did before. I think it will work." He handed her a long rolled up piece of parchment. "Here, give this list to Hermione."

She started to unroll the parchment, looking at the names. "What if there aren't enough guys?"

"I'll deal with that when the dragon flames," he said with a smirk. "In a pinch, some of us can afford to have two girls sue us at the same time, might add to the confusion if we did. The parchment is divided into four columns: each guy's name, his signature, then a space for the girl's name, and her signature. That way there is no overlap unless we have to."

"Draco, that's brilliant!" Ginny beamed, rolling it back up.

"I do have my moments," he said, smirking. "This is to protect us guys too, all of us, so we have to be named, right? This way, every guy who isn't submitting a notification of a prearranged engagement is accused. As I said, lots of the guys wrote down their girl's name, hoping that the Bastard Law will enable them to marry their girlfriends."

"That's a good idea," Ginny said, stuffing the parchment into her bag. "I'll see you later, okay?"

"Not if I see you first," he teased her, turning to go. "Tell Hermione we're standing with you on this."

"Sure."

At first, Madam Pomfrey simply smiled at the girls who came in asking for something to take for morning sickness and gave them the prenatal potions to take each morning. When more and more girls came in for the same symptoms, and none of them requested pregnancy testing, Poppy started to get suspicious, but kept her mouth closed. As March rolled around, nearly every girl, fifteen and up, were taking prenatal potions, and eighty or so were taking potions to relieve morning sickness.

Poppy remembered the special Valentine's Day edition of the *Prophet*, which listed of all the newly betrothed couples Mrs. Havershiems had successfully matched through her professional matchmaking skills with a snort of derision.

At the end of March when Edith Havershiems of The Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee announced that the Ministry would begin matching young couples, based upon her compatibility profiling, Poppy understood what the girls were doing. For the first two weeks, Poppy asked all of the pregnant girls what they intended to do and told them what their options were. Every one of the girls said they were keeping their babies, even if the father wasn't supporting them.

Poppy wanted to scream at that point. As a Healer, and under the Bastard Law, every pregnancy in which the unmarried witch chose to keep the child, she was obligated to report it to the Wizengamot. The Wizengamot then sent a form, insisting that the date of conception and the name of the wizard, or father, be identified, and a paternity suit was filed. Then at the beginning of the third trimester, Poppy would have to perform a Paternity Charm to verify if the accused wizard was indeed responsible. That meant having the expectant mother and the accused, forcibly if necessary, in her hospital wing. At this rate, she'd be handling one hundred and five cases. *One hundred and five!* Oh, my... over a hundred... She looked at her log and started counting. *Seventeen eighth-years, twenty-two seventh-years... twenty-five sixth-years and fifteen fifth-years... Oh, my!*

Then it dawned on her just why none of the girls requested a pregnancy test. She smiled as she read the list while waiting for the Headmistress to arrive in her office.

"Minerva, I don't understand it," Madam Pomfrey said as she pulled a thick folder from her filing cabinet. "One hundred and five girls have come to see me regarding morning sickness and other pregnancy related issues."

"One...how long has this been going on, and why wasn't I told immediately?" Minerva said in shock, plopping down into the chair in front of the Healer's desk.

"I have been tracking the girls for several weeks now. Nearly all the fifth- through seventh-, excuse me, eighth-years seem to have gotten pregnant...on purpose," Poppy said calmly. "If I didn't know better, there is a plot afoot. Didn't you tell me that Mrs. Hopkirk sent you a letter informing you that the students were to be given suitable matches? If I didn't know better, I'd say we have an activist here at Hogwarts who is engaging all the girls who are susceptible to this infernal Marriage Law in a rebellion against the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee's newest development." Poppy handed Minerva the heavy file.

"The Ministry's Marriage Law," Minerva said thoughtfully, accepting the folder and reading down the list of names. "Nearly every eligible girl in school..."

"Correction, every eligible girl at Hogwarts is now ineligible for matching from this Ministry Yenta under the provisions of the Bastard Law."

Minerva dropped the file on the desk. "All of them...suing for paternity...you cannot be serious!"

Poppy sighed. "Oh, but I am. Ever since the *Daily Prophet* announced that the Ministry was going to matchup the female population based upon this compatibility profile they arranged by means of the Ministry's census, the girls have all come forth and announced intent to keep their babies. All one hundred and five, and they gave me the names of the ninety-six boys who impregnated them. Apparently, nine boys impregnated two girls each."

"And they are all suing for paternity?" Minerva asked.

"Each and every one," Poppy replied, turning the folder so she could read it. "Miss Granger claims Ronald Weasley as the father of her child, and Ginevra Weasley has claimed Harry Potter responsible! Draco Malfoy is claimed in two suits as is Cecil Benders, Thomas Knightly, Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, and Ernie Macmillan, to name a few."

"Messers Goldstein, Boot, and Macmillan were in Dumbledore's Army; Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Benders, they've been seen with the girls in Gryffindor quite a bit this year..."

Minerva said, her voice trailing off as she stared at the potions cabinet behind Poppy. "I have no idea why Mr. Malfoy or Mr. Benders would be so reckless as to purposefully impregnate not one, but two girls, other than to assure they are ineligible for forced engagements... But the other boys, they are defenders, brave lads; they may have done it at the girls' requests."

"Minerva, I never said that the girls were, in fact, pregnant," Poppy stated, enjoying the confused look on the Headmistress' face. "I said they *seem* to have gotten pregnant. I never confirmed any of them."

"What?" Minerva gasped in shock.

Poppy smiled and nodded. "Yes, not one of them wanted to confirm their pregnancy. They dutifully reported it, but not one girl asked to have the Pregnancy Charm done."

Minerva swallowed and adjusted the brooch at her throat. "All of them."

Poppy nodded. "All of them. Seems to me that they knew they were, without any doubts, pregnant; or there may be another explanation. It's farfetched, considering that Hogwarts doesn't have the directions for the potion in the library, but the symptoms are all there. The Pseudopregnancy Potion."

"But... How?" Minerva stammered in total disbelief. "How is that possible?"

"One Draco Malfoy is my guess; or Cecil Benders possibly. Both the Benders and the Malfoys have rather expansive libraries," Poppy said, folding her hands on her desk on top of the folder. "I don't know how, or when, but it fits with the why. And I can't say I blame them for trying."

"So what do we do?" Minerva asked. "The girls, they are not harming themselves with this potion, are they?"

"Oh, no. I'm not concerned in that regard. But my guess is that Edith Havershiems is going to be quite upset when she discovers that every young girl that Graceilla Warblock and Charles Polister tried to wrangle in for her to play matchmaker for is ineligible. This is going to really upset that witch. The Ministry may demand I make the girls submit to the Pregnancy Charm."

Minerva smiled. "But of course, you cannot unless they consent."

"Exactly," Poppy said with a sigh.

"Are you ready to face that?" Minerva asked. "I'll support you, if you are."

"It's the least I can do," Poppy said resolutely.

Minerva nodded and sat up straighter. "Then you will have all the support I can give you."

"Thank you, Headmistress."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

The Fertility Feud...

Poppy fell back into her chair and dropped the completed file on the ever-growing pile. So far, she had completed eighty-two of the obligatory reports for the Wizengamot. It was only the third week of March, and nearly all the girls she'd had in for prenatal checkups had filed paternity charges on the boys they claimed had impregnated them. One more week, and she was certain that the remaining thirty-three would follow suit. One hundred and fifteen, which included the ten new expectant mothers this month, and if things went as she figured, another eleven would be by to see her as well. That would account for every single female student between the ages of fifteen to eighteen who would have their birthdays before the end of school.

She picked up the next folder, dipped her quill and began calculating the information requested. 'Amy Waters, age fifteen. Date of her last menstrual cycle was the fifteenth of February, according to the girl. Her due date is... the twenty-second of November. Her baby was supposedly conceived around the first of March. Her second trimester should be the tenth of May, which would put her third trimester around the twenty-third of August. Suggest scheduling a paternity test last week of August, St. Mungo's maternity ward. Wizard responsible...' She checked her notes. *Oh, yes, Steven Perry, fifth-year Hufflepuff. Good family. Won't they be delighted.*

Poppy wrote down the boy's name, answered all the pertinent information of the case and set down her quill. She picked up the sealing wax and added her Healer's crest to the official document. She signed her name, closed the file, and placed it on the pile to go to the Wizengamot.

She sat back in her chair with her hands laced across her middle and smiled. She might be remiss in not sending each file as they came in, but she held a perverse sense of defiance in the fact that she would only send them in with her obligatory monthly report. After all, it's not like they were life threatening cases, and she was only following normal protocol. Pregnancy hardly rated in equivalence to an Acromantula or a Basilisk attack on the castle, potions explosions, fatal or simply contagious disease outbreaks, or a battle. With modern maternity Healer practices, none of the young mothers or their babies would be at serious risk of dying. "Not that there are babies," she scoffed and placed the completed files in the crate. Poppy sat up. That wasn't exactly true. *There were a few of the girls who might actually be pregnant. But since none of them will allow me to do the Pregnancy Charm, I can't be absolutely certain.*

She looked at the calendar on her desk and stared at the eight names she would see tomorrow for their checkups.

At least she didn't have to send these files individually by owl.

Merilyn-Elizabeth Lovelle, administrative secretary of the Council of Magical Law of the Wizengamot Administration Services, loved her title and her position. Normally. But, with this ongoing nonsense of the Department of Muggle-born Liaison Commission's constantly changing of the laws, and with all their amendments, things were

getting out of hand. She had families wanting to sue the Ministry for invalidating signed betrothal contracts, dissolving prearranged plight agreements of understanding, and refusing marriage licenses. There were legal suits regarding dowries and bridal gifts because, under the present law, the Wizengamot had dissolved the unions in question. There were even a few suits filed against the Wizengamot itself, and that was unheard of.

No, this Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee was making her job far more difficult than it ought to be. How was she supposed to decide which cases took precedence or required a partial tribunal over a full tribunal? Surely, not all the cases regarding the legalities of marriage union required a full panel of the Wizengamot. Most should have been handled in a minor courtroom with three to five members present. Nevertheless, that puffed up warbler, Graceilla Warblock, insisted on a full panel...a full tribunal each time! *Quite possibly the most ridiculous, and time-consuming, waffle-head in the country!*

Her case ledger was full for months, and Merilynn-Elizabeth hated scheduling cases so many months advance. Things happened, emergencies came up, delays were costly, postponements and changes of venue happened more frequently... No, she hated having the courtroom dockets scheduled so far ahead.

She wasn't even allowed to table any of the more ridiculous challenges to the desired unions. Merilynn-Elizabeth sighed at the case she had to file for her friend, Charlotte Holt. She and Mark Leach were such a lovely couple, and if it weren't for the fact that there was now a child now in question, the union would have been challenged. She was certain that they didn't have too many common ancestors, they were both practically half-bloods. In fact, Charlotte was suing the Wizengamot for forcing her to take action against her fiancé under the Bastard Law of all things.

She looked up as an interoffice carrier walked in with a huge crate under his arm. "I've a large package for the Wizengamot," the young man said, dropping the crate on Merilynn-Elizabeth's desk with a heavy sounding 'thunk.'

"What?" she exclaimed in shock, rising to her feet. "Who's that from?" It was stacked full of files, and judging by the sound it made landing on her desk, magically enlarged to contain more files than usual.

"Hogwarts, ma'am, to be delivered to the administrative secretary of the Council of Magical Law of the Wizengamot Administration Services," he said, holding out a clipboard and quill. "Please sign here."

The number of paternity suits caught the attention of the *Daily Prophet* and the *Sorcerer's Sun*, although the *Sun* was far more unbiased in their assumptions. The *Prophet* did get two facts right, the number of young girls in the school who claimed to have gotten pregnant and the corresponding number of paternity suits filed under the Bastard Law. The article in the *Prophet* claimed that discipline at the school was at an unheard of low and that the students were running amuck, apparently allowed to fornicate in the dorms and classrooms.

The *Sun* pointed out that the suits were from *all* the girls in the school, ages fifteen to eighteen, apparently making an attempt to fight the Marriage Law. Furious parents sent letters to Headmistress McGonagall and the Heads of House, demanding to know what was going on, and what, if anything, was being done. The Wizengamot sent representatives to the school to verify the records of the pregnancies and discovered that none of the girls had requested to confirm their conditions. This, too, made the papers.

"Oh, get this!" Shelia screeched as she plopped down in front of Ginny and Hermione in the Great Hall for dinner with her copy of the *Sorcerer's Sun* clutched in her hands. "The suspicions stated in the *Daily Prophet* are that the girls at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have either taken a fertility potion to ensure pregnancy or they are faking it. In an interview with Rita Skeeter, Graceilla Warblock commented that the young people were just afraid of being matched by a professionally trained and Ministry-employed Yenta, and she assures the public that the matter is being addressed by the Wizengamot." Can you believe this?" she asked, looking up over her paper.

"Oh, my, gosh! They found out!" Bernice exclaimed, clutching her goblet so tight it made her knuckles white and the juice slosh out a bit.

Several students from the house, and those sitting closest to them at the other tables turned toward Hermione and Shelia, openly listening in. "No. They *think* they know what's going on. Listen. Representatives of the S.H.M.R.C. have sent out notices to each pregnant student at Hogwarts to insist that each student claiming to be pregnant must submit to a Pregnancy Charm to confirm their pregnancy or be held in contempt of the Marriage Law." Shelia looked up at Hermione with a worried expression. "I never got a letter. Did you?"

Bernice spoke up before Hermione could answer. "Can they do that? Can they force us to take a Paternity Charm?"

Hermione shook her head with a mischievous smile on her face. "I don't think so, no. Remember, Patient Rights. We have a legal and ethical right to accept or decline any test, potion, or examination. And Madam Pomfrey couldn't have said anything about our faking it without performing the charm. Because under our Healer-patient confidentiality rights, she cannot blindly speculate or make a diagnosis publicly without losing her Healer's license. It's in her Hippocratic Wand Oath as a Healer." She turned to Shelia. "And no. I never got a letter. Where did you get that?"

"My dad; who else. It's tomorrow's paper. According to my dad, the *Daily Prophet* also started making lists of eligible witches and wizards as well as announcing the first successfully arranged unions," Shelia said, holding up the paper again.

"Wait," Hermione said, holding out her hand. "Let's have a meeting after dinner. Then all the houses will know." She turned around to tell Susan that she wanted to hold a meeting and noticed that the word was already spreading. One of the Ravenclaw girls even got up to tell the Slytherin girls. As soon as Hermione nodded to Ginny that she was ready to leave, Shelia and Bernice jumped to their feet. When Hermione rose to leave, she saw that almost all of the older girls and many of the guys got up as well. She looked up at the High Table and sighed when she noticed that the professors watched her, too. Professor McGonagall made a slight nod of her head as she watched the girls leave.

Hermione found herself quickly surrounded, bombarded in the Entrance Hall with students wanting to know what had happened. "Hold on!" she shouted over the scared and angry students. "Let's get in the room and then talk!" She turned and ran up to the Room of Requirement with nearly two hundred students behind her. When the door to the room opened, it was once again full of comfortable chairs and sofas arranged in stadium seating style with a large, plush armchair on a small platform for Hermione down front. Hermione asked Shelia to read the article her father had sent her for everyone to hear.

"Okay, listen up!" she shouted as soon as Shelia finished. "They can't make us take the test. It's against our Patient Rights. Madam Pomfrey cannot make us take any test, potion, or conduct any charm on us against our will unless it is vital or necessary to save our lives. According to the new laws, if you are sixteen and up, you are protected by the Order of Consent. I think even the fifteen-year-olds can claim that right as well, considering you are just as likely to be forced into a Ministry arranged marriage. I checked that before suggesting we take this course of action. Any one of you can refuse the charm, and there is *nothing* Madam Pomfrey or the Wizengamot can do! It goes against the Healer's Hippocratic Oath, and since the Wizengamot has declared us legally emancipated...they have given us the say over our own bodies as emancipated adults."

There was an outcry of comments. Hermione tried to quiet everyone down, unsuccessfully, until Ginny let out a shrill whistle.

"Thanks, Gin. Okay, everyone listen up. In *The Quibbler* tomorrow, there will be an article I submitted that will explain our rights set forth by the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee's Emancipation Act! Get a copy of the magazine, and use it to fend off any problems with the representatives of the Wizengamot."

There were still a lot of questions, but most everyone calmed, knowing that Hermione had anticipated the S.H.M.R.C.'s actions. By noon the next day, every one of the girls faking their pregnancy passed around copies of *The Quibbler* and even many of the guys had a copy in their pockets.

It turned out that Hermione was right. The next morning, the *Daily Prophet* wrote a scathing article about Hermione Granger's actions in assisting a hundred girls to get pregnant rather than be given proper and beneficial Ministry engagements. The article extolled the benefits of a properly arranged union and reprinted the list of the newly

arranged engagements.

Hermione received numerous letters and Howlers over the next few days, one of the few she answered came from George Weasley, asking her how she pulled off such a coup d'état. Hermione sent him a copy of the Pseudopregnancy Potion and directions on how to use it. Hermione drafted a formal letter that Luna and Shelia asked their dads to print, which gave an apology of sorts to all the worried parents but that had been carefully written to avoid admitting any blame or assuming responsibility.

The Ministry announced their intentions the next day. The morning edition the first day of April, the S.H.M.R.C. announced that the stipulations of the Marriage Law were now in full force. Edith Havershiems gleefully listed twenty couples in the *Daily Prophet* who were engaged, supposedly in happy, Ministry-approved, arranged unions, which had been made by her and her staff of professionals as proof of her successful matchmaking skills.

That afternoon, a second special edition of the *Daily Prophet* was delivered to every subscriber. The large horned owl that delivered Hermione's pecked at her hand, making her bleed before he flew off. She opened the paper, and her eyes widened at the headlines.

Compliance to the Marriage Law Is Now Mandatory

In the efforts to ensure that all individuals of child-bearing age are properly matched by the compatibility profiling of the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Commission Yenta, Mrs. Edith Havershiems and her capable staff, the Ministry of Magic will hereby guarantee a suitable match for all eligible witches and wizards. Failure to comply with the Marriage Law will result in sterilization, internment in Azkaban, and having your wand snapped.

Due to a large increase of concern among couples and parents who claim to have been engaged prior to the enactment of the S.H.M.R.C. and the Emancipation Act, any couple who can show both proof of engagement and can reasonably show proof that their heritage is significantly devoid of common ancestry, may petition the S.H.M.R.C. for consideration. These couples will be compared for suitable compatibility and, if found, will maintain the rights of their prearranged marital contracts.

It has also come to the attention of the S.H.M.R.C. that a number of students have taken upon themselves to defy the Marriage Law and the efforts of the Ministry. Unless each of the young ladies currently engaging in illegal activities of falsifying pregnancies cease and submit to the administrative assistance of an approved union, each girl will be found in contempt of the law...

An old picture of Hermione from her fourth year, hugging Harry before the first challenge of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, graced the page.

The outcry of the students in the Great Hall as they read the articles was deafening.

Hermione pulled out her Galleon and called a meeting of all the girls in the Room of Requirement. When everyone was assembled, she raised her hand to get everyone's attention. "The Ministry still can't take action against us under the stipulations of the Bastard Law, which provides that no witch carrying or expecting a baby can be sentenced to Azkaban," she tried to reassure the students who had shown up. "So unless the Ministry appeals the Bastard Law or discovers that we are not pregnant, there isn't *anything* they can do. What I suggest is to hold fast to the plan and *don't give in*. Unless they force us to take the Pregnancy Charm against our will, and no Healer can do that unless they break their Hippocratic Wand Oath and forfeit their license as a Healer, there is *nothing* the Wizengamot can do!"

"But my father is demanding that I marry the guy I claim impregnated me," Michelle Kearney, a sixth-year Ravenclaw, wailed from the back.

"Under the Bastard Law, your parents can't force the guy to marry you until paternity is confirmed during your third trimester...or in our case what would be your seventh month," Draco told her from across the room. Two Slytherin guys voiced their agreement to his statement.

"Thank you, Draco," Hermione said, gaining everyone's attention again. "Harry and Ron told me that the S.H.M.R.C. is getting hundreds of Howlers every day. So are the Minister and the Heads in the M.L.E. Even the members of the Wizengamot are getting them. There are couples out there who are following our example and taking the Pseudopregnancy Potion as well. We are not as alone as you think. Yes, the *Prophet* is singling us out, especially me, and there is a lot of pressure being put on us, but only because we've taken ourselves off Edith Havershiems' list, and she's upset about it."

Julianna stood up. "Look, we've got nothing to lose. So far, all they've said is that we have to submit to the administrative assistance."

Norma, a sixth-year Ravenclaw, raised her hand. "But they have accused us of falsifying the pregnancies. When it's found out that we are, then what?"

"I have an idea, but it's a long shot," Hermione stated. "I found an annotation in an old Potions journal. It suggests that the Sterilization Curse is reversible. The wizard who wrote it is a renowned Potions master. I was hoping to find more on the subject, but so far I've had limited success. But there are other options; there has to be. We simply have to find them."

There were a lot of suggestions, comments, arguments made, and several ideas were thrown out. Susan wrote down as many of them as she could.

"What if we just see who the Yenta would match us up with," Jonathan Barnes, a fifth-year Slytherin, asked.

"You could," Julianna said, turning to the boy. "But then you'd have to marry whomever they picked, whether you wanted to or not. Look, everyone," she said, turning to the group. "My sister was matched to a guy she didn't even know. The Wizengamot approved the match without her consent, and she had to be married in a month or face the penalties. We all know what they are. She was listed as one of the Ministry's successful marriages, but trust me...this is not a winning situation for her. He is abusive towards my sister, and... I know that being under the influence of this potion sucks, but the alternative is worse. How many of you know someone who's being matched or has been matched?"

Several students raised their hands.

Julianna continued, "Okay, keep your hand up if the match is a good one or they are happy with their partner."

Only a few hands remained aloft.

"So you see, the alternative is worse. I say we take our chances and try to fight this," Julianna said and sat down.

Before everyone left, Hermione passed out the girls' next dose.

By now, Hermione was in full production of the potion. With Draco and Ginny helping her in the brewing, it was a lot easier making several cauldrons at once, although she was still missing lessons or running late at times. So far, none of the professors admonished her too badly about it though, and she hadn't lost any house points either. George wrote back that he was making a mint on the potion. Apparently, Angie had taken the potion and was claiming George as the father, and Verity had claimed Lee Jordan in her paternity suit. There were also women who sent Hermione Galleons so that they could try the ruse. She referred those letters to George so he could screen them, rather than send the potion by owl.

In her April report, Madam Pomfrey informed the Wizengamot that she'd given up trying to force the girls to take the Pregnancy Charm. Graciella Warblock responded back, furious at the Healer's inability to control the situation, warning her that the Wizengamot would take affirmative action.

Professor McGonagall sent a note to Hermione and Ginny, requesting that they come to her office. Madam Pomfrey was already seated in one of the chairs in front of the desk when the girls entered. "Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, have a seat," Professor McGonagall said, indicating the two empty chairs. "You girls have been rather busy, haven't you?"

Hermione swallowed nervously as she sat down. "I am studying for my N.E.W.T.s, Professor," she replied nervously, clasping her hands tightly in her lap.

"You have taken on the Ministry and have been brewing a restricted potion, which you've been passing out to the girls of my school," Professor McGonagall said, sitting stiffly in her chair and looking over her glasses at the girls.

Ginny and Hermione both tried very hard not to shift in their seats.

"It has been noticed. I don't blame you one bit. Now I have a letter from the Wizengamot stating that they are willing to consider approving of the match between your beau and yourselves, which I think is fair, considering that you have not gone through the S.H.M.R.C. Yenta for approval. If you choose this route, you will be expected to marry the young man in question at the end of your school year. Would either of you care to accept the decision of the Wizengamot?"

"Not under the current law, no," Hermione said as Ginny replied exuberantly, "Yes, I would."

Professor McGonagall smiled patiently. "Hermione, I'll ask you first. Please explain to me why, then, did you and Mr. Weasley decide to become parents." Hermione opened her mouth to explain but the Headmistress cut her off. "You, too, Miss Weasley, although why you'd drag Mr. Potter's good name into this, I cannot fathom."

"Harry and I are engaged, Professor," Ginny blurted out. Madam Pomfrey raised an eyebrow, but Ginny continued. "We have been ever since his sixth year. He promised me that if he survived Voldemort, we would get married."

"And Mr. Potter will confirm this of course?" Professor McGonagall asked.

Ginny nodded. "Yes, Professor, he will."

Professor McGonagall looked suspicious for a minute, then nodded, marking down Ginny's statement. "All right. I see no reason why you and Mr. Potter would be considered unacceptable." She then turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger?"

"I have been engaged to Ron since the end of our sixth year as well. Since I'm still in school, and he has three years of Auror training, we decided to wait. But then this Marriage Law came about, and well, we didn't want to wait and be told that we cannot marry," she said boldly.

"Very well, I'll submit that to the Wizengamot on your behalf," Professor McGonagall said as she opened another file and made an annotation. "According to the S.H.M.R.C. in order for the Wizengamot to approval your betrothal, you will both need to drop your lawsuits and submit your petitions for engagement to your respective fiancés. If you do that, I would think Mrs. Warblock would have to see that you are willing to compromise...to cooperate...it would be a show of good faith on both your parts. I'm sure that they will accept your engagements. That would surely appease those two witches..."

"With all due respect, Headmistress, I cannot do that," Hermione replied. "If we drop the paternity suits, then the S.H.M.R.C. can arrange marriages for us, and I refuse to accept a Ministry arranged match."

"But, Miss Granger, if you pardon me for saying, you are Muggle-born, and Mr. Weasley is a pure-blood. Your match is surely assured," Professor McGonagall said, lacing her hands in front of her and looking at Hermione over her glasses again. "That is the exact criteria the S.H.M.R.C. has set forth: force pure-bloods to marry Muggle-borns so as to widen the gene pool and strengthen the bloodlines of wizardkind."

"Yes, I realize that, but Ron and Harry are already on the first list, and they already have their Ministry selected matches...and truthfully, I don't trust the current administration," Hermione said, trying to keep her tone of voice calm and rational. "The S.H.M.R.C. has already started *forcing* couples outside of the school to get married or the Aurors arrest them for violation of the Marriage Law. Both Harry and Ron were given their matches prior to our paternity claims. What if they are forced to marry their Yenta approved matches through the S.H.M.R.C.?"

"Hermione's right. Harry told me at Christmas that he'd been sent his match already, a Deborah Mendleson, but he hadn't sent in his acceptance. If we drop our suits, then they might be forced to marry the Ministry approved witch within the month. That is why he was so glad that I offered this alternative," Ginny explained, trying not to fidget as the older women watched her intently while they listened. "Ron is on the list as well, but he didn't say anything about who he was matched up with. Harry said he was livid and refused to talk about it. The only reason none of the students here are being matched up is because we took matters into our own hands."

"No, the only reason you're not being matched up is because the students are still in school and are on a different list...or lists. The students finishing school will be matched up over the summer," Professor McGonagall.

"I strongly suspect that the Yenta has already determined who shall marry whom." Hermione sat forward and looked at the older women imploringly. "Harry told me that all the reproductively viable witches and wizards, seventeen through forty-five are on the first list. The second list includes wizards as old as fifty-five, although Harry heard rumors that men as old as sixty-five are being considered! They might be on a third list, but that's old! I don't want to be forced to marry an old guy...or any guy! If you consider that all the seventh- and eighth-year girls in school are on the second list...either we marry a guy in our year after leaving school or we might be matched with some old guy... Don't you see? This is necessary!"

"Well, okay then. But since Harry is in Auror training, Minerva, he and Ginny are not required to marry until Harry finishes his training program," Madam Pomfrey stated.

"According to the Proper Unions Act, if either of the couple is in school or a training program the wizard is required to allow the right to labor or *continued education* if said witch is in her sixth- or seventh-year of schooling. But they also infer that the wizard can hold the engagement until he has completed his training as long as he can show proof that he can support the girl in question."

Ginny nearly bounced in her seat. "He can! Of course Harry can!"

"And so can Ron," Hermione stated. "I also plan on furthering my education after Hogwarts. So does that apply to me as well?"

Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall both smiled. "Yes, it does," the Headmistress replied. "I suggest that you discuss this alternate course with your friends before the Ministry passes a law, forcing Healers to give certain diagnostic charms to patients against their will in cases where the witch or wizard is doing something or carries a condition destructive to their health. That's just some friendly advice, from your old Head of House."

Hermione looked at her, gobsmacked, and Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey both nodded; the professor, serenely, the Healer, frowning.

That night Hermione called an emergency meeting. Julianna, Draco, Thomas, and Cecil represented Slytherin, Susan and Luna each brought with them three students to represent their houses, and Bernice, Shelia, Bill Hamelton and Ernil Kroomer to represent Gryffindor with Hermione and Ginny. Hermione related what the Headmistress told her.

"Shite!" Draco snarled. "I knew this was going too well."

"Well, it's a disaster!" Julianna exclaimed. "So what now? We all agree to marry the bloke we claimed got us pregnant?"

Draco crossed his arms. "Or actually get their girlfriends pregnant. Can they get pregnant for real, Hermione, or not?"

Hermione nodded. "If the girl doesn't take the next dose, although it might take a month, she can get pregnant. Using a fertility potion would help, but they're against the law now."

"Terrific," Cecil snorted.

"If not, then I suggest that all the students apply to an educational or training program," Ginny suggested.

"What? Like Healer training?" Susan asked.

Hermione nodded. "That's exactly what she means. Even a Muggle university or technical training program would do. Under the Proper Unions Act, if either of the couple is in school or a training program, the wizard is required to allow the right to labor or *continued education* if said witch is in her sixth or seventh year of schooling," she quoted Madam Pomfrey. "That alone can provide all the seventh- and eighth-year students leaving school at least three years. By that time, this law has got to be appealed. So, unless we find a better solution to put off being forced into a marriage, it's an option. Because of the devastation caused by the war, the Healers and Aurors are accepting loads more applications."

"Then there are apprenticeships," Susan pointed out. "Nearly every field has some type of training."

"In the mean time, I'm going to apply to St. Mungo's and see if I get in," Ernil stated.

"There are all those pamphlets, leaflets, and flyers that are being passed around," Bernice suggested. "Some of them mention training."

When everyone was leaving, Hermione asked Draco to wait a minute to discuss the brewing schedule. Julianna and Cecil pulled Hermione aside. "What about this sterilization reversal you mentioned," she asked. "You said that it is reversible."

Hermione blushed. "I was using an article in a Potions journal to substantiate the antithesis of my paper and ran across an article written by S. S. Prince that suggested that certain disfigurement charms can be reversed by potions. There was a sentence in which he stated that the Sterilization Charm could be reversed in females by utilizing a testosterone potion with an estrogen inhibitor and vice versa in males... It's a long shot, but I haven't been able to find anything else written by Master S. S. Prince, nor anything about this potion."

"He is Severus Snape," Draco stated.

"I know he's Severus Snape," Hermione stated. "He didn't start publishing his articles under his own name until after 1980 when he came to work at Hogwarts. The article predates his years as a professor, when he was serving Voldemort."

"Snape knew how to make...he knew how to reverse the Sterilization Curse?" Cecil asked, gobsmacked.

"Professor Snape...and apparently he did, or knew about a potion that could," Hermione admonished him, giving Cecil a look that said she'd not tolerate any disrespect of the ex-professor. "Only I cannot find any of his writings on the subject."

"Well, you'd be looking in the wrong place," Draco stated, smiling at her.

"I was looking in the Potions section and through the journals and periodicals..."

"Of Hogwarts," Draco said smugly.

Julianna's eyes narrowed, staring at her. "You'd trust something written by Severus Snape?"

"With my life...and have, numerous times. He was always furious with me for quoting him in my essays," Hermione said emphatically. "Besides, he saved my life numerous times. My second year alone he brewed potions twice: he cured me from being petrified and when I, er... Anyway, he was a remarkable wizard, a brilliant intellect. Why wouldn't I trust him?"

"Oh, I dunno, Gryffindor, why wouldn't you trust a Slytherin, ex-Death Eater turned..."

"HE was a brilliant wizard. I owe him my life! My friends and I do...several times over, actually!"

Julianna's expression changed to a look of awed respect.

"His journals are at my family home. In the potions lab. He is a good friend of my dad's, and my uncle once removed," Draco stated. "I'm sure I can convince him to..."

"He's alive?!" Hermione shrieked, jumping to her feet.

"Of course he is," Draco said, smirking. "He's living in France at my family's estate. He's recovering and recuperating after everything he had to do in this bloody war. He wanted to start over...so my family is giving him a fresh start."

"How can I reach him?"

"Send an owl," Draco said smugly. "And here I thought you were intelligent."

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Submission or Infertility

Madam Pomfrey smiled at Hermione when she entered the hospital wing for her scheduled appointment. "Have you given any more thought as to what field you will pursue after leaving Hogwarts?" the kindly matron asked.

"In truth, I had been considering applying to the Ministry before all this happened, but now I'm not sure I want to," Hermione stated, taking her seat on the bed for her examination. "With everything going on, I was thinking about going into Magical Law."

"Have you ever heard about the Elfrida Clagg School of Magical and Danelaw in Castle Hill, Cambridgeshire? My nephew is a professor there. It's associated with

Cambridge University and is a fine institution. I'm sure Professor McGonagall would write you a letter of reference, if you like?" Madam Pomfrey asked as she swept her wand over Hermione's torso.

"Danelaw? The wizarding world follows Danelaw?" Hermione asked in shock.

"For centuries." The tip of her wand glowed red as it passed over her abdomen. "Hermione, you're not pregnant, are you?"

"How?!" She recoiled in shock and jumped to her feet. "You cannot perform the Pregnancy Charm without my consent! How could you?"

"No fetal heartbeat," the Healer said softly and sat down, indicating that she do the same. "I wanted to know for sure. I'm sorry. This will stay between us. But I feel compelled to tell you that the Wizengamot is going to require certain vital signs be taken on each of you girls to verify that you are carrying a vital, healthy fetus." She looked at her hands as she rolled her wand in her fingers, and then looked up, her grey eyes full of empathy. "You should know that as of next week, I am to include fetal heart rate, sex, size, and approximate weight in my monthly reports. You girls may refuse, but they're going to pass as a law requiring Healers to record prenatal vital signs on all pregnancies sometime soon. They want verification of your pregnancies now instead waiting until June."

"My third trimester isn't until July!" Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. "Wait! That means that they are revoking the Healer-patient confidentiality..."

Madam Pomfrey shook her head. "Your third trimester starts the eighteenth of June. Hermione, they are amending what qualifies as Healer-patient privileged information under the Healer's Hippocratic Oath, as well as what is or is not protected under Healer-patient confidentiality rights." She lowered her voice even more. "I suspect to be so informed by the end of next week. I had truly hoped to wait until you girls hit your third trimester before I had to report you, but it looks like I won't be able to. Those who would have their third trimester in the summer after leaving school...the Healers at St. Mungo's the S.H.R.M.C. are using aren't going to be lenient. Many of you are falsifying your paternity claims. The young wizards' families will have cause to sue each girl who has made false claims."

Hermione inhaled sharply as she covered her mouth. "The down side of the Bastard Law. I was hoping that this law would be repealed before...shit! What are we going to do?"

The kindly Healer laid her hand on Hermione's, and she felt a slip of parchment pressed into her palm. "It's a long shot, but you could claim that the girls all ate this. It's a rare delicacy that very few house-elves can make."

"Clam chowder from Shetland Island snow clams!? They're poisonous!" Hermione exclaimed when she unfolded the parchment. "Women used them to abort pregnancies."

"And if the soup is not prepared correctly it can cause sterility," Madam Pomfrey stated, so quietly Hermione had to strain to hear her. "I could lose my license, saying this, but I am on your side. I think that this Marriage Law is horrible. I'm too old, thank God," she said, crossing herself, "but I cannot condone what the Ministry is doing. It's one thing to encourage couples to have children, even provide fertility potions, but this... No, I agree with you girls. I'd fight it too. If you speak to the house-elves, Old Brenna knows how to make it properly. I should think a..."

Hermione stared at her in shock. "You have been fighting this with us, haven't you, in your own way?" she asked, suddenly aware of that the Healer had been helping them all along.

Madam Pomfrey stood abruptly, her expression an exaggerated show of righteous indignation. "I have no idea what you are implying, young lady! Of course not," she said in a bristled, curt tone, smoothing down her skirts. "I have done no such thing!" She winked just before she pulled herself up to her full height. "My reports have always been accurate and thorough. I have been the Hogwarts Healer for longer than you're parents have been alive! And I do not condone this sort of behavior." However, she was pointing to the file on the bedside table, and Hermione lowered her head, nodding in understanding. Making a sly glance at the wall as if looking at the Healer in embarrassment, she saw all the Healers in the portraits were watching them, some overtly, some coyly.

When she left the hospital wing, Hermione pulled out her DA coin and sent a message to Luna, Susan, and Julianna to gather some of the girls from each house and meet her in the room where she brewed the potions. When everyone was gathered, Hermione told the girls what Madam Pomfrey had said, and Ginny told them the warning that Professor McGonagall had given them.

"So now what?" Susan exclaimed, her fright making her voice seem nearly hysterical.

"Calm down, that's what," Julianna said, crossing her arms. "The S.H.M.R.C. is trying to root out what's going on, that's what."

"So we're going to be forced to admit that the paternity claims are false?" Bernice asked, wringing her hands together. "My family can't afford a false paternity suit."

"Like mine can?" Mary, a seventh-year Hufflepuff, snapped back, her expression as fearful as Susan's.

"Can they do that, take away our Healer-patient confidentiality rights?" Susan asked.

Luna was braiding a lock of her hair. "If the Wizengamot does, there won't be a witch or wizard who will confide in their Healer!" She looked serenely at Julianna. "And even if a Healer does break their oath to do this charm, the Healer's Hippocratic Wand Oath would invalidate it. Their wand would snap and their wand arm would be crippled with paraungius bursoliths."

"Ernil told me about that! It's really a painful calcification of the bursa in the knuckles and wrist joints...they wouldn't be able to use their hand anymore. It's worse than arthritis; it isn't curable!" Susan stated, wringing her hands. "So why is the Wizengamot doing this? When the public finds out...when the Healers find out..."

"Susan, you're brilliant!" Ginny exclaimed excitedly.

"What is? We're being found out!" Valerie whined. Up until now, she'd been really uncomfortable about the whole idea of faking the pregnancies and had been spending more time with her other friends, disassociating herself from Shelia and Hermione.

"Hermione said that Madam Pomfrey was only told this recently...and Professor McGonagall knew that this was going to happen! I think they were given the information from an inside source and they've passed it on to us!" Ginny said, smiling and indicated toward Shelia with her hand. "They are trying to give us forewarning, like Shelia's dad does when he hears things through his reporters!"

Hermione pressed the heel of her palm to her temple. "Only I was so blind...I'm so sorry!" She looked up and grimaced. "Professor McGonagall was giving me a heads up, and I missed it! Madam Pomfrey was reminding me that the law is going to be passed. She is forewarning us! The public doesn't know! But we do!"

"So?" Susan asked, perplexed. "We know in advance. How is that going to stop it from happening?"

"We use our resources!" Shelia exclaimed, grinning, making a jerk with her fists as if ready to fight. "There isn't a witch alive who would stand for being forced to take potions or charms against their will. According to my dad, loads of couples are following our example and trying to defy this Marriage Law. The lists of couples are nowhere near as long as they should be if people weren't resisting, right? I mean, if everyone out there," she said with a wide sweep of her hand, "age seventeen to sixty are on the list and have filled out the census, why were there only twenty or so engagements in the last *Daily Prophet*? Why not hundreds? We're talking about all of Great Britain, right?"

Bernice was so excited she butted in, "So if we write letters, like we did last time..."

Shelia nodded as she interjected, "We will inform the public!"

Valerie didn't look too convinced. "But will it make any difference. We are talking about the government. They can do whatever they want!"

"By writing to every publication in the wizarding world!" Julianna said as Susan exclaimed, "Oh it could work! We can do a letter campaign!"

Julianna nodded, smiling exuberantly. "I'll get everyone in Slytherin to get on it tonight."

"You can count on Hufflepuff, too," Susan said.

"Does the school have enough owls?" Luna asked. "It might take a while for every one of us to send letters to each publication. The poor birds will be flying round trips for days."

"There is always the Hogsmeade post office," Ginny said with a smirk. "And any eighth-years can walk down to Hogsmeade in the afternoon as long as they don't skive off lessons."

That started a letter campaign amongst the fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-year students to every known publication, local and abroad, and every relative and family friend they knew. Thanks to the *Sorcerer's Sun*, *Witches Home Journal*, *Magical Living*, *Witch Weekly*, *The Magic Mirror*, and of course *The Quibbler* printing many of the girl's letters, and several of the concerned parents as well, the public became aware of what the Ministry was actually doing with their new law...forcing everybody, patients and students, to forfeit their Healer-patient confidentiality rights and submit to the Ministry-arranged marriages. Once word got out about what the Ministry was doing, the *Daily Prophet* spouted the Ministry's propaganda in favor of the law and its reasons.

By the end of the week-long letter campaign, Professor McGonagall made an announcement at breakfast. "May I have your attention please," she said, tapping her water goblet with her spoon. Everyone settled down and turned to look at her. "In light of the increase of outgoing post, both here and at the Hogsmeade Post office, Postmaster Gains and Professor Hagrid have both asked me to remind you that owls are creatures that do have limitations. Although the Hogwarts owls are by nature loyal and proud of their station and are willing to keep up the normal flow of correspondences, such recent increases in outgoing post has caused wing strain for some of our smaller owls. Therefore, boxes shall be set in the Deputy Headmaster's office for any outgoing post to any publication you choose to write to, which will then be sent by Floo the following morning. Hopefully, this will alleviate any undue strain on our owls. Thank you."

Hermione turned to Shelia and Ginny, and all three girls broke out in laughter as the bowls of eggs and platters of pancakes appeared on the table.

Over the next week, many of the publications were printing letters of concerned readers as well. Encouraged by the letters of the concerned parents and students, numerous couples agreed to be interviewed by the publications, many claiming that the Ministry's approach was not in the usual manner of a magical matchmaker, but that of an arranged marriage forced upon the couples against their will. One article in *Witch Weekly*, which was printed in three other papers, was from none other than Rita Skeeter. Hermione was all smiles as she read the first half of the reporter's article and then sighed in empathy for what followed.

I, Rita Skeeter, reporter for the Daily Prophet, *now engaging as an independent correspondent, have had the pleasure of meeting with several of the young couples whose marriages were arranged by Mrs. Edythe Havershiems. I have been a long time friend of Mrs. Graceilla Warblock, a lovely lady of fine breeding and repute, and therefore in the beginning, I was supportive of this new Ministry Program of the Social Heritage, Marriage, and Registration Committee. However, it has come to my attention that certain occurrences are happening that must be brought to light. My dear readers, I was appalled to learn that I, Rita Skeeter, am to be matched with Marcus Barbary, father to the famous Heathcote Barbary, rhythm guitar player for the Weird Sisters. Imagine my shock when my friend informed me that I was to be engaged! To a wizard some thirty-five years (or so) my senior and father of six! Me! Forced into this infernal travesty and expected to bear children in the prime of my career? I certainly want to do my part for wizardkind, but I am on the road all the time, searching juicy tidbits for you, my avid fans. Now I ask you, how can I be a good mother if I'm on the road all the time?*

And my own concerns aside, I recently had a most sorrowful interview with one Serrena Connery, who, if you remember, was married to Helbert Flint, oldest brother of the Quidditch Chaser, Marcus Flint of the Heidelberg Harriers. Those of you may recall Helbert Flint was one of Slytherin's Beaters while a student at Hogwarts. Well, let me tell you, batting Bludgers isn't all this brutal Beater is bludgering. As you know, Miss Connery has tried to file for an annulment of her marriage under the claims of neglect, battery, and irreconcilable differences. My dear readers, when I met with Mrs. Flint, who refuses to use the man's name and insists to be called by her maiden name, believe me when I say I was utterly shocked! The poor dear was head to toe bruises, terrified of my photographer and refused to allow him in her home.

This interview had me wondering if any of the other witches who are in Ministry-approved unions are likewise unsatisfied. I was appalled to find nine couples trying to appeal to the Wizengamot to invalidate their marriages. Nine who are desperately trying to be released from their Ministry-approved matches! None of the couples were given the right to deny their match, nor were they given alternatives if the witch or wizard disapproved of the person the Ministry Yenta selected for them! Can you believe this...

Hermione looked up as Julianna touched her shoulder. "Did you read the article in *Witch Weekly* today?"

"The one by Rita Skeeter? Just now," Hermione said, making room for the girl to sit down. "Serrena is your sister, isn't she?"

Julianna nodded. "She's in St. Mungo's again. I just got word. Helbert beat her again because he found out that Rita Skeeter came by the house. Of course, the Ministry's main concern is the baby she is carrying, but she had a broken jaw, three ribs, a fractured wrist, and multiple bruises. But until she delivers four children, she's stuck in this marriage."

"Julianna, I'm sorry!" Hermione exclaimed, placing her hand on the girl's arm. "But why? Isn't there anything that can be done?"

She looked up from where her gaze had been on Hermione's hand to look her in the eye. "We are doing it. This...all of this...is helping! By fighting this law, we and people like my sister are making the world aware of how unfair it all is." She turned her head. "I came over here to say thank you for..." Her gaze shifted to look Hermione in the eye again. "I'm glad that you included us Slytherins. It means a lot to me that you didn't turn your back on us."

Hermione gave the girl's arm a squeeze. "Like I said to you earlier, I'm glad to have you on my side. And when you write your sister, please send her my condolences for her situation and my support that hopefully things can get better for her...for all of us."

Julianna smiled sadly as she rose. "You're all right, Hermione. Thank you for your concern. It means a lot to me. I'm glad we've gotten to know each other. I'd be proud to think of you as a friend."

"I'd like that, being friends," Hermione said, smiling back as Julianna walked away for the Slytherin table.

Ginny nudged her. "We could send her a card. What do you think?"

Hermione nodded. "I think it's a great idea. We can make one during break."

Rita's article caused quite a stir. One by one, over the next two weeks, the girls were asked to see their Head of House to discuss the situation of the pregnancies. But for a short time, it seemed that all the forced marriages were being reconsidered.

The Quibbler ran the announcement that Luna had petitioned for approval of her engagement to the son of her father's friend, Rolf Scamander, since the summer after the war, however the Wizengamot listed her betrothal as pending in the *Daily Prophet*. Likewise, many other couples who were still pending permission to get married submitted letters to announce their engagements in the *Sorcerer's Sun* and *The Quibbler*, making quite a fuss for the Wizengamot to sort out. Finally, many of the

engagements were granted, just so long as at least three viable and magically sound children were produced. Harry wrote to Ginny and Hermione telling them that hundreds of Howlers from angry people, furious that the couples were allowed to side step the law, had flooded the Ministry and the members of the Wizengamot. Apparently, many of the new Howlers also contained dung bombs that exploded once the Howler finished its message.

Professor McGonagall once again called Ginny and Hermione into her office. Harry had filed a no-contest to his paternity suit and claimed that he and Ginny had become engaged the end of his sixth year. *Witch Weekly* and *The Quibbler* ran the article in which he explained his promise to wed her if they survived Voldemort, which was confirmed in the interview by Ron.

But Hermione's claim to be already engaged to Ron was denied by the committee. When Hermione asked why, Professor McGonagall stated that their stories didn't match up and that Harry wasn't sure as to when Hermione and Ron had formally decided to get engaged. The boys claimed it was while they were camping, not at the end of the school year as Hermione had claimed. "They are retaliating against you. You are to be matched up with Draco Malfoy. They hope his family can get you in hand."

"What?" Hermione shrieked, jumping to her feet and slamming her hands on the Headmistress' desk. "I can't marry that ferret!"

It took Professor McGonagall fifteen minutes to calm her down.

Not soon after, the Ministry passed a law enforcing that the Healer's Hippocratic Wand Oath did not apply when the witch or wizard was doing something or carried a condition destructive to their health. With that amendment to the Healer's Hippocratic Oath, Madam Pomfrey was directed to confirm or deny all the supposed pregnancies at Hogwarts. Of course, most of the girls were found to be suffering from a Pseudocyesis condition caused by undue stress and aggravation brought on by the Marriage Law, and final examinations, O.W.L.s, and N.E.W.T. exams. Each girl was given proper potions to correct the situation and a vial of Calming Draught and a mild Sleeping Potion.

Knowing that the ruse was going to be found out, Hermione, Draco and their friends had tried to find the potions that reversed the Sterility Curse. The curse, generally used on illegally cross-bred magical creatures, would help the girls avoid marriages under the clause of 'deemed unfit for the program or as a suitable wife.'

Finally, Hermione found the journal with the article about reversing the Sterility Curse. She was pleased that Severus S. Prince was given due accolades he deserved for developing the potion, but the journal only had a summary of the potion, not the actual directions. "Apparently during Voldemort's first reign of terror, some of the Death Eaters were using the Sterility Curse on the Muggle-born females to prohibit their being able to further pollute wizarding society with their spawn, as they say," she explained when she had called a meeting to discuss the plan.

"Severus Snape's discovery of the potion to reverse the effect of the curse had been during the time right before The Dark...you know's first fall," Draco stated, looking somber.

"Professor Snape had been published in an obscure Potions Journal the Hogwarts library still subscribes to, but he'd removed it when he'd started teaching," Hermione stated. "That's why I had a hard time finding it...Madam Pince said he still had it, so the library only had the one that mentioned his discovery."

"What's sad is that his efforts to help the wounded Muggle-borns had been over-looked in his trial, and he'd never received the acclaim for his discovery," Ginny stated.

"Well, if you want to write it up, I'm sure my dad would love to run the article," Shelia stated.

"My father will, too," Luna said wistfully. "We have a lovely picture of him on file."

"But even though we know who invented it, I don't have the directions to the potion!" Hermione said with a sigh. "No point planning on this without the potion to back it up."

"We still have the potions section of the Manor to look through, if you're up for defying the rules again, Hermione," Draco said with a smirk.

"And I've written to Severus again," Hermione stated. "I'm hoping he answers. If not, I'm sure it will turn up. But if not, thank you for the offer, Draco. I'll think about it. Maybe next weekend."

Draco smirked as he replied, "I'll take you home with me whenever you're ready," with a wink.

Hermione shook her head and walked away.

Severus' letter came just as Hermione was about to give up and ask Draco to take her back to his family library to search.

Miss Granger,

After considerable thought, I have reluctantly decided to assist you. However, I truly doubt that you'll be able to meet the requirements for the potion.

First, you must use a gold-lined silver cauldron.

Secondly, you will have to use a seventeen inch platinum stirring rod and a fourteen inch raw crystal shaft.

Third, and most importantly, you will have to have a strand of hair of the victim that predates the sterilization and cannot predate it by more than five years from the onset of the curse.

Lastly, you will have to prepare the Polyjuice Potion, making several variations in the ingredient preparations:

The leeches must be female.

The knotgrass must pickle for a month in the juices of the leeches you intend to use, but you cannot harm the leeches in procuring the juices.

The knotgrass must be picked at midnight of the full moon.

The boomslang skin must be from a first shedding of a young boomslang snake.

The lacewing flies must stew in water from a pond that a unicorn drinks from. You must use a new, unused, hand-blown crystal beaker to draw the water without touching the pool, either with your person, hands, or the beaker. This must be done at midnight on a new moon. Oh, yes, I do hope you are a virgin. Otherwise you must find a seventeen-year-old virgin, completely untouched, even by her own administrations, to collect the water.

You must use a new, unused silver potions knife, and you must simmer the base of the potion over a cold, blue flame.

If you think you can meet the requirements, I have enclosed the directions for both potions.

Sincerely,

Severus S. Prince.

Bernice had burst out laughing at the list. "I'm sure Dad can get the leeches, lacewing flies, knotgrass, and boomslang skin!" she exclaimed and sent a letter to her father asking for the ingredients. This time her father and uncle sent her the necessary ingredients the next day and had even selected the finest quality that they could and assured Bernice that they met the exact specifications she asked for. Draco and Cecil once again came through with the necessary equipment, and on the night of the new moon, Luna went with Hermione to collect the water in a meadow Luna knew about where the Unicorns came to drink.

Although the potions would take a month to brew, numerous girls opted to let Hermione use a modified version of the Sterility Curse, not easily detectable and seemingly permanent, or trying Madam Pomfrey's soup, in lieu of facing an unwanted marriage. Unlike the Pseudopregnancy Potion, this appeared to be an actual deformity in the girls' reproductive organs and seemed irreversible.

Madam Pomfrey noted in each girl's chart the unfortunate discovery. She placed a note in the crate with her monthly report with a smile.

To the Members of the Wizengamot and Wizengamot Administration Services,

Due to the unfortunate circumstances of stress combined with the consumption of the Shetland Island snow clams chowder and the use of the Pseudopregnancy Potion, many of the young ladies of Hogwarts are infertile. Likewise, I have discovered that many of the young men are similarly affected, although the cause at this time cannot be determined.

As to the reported pregnancies, I claim responsibility for accepting the claims of the young girls without verifying the pregnancies personally. I have been assured that the girls involved will drop their paternity claims and the young men involved have declined to press for damages and defamation of character.

However, there seems to apparently be a number of cases of misdiagnosis in regards to several due dates of some of the expectant mothers, possibly as a result of the aforementioned potion and stress. I have enclosed a updated report of all viable pregnancies with fetal vital statistics and approximate dates.

Your humble servant,

Poppy Pomfrey

Healer of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry

This really confused the Healers, and since none of the Healers at St. Mungo's were told of the reversal potion, nearly every 'eligible' girl in Hogwarts was 'deemed unfit for the program or as a suitable wife.'

Hermione received a letter from Harry, asking for her to meet him in Hogsmeade. When she arrived, he escorted her to a back room in the Three Broomsticks and indicated that she sit down. "Hermione, you have to drop this paternity suit against Ron," he said after their third butterbeer.

"Why?" she screeched at the sudden change of subject. "I thought..."

Harry was staring into his mug as if divining from the head of foam. "Ron was matched up with Ursula Fancourt. Lavender Brown also petitioned for him, so both matches are pending. Lavender's family is friends with the Warblocks. She wants to marry Ron, and Miss Havershiems approved the match, but so did Ursula Fancourt. Just before Christmas, he'd been given a month to choose which witch...then you filed the paternity suit."

She couldn't believe it. She didn't know Ursula Fancourt very well except as a snooty Ravenclaw from her year who bragged about being related to Perpetuna Fancourt, the witch who'd invented the Lunascope. "But I thought that Lavender is a pure-blood!"

"No, well, mostly. Lavender's father's family is German, and her grandmother on her mother's side is from France. The Ministry under Voldemort didn't bother checking families with foreign backgrounds all that carefully. Apparently there are plenty of half-bloods in her family ancestry, enough to make the match valid under the current laws."

"But what does Ron want?" she asked, stunned by his revelation.

"I'm not sure what Ron wants," he admitted, cradling his mug with two hands. "Lavender's really mad at you over the suit. And that's only half of it; the point is that if you don't drop your suit, Ron will be kicked out of Auror Training."

She couldn't believe what he was asking of her. "Oh, can't have that, can we? What about me? I'm doing this for both of us."

Harry shrugged listlessly. "Lavender said that you are faking your pregnancy. You'll be investigated."

"Bitch!"

He looked up; his expression one that told her he was going to tell her bad news. "Hermione, he's seeing a girl from the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

His statement cut like a knife. "Let me guess, she works in the British Quidditch offices," she said waspishly.

"Department of International Quidditch League Headquarters, actually," he admitted, staring at the mug again, his shoulders slumping warily.

He looked up at her, and she knew that he didn't want to tell her these things, but that wasn't stopping him. "Hermione, you know I am on your side, right? Aren't you planning on going to a training program or something?"

She nodded. "Law school. Professor McGonagall and all my professors are writing me letters for law school."

Harry nodded, then let go of his mug, tracing a crack in the table with his finger. "So, I was thinking, Charlie isn't on the list; what about filing for him and then going to law school? By the time you finish, this insanity has to be over anyway."

"Trade one Weasley for another," she said bitterly, gripping her own mug tightly in her hands. "I can't. I'm the leader of this rebellion, and if I drop out, it sets a bad example for the others who are relying on me."

"Just think about it, will you? I don't want my first act as Auror to be arresting my best mate," he said sadly. She'd simply stared at him as he rose to go. "Really think this over, will you? I...I don't want to see you in Azkaban."

The trek back to the castle was the longest one Hermione had ever made. She told Ginny what Harry had said and listened to her friend try to reassure her that it wouldn't happen. However, Hermione wasn't convinced. Something about Harry's slumped shoulders and forlorn expression told her his warning had to be taken seriously.

Draco was waiting for her in the Entrance Hall when she came down for dinner. "Hermione, have you got a minute?"

"Sure, what's up," she asked, trying to sound chipper.

"Me, us," he stammered, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. "I have been thinking about this. I got a response to my request to marry Daphne. The Wizengamot informed me that I have to marry a Muggle-born. I don't know any that...well, what I was thinking is that you and I don't make a bad match."

"What?! Are you insane? You've hated me for years! You've only been decent this year because we are on the same side of this insane law!" she screeched, not caring who overheard them. "I seriously doubt your *opinions* of me have changed all that much, Draco Malfoy!"

"Actually, they have," Draco said and shrugged his shoulders as he looked at her imploringly. "There are a lot of reasons why you and I are a good match. We like the same subjects. We both love to read, and if we have kids, I can afford nannies, governesses, and you'd be able to pursue your interests..."

This was too much for her to be dealing with at the moment. "You...me...have kids? You're nutters if you think I'd agree! What about your family? I'm sure that your parents would *love* having me as a daughter-in-law shoved down their snobby, pure-as-snow-blood throats!"

"That is uncalled for!" he snapped, then looked apologetically at her.

She ignored his look. "I was tortured in your house! You...yourself hexed, cursed, and tormented me for years! You made my front teeth grow down to my chest! Your father's friends attacked my parent's home and burned it to the ground! I was nearly killed by your aunt!" she ranted, the stress of her situation making her frustrations come out at him.

"All right, we have history," he said, pulling his hands out and holding them palm up in front of him.

"*History!*" she screeched, her hands on her hips. "Is that what you want to call it? *Ahistory?*"

"Would you even consider that I might have changed?" he said through gritted teeth, aware that people were staring.

"Yes, I will give you that," she snapped at him.

"Then will you at least consider it?" he asked.

"Draco, there isn't that much to consider. You can't go from nemesis to lover overnight," she said with a shake of her head. "We've hardly even been friends that long and certainly haven't been seeing each other romantically. Things don't change that quickly. We've only started to be amicable this year, compatriots in battle, so to speak. Hardly ground for marriage and certainly not to..."

"So I'm not good enough for you, is that it? You set your sights awfully high, Mudblood!" he sneered, his feelings clearly hurt.

"Back to Mudblood, am I? Watch it, Draco, you'll land in Azkaban for calling me that!" she sneered back.

"You stuck up, bitch. You're impossible!" he snapped at her, his hands now clenched in fists by his side.

Hermione balled her hands into fists, wishing that he'd drop the idea. "Look. You and me... You don't love me. I have no idea why you'd pick *me*, of all people? You and I...I can't see us as a couple."

"You've been invaluable in all this..." He relaxed his hands at his sides, raising his right hand in her direction. "If you don't drop your suit, you'll be in Azkaban and Weasley kicked out from becoming an Auror. Is that what you want? The Wizengamot will approve our match."

"How do you...you filed a petition for me? Didn't you?" she asked, remembering what Professor McGonagall had told her. "You did! Damn you, Draco. Well, for your information I'm going to law school. I am *not* going to marry anyone until I graduate, and that's final!"

He shoved his hands back in his pockets and resumed his old arrogant pose. "Well, I'll be seeing you in class, Hermione. I'm going to Law School, too."

"What?" she screeched. This was simply too much.

"Elfrida Clagg School of Magical and Danelaw in Castle Hill, Cambridgeshire. So you'll have plenty of time to decide on what you want." He smirked at her, and she wanted to wipe it off his face. "But know this...we've been approved!"

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

After the Leaving Feast

As if Hermione didn't have enough to worry about with revising for her N.E.W.T.s, the Ministry sent her a letter four days before exams, threatening to expel her and any student agreeing to follow her example. Hermione wrote a letter telling Charles Polister to go ahead and try expelling nearly half the student population of Hogwarts, and she dared him to explain to the public why every single student appeared to be fighting his department's forced marriages. She sent copies of the letter to each publication: the *Sorcerer's Sun*, *Magical Living*, *Witch Weekly*, *The Magic Mirror*, *Witches Home Journal*, and of course, *The Quibbler*, which all printed the letter.

The *Daily Prophet* ran a scathing article about all of Hermione's defiance against the Ministry's efforts to resolve the problem of magical defects and strengthening the magical bloodlines. Several people wrote her, outraged that the Ministry would continue its attack against her the week before her exams. Many of the letters stated that copies had been sent to Charles Polister and the Minister himself. Both papers, the *Sorcerer's Sun* and *The Quibbler*, published copies the letters she'd received showing their support.

Hermione responded with a letter in the *Sorcerer's Sun* and *The Quibbler* that forcing people to get married through a Yenta, disregarding and denying the engagements of people in love was repugnant. She argued that as long as the S.H.M.R.C. was going to force people into marriages without allowing the couples to decline the Yenta's matches, it was a flawed program of forced breeding, and that the Wizengamot was showing of complete disregard to the individual's feelings or concerns.

The S.H.M.R.C.s program is extremely prejudicial, just as prejudicial as Voldemort's idealism was, only targeted against pure-bloods instead of Muggle-borns. Instead of

trying to heal the wounds of war, new wounds are being opened, new prejudices spouted and acted upon to the detriment of us all. Why must blood be a factor in these decisions? Why must blood be the segregation factor that divides us? Why not look at ourselves and each other and see people. Witch or wizard...we are human beings and deserve respect. She also pointed out in her letter, *If we learned anything from the rise of Voldemort, and from Gellert Grindelwald before him, it is that prejudices are destructive to our society and to us as human beings. It's time to rise above this petty nonsense and see each other as people, equal, each of us unique and special in our own rights. I would hope that our legacy isn't a continuation of hate and disrespect because of who you were born to, but rather from our actions, contributions, and achievements. Only then will we have a society to be proud of.*

The day of her first exam, more letters poured into to the Great Hall the following day, some in support, others defamatory.

The *Daily Prophet* decided to run an article on the location of the Quidditch World Cup and two huge articles on the competing teams, Germany and Italy.

Ginny was commenting on the change in the *Prophet* as they exited the Great Hall for the library to revise.

"Er, Hermione, you got a minute?"

She turned, surprised to see Greg waiting for her in the corridor. "Sure, Greg, what's up?"

"I was hopin', well, I wondered if you had a minute," he said, gripping his book bag tightly in his hands.

Hermione smiled. "Sure, I have a minute." She turned to Ginny. "I'll catch up with you later, okay?"

"Yeah," Ginny said, waving her off. "I'll save you a seat."

Hermione walked over to Greg and placed a hand on his arm. "You're worried about your Muggle Studies N.E.W.T., aren't you?"

Greg nodded and looked down. "If I don't pass my N.E.W.T., I won't be leaving Hogwarts. Part of my, er, probation. Me and some of the guys, we were wondering, do you...could you have a review session tonight?"

Hermione bit her lip. She had two N.E.W.T.s to revise for: Ancient Runes and Literature. She'd read all the books on the reading list Professor Kleiger had given them, and she didn't need all night for Runes... "I think I can spare some time this evening. How about right after dinner?"

"How about dinner?" Greg asked hopefully.

Three third-years passing them shot surprised glances their way. She laughed at his suggestion as they watched the students leave. "So, Mr. Goyle, is that a proposition for a date?" she asked teasingly.

His face turned a few shades of pink. "Francine wouldn't like that very much. I was thinking that we could get you into the common room and have dinner there. If you'd want to, of course."

"Sure. But I have to revise for Ancient Runes. I have that N.E.W.T. tomorrow morning, but I can spare an hour or two," Hermione agreed. "By the way, how is Francine? She hasn't asked me for her potion. Did she decide to go along with whomever the Ministry selected for her?"

Greg turned a much darker shade of red and stared at his hands. "She stopped taking the potion. I'm gonna be a dad." He looked up as Hermione gaped at him in shock. "She's pregnant. Twins. Two of them. Me. I'm having a baby...two of 'em."

"Greg, I'm happy for you if you are," she said encouragingly, her smile genuine. "I know you like the girl."

"She's all right. She picked me, you know. Out of all the blokes, she picked me," he said as if still in awe. "She's so smart and pretty. A Hufflepuff, but they make good mums, right?" He looked away again as he leaned against the wall. "I have told her to keep the suit in case my dad gets mad and tries anything. I won't contest it, if she'll have me. Draco says that if the baby is...are...both of them are healthy and strong, the Wizengamot will marry us. That is if they approve." He looked up at her earnestly, his worry that he'd let her down evident in his eyes. "Are you disappointed in us?"

"Greg, if it makes you happy, then I'm happy for you," Hermione said, giving his arm a squeeze again to emphasize her sentiments. "All I ever wanted was for us to have matches we wanted. If you and Francine will be happy together, then I'm happy for you."

"Thanks," he said, grinning. "I still can't believe I'm gonna be a dad."

"Considering what the Ministry is doing, it was inevitable," she replied, smiling back at him. "I think you'll make a great dad."

"Thanks. Do you really think so? I don't want to muck up and, well, you know, do it wrong," he replied. "But I gotta pass my N.E.W.T.s first. I think I'll do all right in History of Magic; I only needed an acceptable in that one, but I have to do get an Exceeds in my Muggle Studies so they know I took it seriously enough."

"Well, we do have a dinner date to revise for that one," Hermione said cheekily. "Besides, I've always wanted to see the Slytherin common room, ever since my second year."

"Oi, about that...who impersonated me that time?" he asked, giving her an all too familiar scowling glare.

"If I remember right, it was Harry," she admitted.

Greg nodded as if thinking whether he should be mad or not. "Crabbe and I had a bet going... Moot point now, isn't it? But I'm kinda glad it was him." He pushed off from the wall. "I got to go. Francine wants to talk about baby names again."

"See you in the Entrance Hall or should I meet you in the dungeons?" she asked, falling in step with him as they walked off. "I have no idea where the Slytherin common room entrance is, except that it's in the dungeons."

He smiled, knowingly. "I'll meet you by the stairs that lead to the dungeons. That way you won't get lost."

Hermione exited the classroom with a fidgety sense of uncertainty that she always felt after an exam. She fought down the urge to run and check her answers, forcing herself to be content with the fact that given everything going on around her she had done her utmost best on the exam, and come what may, she knew her score would be high. She had one more exam, and then her schooling at Hogwarts would be over.

Draco hadn't given up on his intention of talking her into accepting his proposal, much to Hermione's annoyance. The second day of exams, he'd approached her to ask if she'd reconsidered, then escorted her to her next exam. Since they had Transfiguration together the next day, he escorted her there as well, and afterwards to the library, then to the Transfigurations practical. She managed to ditch him before dinner, but afterwards, he tried to escort her to her common room, all under the pretenses of wanting her to 'get to know him better.' In addition, each meal in the Great Hall that day, as he had the day before, and the day before that, he'd made eye contact with her and had raised his goblet in her direction as if toasting them as a couple with what she knew he'd thought to be his most winning smile. It had been aggravating her to no end and highly distracting. Thankfully, all her friends had their Herbology practical after breakfast the last day of exams, so she'd been surrounded by them on her way to the greenhouses as they'd compared notes and shared last minute revision questions. She'd even managed to ditch him on her way to lunch.

"Draco, I haven't changed my mind," Hermione snapped when Draco, followed by Cecil, cornered Hermione in the corridor between exams.

"Well, I certainly hope not or you'll put us all in a jam!" Cecil scowled at her.

"Of course not!" she exclaimed, furious at the accusation.

"Look, some of the guys need to talk to you." Draco shoved a piece of parchment at her. "Here is the list of guys who have sorted things out with their girlfriends and went and got their girlfriends pregnant...for real! The rest of us are meeting in the classroom next to the History of Magic room after the last exam. Can you come?"

"Yes, I can come...I'm not quitting anything." Hermione shoved the parchment in her bag. "Are you saying you got a girl pregnant?"

"No, Hermione, but we've been designated as leader or spokeswizard for the guys," Draco said, chuckling softly. "Since we've been in the thick of it since the beginning, it was kind of natural...look, some of the guys were getting nervous and their girlfriends were getting scared. So some of the blokes decided to go ahead and... We're getting together to talk about how to defend their actions. A little late, but they can't do the Sterility Charm if they got their girls pregnant, and the Ministry is putting pressure on the girls to drop their paternity suits."

"Pretty much, anyone who's going to be sterilized has done so, right?" Cecil asked, checking that they were not attracting unwanted attention.

"Most of the students who had been conspiring in the ruse of the false pregnancies have allowed me to sterilize them with the promise that the charm would be reversed when they decided to have children," Hermione admitted. "But not all of them. I know a few girls told me that they had gotten pregnant and therefore couldn't have the charm done. It would've caused a miscarriage."

"From what Julianna told me, several of the girls who'd been claiming that their boyfriends knocked them up risked Azkaban by taking fertility potions to get pregnant," Draco stated.

"Yeah, Luna and Shelia said that they'd heard that Madam Pomfrey sent in a correction letter stating the new due dates with the report confirming the pregnancies by means of fetal vital signs," Hermione said, crossing her arms. "Shelia said that it really confused the Healers of St. Mungo's. The article this morning in the *Daily Prophet* reported that the couples were hoping to win their paternity suits so they could marry their boyfriends. I really hope they can. The article was particularly harsh. The *Prophet* condemned them for taking matters into their own hands and increasing the risk of adding more deformed and magically inept children onto magical society, as if that is really going to happen," she sneered. "The other publications, like *The Quibbler*, *Witch Weekly*, and the *Sun* simply stated that since the Pregnancy Charm hadn't been used, Madam Pomfrey had simply been mistaken, confusing pre-N.E.W.T. stress as pregnancy symptoms."

"Bet that put her knickers in a twist," Cecil snickered.

"She wasn't pleased, but she's staying silent on it for now. She's been trying to help us all along, but even she is getting threats from the Wizengamot." She tilted her head and her brow creased as she tried to consider what if anything she could do about their situation.

"So, the guys want to talk to you...us...about the ramifications," Cecil stated, breaking her train of thought.

Hermione shrugged, wondering what if anything there was to say to these couples, they were taking a huge risk, actually getting pregnant. "I can try, but you'd know more about that than me, Draco. You know these laws as well as I do."

"Hermione, those of us that are sticking with the sterility plan are, well, it's nerve wracking. We want assurances that this potion will work... that you were...are...are you a virgin?"

"Am I a what?" she exclaimed in disbelief. "How can you ask me that?"

"I read the potions directions from Snape," Draco said with a raised eyebrow. "Certainly you and Weasley..."

"As if that's your business!" she snapped then covered her mouth! "You think...me...how dare you presume anything Draco Malfoy!"

"That would be a no," Draco said, turning to Cecil.

"So who collected the water?" Cecil asked.

Hermione tried to fight down the slight warm feeling in her face. "Luna asked the female for the water."

"Excuse me?" they asked in unison with identical looks of stunned disbelief.

"You heard me," Hermione replied, nodding. "The Unicorn took the container and filled it herself."

"Well, that's a relief," Cecil said, although Draco was eyeing her suspiciously.

"So what about the meeting, you coming or not?" he asked.

"Draco, I'm *going* to law school, not a graduate of...I know as much about this as you do! Less, actually! You're the one who told me about the Bastard Law!"

Cecil hitched his bag more comfortably on his shoulder. "Look, at this point it's for moral support. These guys, they're in a fix with the S.H.M.R.C. and are getting a lot of pressure. Those of us who are choosing to be sterile, well, they want reassurances. They got letters too saying...Charles Polister and Graceilla Warblock wrote that all us guys broke the law by impregnating our girlfriends and will face fines...even imprisonment. And now we are considering being made sterile...but...you know... sterilization? You started this movement...finish it!"

"We are all under pressure from the S.H.M.R.C.! I'll come, but I have no idea what I can say or do. They, like me, and every one of us, are defying the laws. The laws are wrong, and someday, somehow, someone will figure that out and do something about it, but until then..." She sighed to calm herself down. "Everyone who had decided to do the Pseudopregnancy Potion is now on the receiving end of the Ministry's vengeance for our independent declaration of defiance, just as our letters from the MLE stated. But so far no one has been arrested. No one is going to jail...but they are putting pressure on us all to comply with the law and the S.H.M.R.C. I'm sure of that as long as the couples who have gotten pregnant have healthy babies, it will be all right, but what can the S.H.M.R.C. do? They're whole thing is about making babies and boosting the population of wizardkind!"

"They threatened to put the girls in St. Mungo's and the blokes in Azkaban," Draco stated. "We should go."

Cecil nodded and turned to leave.

Draco looked at her with a piercingly resolute stare. "Reconsider, Hermione. It wouldn't be that bad."

"No, Draco," she said, shaking her head.

He looked away and back at her as he sighed. "Why not? You'd have everything you could possibly want."

"Not everything," she said, glaring at him. "Money isn't everything."

Draco shrugged. "Makes things a lot easier," he said as he turned to leave. "Think about it and reconsider my offer."

Hermione turned quickly and stormed off in the opposite direction for her next exam, muttering, "As if, you sneaky, underhanded snake! You don't love me, and I don't love you, you little ferret. I don't care if the Wizengamot approved us...I'm not marrying anyone because I have the right bloodline...or lack of bloodlines. Ooughhh!"

"Hermione, are you all right?" Shelia asked, holding open the door to the classroom.

Valerie blushed and hurried inside.

Hermione let another Ravenclaw guy pass them. "Do you remember what I told you Draco asked me?"

"Yeah," Shelia stated, wrinkling her brow in confusion.

"He told me to reconsider."

"Git," Shelia said with a jerk of her head and a roll of her eyes. "C'mon, forget him. We have our Charms N.E.W.T. to fail."

"DON'T SAY THAT!" Hermione screeched in shock, one hand reaching out automatically to grab Shelia's arm, the other clutching her chest, making several students in the classroom turn around, some of them snickering.

"Hermione, calm down! I was only joking," Shelia said, trying to reassure her.

Ginny started laughing from her seat at the front of the room. "Didn't you know? That's Hermione's Boggart...McGonagall telling her she'd failed something."

Several students groaned at the comment, one boy said, "As if that would happen," and several more had to turn away to conceal their mirth or shook their heads.

"Not funny, Gin! Stop laughing," Hermione said as she hurried to her seat, her heart still pounding in her chest.

Valerie groaned as Hermione and Shelia walked past her desk. "As if *you'd* fail a test. No one gets higher scores."

"Everyone, settle down now," Griselda Marchbanks said as the stack test pamphlets floated down the aisle and individual ones landed on each occupied desk. She stopped directly in front of Hermione and gave her a wink as she nodded her head. "Just do your best, young lady. Everything will work out, but keep your wits about you," she said encouragingly, then lowered her voice. "I'm right proud of you, Miss Granger. Tosh, this blasted law...infernal tripe it is, but you keep at it. It's making a difference."

Hermione stared at the woman, gobsmacked.

"Bags away, all your belongings off your desks," Mrs. Marchbanks said clearly. "Your exam quills are beside your inkwells. You may break the seal on your test booklet and begin."

Mrs. Marchbanks nodded at the sound of the seals popping. "You may begin."

Hermione exited the large classroom with a sigh of relief, her last N.E.W.T. was over, and she was now a graduate of Hogwarts.

Throughout the week, several more students had approached Hermione and Ginny to say that they had decided to defy the Wizengamot and try the sterilization spell. They'd tried to be as reassuring as possible, answered the concerned inquiries with as much patience as possible, but inwardly Hermione hated being frequently interrupted while revising. Susan, Julianna, and Luna frequently joined her and Ginny, Shelia, and Bernice in the library whenever possible, as did Valerie. Thankfully, her friends were fielding as many questions as she was, so that was a relief. But since Hermione was considered the leader of their rebellion, she was the one most frequently sought out.

Hermione had never been at a leaving feast that held as much nervous anxiety as the one that had been held last night. Slips of parchment were passed to her from so many students, wanting to keep in touch and worried about what would happen over the summer. She had even started using a Muggle address book, adding in extra pages magically to keep all the address and Floo connections she was receiving.

That night, the Room of Requirement was once again a huge spacious meeting room, as those leaving and those who faced a year without her gathered to hear Hermione's assurances that she was only an owl away and that the potion to reverse the sterility would be available to anyone who asked her for it. "REMEMBER," she shouted over the din in the room. "Keep your lock of hair in a safe place because you'll need it to reverse the spell."

"You're sure you can reverse it, right?" Marlene, a sixth-year Hufflepuff, asked, toying nervously with her braid. "I mean, if I wanted to, I can still have kids later, right?"

"Absolutely," Hermione stated firmly. Both Hermione and Ginny had their hair next to their heart in a locket on a long chain. "But the reversal potion only works during the transformation period as the Polyjuice Potion wears off...when you are returning back into yourself. The Polyjuice Potion alters your physical makeup and the reversal potion repairs the reproductive organs as you revert back. So don't lose your hairs. I have both formulas, a male version and a female version, so anyone can do this."

"But where did you get the directions?" a fifth-year boy asked.

Hermione saw Julianna nod out of the corner of her eye, and Shelia and Ginny both nodded as well. "It was given to me by Master Severus S. Prince." She had no idea why she was using his pseudonym, except to protect him or something. She saw Draco shake his head, but both Ginny and Julianna smiled as they shook their heads, silently laughing at her.

"I thought he was dead," Wayne Hopkins said, looking confused. "Didn't he die in You-Know-Who's first reign of terror?"

"No," Draco said, smirking. "He changed his name and went into service making potions and teaching dunderheads."

Hermione scowled at him, then turned to face Wayne. "No, he's alive and living abroad. He's made a name for himself in France." Murmurs started spreading. "Look, he's an incredible Potions master and I would...I am trusting him. Ginny sterilized me and I have sterilized my best friends and many of you only because I really trust Master Prince. I know this potion works, I have his assurances. I have enough to give each of you a dose, secured away in a vault in Gringotts for whenever you...any of you ask me for it. Contact me, Ginny, Shelia, Bernice, or Julianna. Susan and Luna will be able to reach me as well. Yes, I'm going to law school, but I won't be far. Only a Floo away. I'll be staying at Harry's place over the summer."

"If not longer," Ginny added with a chuckle.

She ignored the dark glare from Draco as she pointed to a Ravenclaw across the room to answer her question.

The night before the students were to return home, Hermione held one last meeting in the Room of Requirement, promising all the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-years that she'd still give the Sterility Reversal Potion to anyone who opted to take sterility over a forced marriage. And she swore that someday she'd find a way to appeal the Marriage Law from the books for good.

By the time the students were boarding the train to go home, an unprecedented two-thirds of the seventh- and eighth-years leaving school had some kind of apprenticeship or training lined up, or opted to apply for a Master or Tradesman in their favorite subjects. Twenty-one seventh-, and eighth-year girls had confirmed pregnancies, and all of

those females who were not, and many of the guys, nearly one hundred-thirty students in all, were confirmed as sterile.

Hermione, Shelia, and Draco all applied to law school at the Elfrida Clagg School of Magical and Danelaw in Castle Hill, Cambridgeshire.

Bernice, Ernil, and Ginny applied to St. Mungo's Healer training program.

Draco boarded the train and slyly followed Ginny to see which compartment she'd go into, knowing that Hermione would be in the same one. He was surprised to see Julianna Connery walking with Shelia Margulies and Bernice Witherspoon. The girls were all talking animatedly as they checked the doors to the compartments. The three of them ducked into the compartment Ginny was in. *Damn*. He wouldn't be able to ride back with Hermione and Ginny.

"Excuse me, Draco," Hermione said as she squeezed past.

"No problem," he said as he flattened himself against the windows, but not enough that she didn't brush against him as she passed. She glared at him, and he gave her a pleased smirk in return. "Anytime, Hermione."

She tossed her hair as she stormed away, followed by Luna Lovegood and Julie Hazelton.

He turned and saw Greg enter the compartment with Francine Perry and her friends. His mate was truly into the girl he'd knocked up *Wet prat. His dad will lay a dragon over that mess*. Draco casually walked past Hermione's compartment, glancing in and nodding. It was full. Nah, if he was to have any chance convincing Hermione to accept his proposal, he'd have to find another way to prove he'd changed. Draco joined Cecil, Charles, and Thomas, watching them in amazement at how much they'd changed over the course of the year. Only seven months ago, they were sneering at the Muggle-borns, and now Cecil and Thomas were talking about which ones they'd prefer to marry. Cecil was even considering Julie Hazelton or the Westmore girl from Hufflepuff. Adam Davis walked in holding hands with Valerie Harness, another couple that would never have happened without this blasted Marriage Law.

"What about you, Draco?" Charles asked. "You still think you have a chance with Granger?"

"Oh, of course I do. We're approved and all, and we're going to law school together. Only time will tell," Draco said as he turned to look out of the window. "But she'll succumb to the Malfoy charm in the end."

"Not so sure, mate, she was rather adamant last week," Cecil said with a smirk.

"I'll just have to convince her otherwise, won't I?" Draco stated, looking smug. *So much has changed. I can't believe I'm pursuing Potter's best mate. He could have smacked himself in the forehead. Of course! I have to prove I've changed. If I befriend Potter...Harry, she'll have to see I've changed, and for the better. If I can convince Harry, I'll have an in with Hermione.*

"Draco, you all right?" Valerie asked, still holding hands with Adam.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Draco replied, smiling his winning Malfoy smile at her. *Things will be just fine.*

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Arranging Affairs

Edithe paced Graceilla's office, her agitation literally making the fiddle fern and pinkerdyllis on Graceilla's magical windowsill and the Flutterby bush, trimmed in a neat topiary in the corner, quiver with nervousness.

"That insolent *chit!*" Edithe snarled venomously as she paced, her hands clenched in fists. "How *dare* she! Merilynn Elizabeth in the Wizengamot Administration office said that all my work finding suitable matches for the girls leaving Hogwarts is for naught. That Healer... *Pomfrey*...said in her last report that they are sterile!" She threw her hands up in exasperation. "How am I supposed to do my job and meet satisfactory quotas if every eligible girl in school has allowed that rebellious wench to sterilize them! Sterilized! As in *ineligible...cannot bear children!*"

"Who, Edithe? Madam Pomfrey wouldn't have sterilized the girls."

"That wench, Hermione Granger, who else?!" Edithe sneered venomously enough that Graceilla cringed.

"The students are all coming home on the Hogwarts Express today," Graceilla stated soothingly while holding out her hands in supplication to try to get her friend to calm down. "We'll just insist that they all see a Healer to get to the bottom of this. It's possible they're all faking it."

"First the pregnancies...now this! How can you go from pregnant to sterile in a few weeks? It's that Granger *chit*...I know it! The entire school followed her lead. Just because she's friends with that...that...Harry Potter! AND HE'S IN ON IT, TOO!" Edithe stomped her foot and whirled around to face the desk. "And, because she's Hermione Granger, golden swot, best friend of famous Harry Potter, when I filed to have her arrested they told me no! NO!" Edithe stood facing Graceilla squarely, her nostrils flaring and her hands in fists at her sides.

"Edithe, we cannot prove the girl did sterilize them..."

"And half of the girls leaving Hogwarts this year are actually *pregnant!*"

Graceilla looked at the parchment memo from the Wizengamot. "Only twelve by my account!" she said, trying to pacify her friend and colleague.

Edithe rounded on her again. "Since there are only forty-two females completing school this year, that's one third of the graduating female students!" she ranted, throwing her hands up in the air. "The entire point of this law is to increase our numbers with magically superior children. So far, we have not been increasing our numbers at all! Did you know that Muggle births are *up* thirty-nine percent? *Thirty-nine percent!* We haven't had thirty-nine births, let alone an increase in percentage!"

"Edithe, control yourself! I'm sure now that summer is here, the girls will be properly married to acceptable wizards, and once we resolve this farce of sterilization, they will all get pregnant," Graceilla said, signing off on one of Edithe's matches to send to the Wizengamot for approval. "I mean, really, Edithe, who would actually sterilize themselves...voluntarily? It just doesn't make sense." She placed the petition in the box to go to the Administrative Offices of the Wizengamot. "Now, is there anything else?"

"I'll say! I have made ninety unions, and forty-three of my couples are filing for release of obligation, citing spousal abuse, infidelity, potion abuse, incompatibility...of all the nerve, irreconcilable differences...or some such nonsense, and emotional distress inhibiting witches from performing and meeting the required offspring," Edithe said with a sneer. "They don't have to perform...just let him do his business and have babies! And what is there to reconcile? Have sex, get pregnant, and ignore the wizard for a year. What's so hard about that? That's what Sheldon and I did." She flung her hands up in exasperation. "Merlin bless him. I had one child and another on the way before I annulled my hand-fasting!"

Too bad Eugene turned out to be so inept magically, but Emily is a sweet thing and has a lovely child; Deborah is so gentle and kind, a true delight! You are doing your best," Graceilla said in a pacifying tone, hoping to appease her friend. "Make me a list of the couples giving you troubles, and I'll send a letter informing them of their obligations under the law. Maybe we can seek assistance from Uncle Stanford regarding the pregnancies. It's possible we can use a fertility potion... or possibly induce the younger witches to produce twins? That might speed things along nicely."

Edithe smiled, her gaze moving to the magical window. "Oh, we are so lucky to have you leading the S.H.R.M.C.! Imagine, you having Healer Stanford Brumfield as an uncle. He's such a remarkable wizard!"

Graceilla smiled, pleased that her friend seemed to have calmed somewhat. "He's coming over for dinner on Sunday. Why don't you join us? I'm sure he'd love to hear how you are implementing his theory."

"Oh, I'd be delighted!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands in joy.

Harry was on the platform in King's Cross with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley when the Hogwarts Express rolled in. Ginny had rushed from the train and into Harry's arms, exuberant to see her fiancé. Harry hugged her fiercely and kissed her, completely impervious to the shocked expression on Mrs. Weasley's face and the huge grin in Mr. Weasley's.

"I've missed you so much," Ginny said, finally coming up for air, as Hermione greeted first Mr. Weasley and then Mrs. Weasley.

Harry rested his forehead on hers. "Not as much as I have you. Well, when I wasn't struggling with my revisions and spell work." He turned to Hermione. "What, no hug?"

Hermione laughed as Ginny stepped aside to hug her mum and let Harry hug his best mate. "It's good to see you," he said into her hair.

"So, Hermione, are you coming to the Burrow with us?" Mr. Weasley asked as he levitated Ginny's trunk and Crooks' carrier onto a trolley.

She stepped back from her warm welcome from Mrs. Weasley. "I, er, I told Harry I'd be staying with him," she said and turned to face him, "if the offer is still on."

Harry nodded still smiling happily. "Yes, of course it's still on."

Hermione plucked Crooks' carrier off the trolley.

Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth as if to protest, but Mr. Weasley cut her off. "Fine, fine. You're both expected for Sunday dinner, though. No arguments. Come along, Ginny, you'll be seeing him soon enough." Ginny waved good-bye as she left with her parents.

Hermione turned to look for her trunk, confused to see it was missing. "My trunk?"

Draco appeared next her. "A house-elf in a skirt took it before we left Hogsmeade," he said with a smirk. "I thought your elf was an old male, Potter. Or may I call you Harry?"

"It's still Potter," Harry replied, then turned to Hermione. "Winky arrived at the house hours ago."

"Winky's my new house-elf...I'll explain later," she said and turned to Draco. "Happy holiday, Draco. Good-bye."

He only laughed at her curtness and stepped closer to her. "Now come on, after all we went through together last year, I thought we were well beyond all that," he said and held out his hand.

Hermione looked at the proffered hand and placed hers in it, only to be pulled forward and into a hug, banging Crooks' carrier on his leg, making Crooks hiss in anger.

"Happy holiday, love. I'm going to miss you."

Hermione pulled back immediately and nearly toppled into a second-year greeting his family, which made her lose her footing.

Draco's hand shot out instantly, helping her steady herself on her feet again. "Watch your step. We don't want you, of all witches, breaking your lovely neck," he said with a smile.

"Watch it, Malfoy," Harry warned him softly, "unhand her," as Hermione turned to apologize to the young boy, then whirled to face Draco.

"If you weren't pawing, at me I wouldn't have!"

Draco held up his hands. "I was only wishing my new friend a happy holiday. Don't go misunderstanding my intentions." He turned, scanning the thinning crowd. "I was hoping to say good-bye to Ginevra." His gaze stopped on Hermione. "You'll tell her happy hols for me, won't you?"

"Yes, I can do that," Hermione agreed, moving to stand closer to Harry.

Harry had narrowed his eyes suspiciously, watching Hermione's coolness toward Draco in stark contrast to Draco's attempt at a friendly good-bye.

"Well, I won't keep you," Draco said. "Oh, if I wanted to send an owl this summer, you'll be staying at the Burrow?"

One side of Hermione's mouth curved in to a smirk. "No, Harry's actually. Although, my post can be sent to the Burrow, if you like, and Mr. or Mrs. Weasley can forward it to me."

Draco's eyes had grown cool and his smile faltered, but he recovered quickly. "Oh, Apollo can find anyone, even carefully warded homes." He turned his attention to Harry. "I would really like the opportunity to see you over the summer, Harry. Possibly have you come over for a spot of Quidditch or Abraxan riding? I know you are acquainted with magical equestrians, but Abraxans have a much smoother gait than Hippogriffs or Thestrals."

"I'm rather busy, Malfoy," Harry said, the crease between his brows deepening as his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Please, call me Draco. I...things are different, and I'd like to think we can start over," he said, extending his hand.

There were considerably fewer people on the platform, but they were still attracting attention. Harry took his hand and gave one small shake before letting go. "Happy hols, Draco. I'll have to see about my schedule." He turned to Hermione. "Are you ready? Kreacher is making your favorite."

"Yes, I'm ready. Bye, Draco. I'll possibly see you in September," Hermione said and quickly headed for the barrier.

Harry found her waiting for him by the curb, trying to sooth Crookshanks in his carrier. "Hermione, what's up with Malfoy?" he asked. "You and Gin told me in your letters that you were friends with the ferret now, but *that* was more than him just being friendly."

She shook her head. "It's nothing," she said to brush off his questions as she looped her arm with his. "Take me home, Harry."

Harry was thrilled to have Hermione living with him. He Disapparated, taking her with him Side-Along, arriving in the entry of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The room was lit with a warm light with a soft, buttery cream damask on the walls and a large new Persian rug on the floor. A portrait of Harry's parents hung where Mrs. Black used to be. Hermione looked through the doorway as they passed the dining room, amazed by the soft pale green on the walls and new drapes.

She ascended the stairs after Harry, looking at the pictures he'd put on the wall of his parents and friends. She paused to examine a large painting made from Harry's picture of the first Order of the Phoenix that hung proudly on the wall next to a portrait version of the second Order of the Phoenix that included the members who had died: Sirius, Remus, Tonks, Moody, and Emmeline Vance, and several faces Hermione didn't recognize. Another portrait showed the faces of all the members of Dumbledore's Army from before the war. She turned to ask him when he'd had them done and hurried up the stairs, realizing he had been telling her about the changes to the house.

"...Mrs. Black is in the vault. I had a wizard replace the wall..."

She sucked in her breath as she stepped into the doorway of the drawing room, amazed at the transformation.

"I've had the wallpaper in the room redone, and Kreacher has really made the place livable," he explained.

"Is this what all the letters to Gin were about, redecorating?" she asked, grinning at him.

"I just told Kreacher that I was tired of dreary walls and old wallpaper, and he did most of it. I figured if Ginny and I were actually going to live here, and if I was going to have a family, it should look a bit friendlier." He opened the doors to the library. "Winky cleaned up this room." He turned, smiling at her smile. "And you can have any room in the house as yours." He pointed behind him. "I'm in the master suite, so Winky wasn't sure where to put your things, unless you want the same room as before. The third landing is full of boxes, and Kreacher's bedroom is one of the servants' bedrooms downstairs off the kitchen. There's one for Winky too." Hermione followed him as he told her about the upgrades he'd made on the house.

That night at dinner, he pulled a small, square box from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Is that for me?" she teased him, clutching her hands at her chest with her smile as wide as she could make it.

"No, it's for Gin, but I wanted to show it to you," he said and handed her the box.

Hermione inhaled sharply at the sight of the lovely antique diamond ring.

"Do you think she'll like it? I got it in London."

"She'll love it," Hermione exclaimed, handing the ring back.

He smiled as he closed the box. "As soon as the Wizengamot gives me and Ginny approval, I'm going to give it to her, and she'll be moving in here, too."

"What is the delay? Didn't Ginny drop the paternity suit?" she asked, hoping the S.H.R.M.C. wasn't giving her friends any grief.

"I found out that Deborah Mendleson is Edythe Havershiems granddaughter, and she...both of them are pushing for me to marry her. Fortunately, Mafalda Hopkirk, Head of the Department of Law Enforcement, and Tiberius Ogden, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, seem to be on friendly terms with me. I just hope they are willing to allow my petition to marry Ginny instead," he explained. "Seems I have friends in high places."

"Nepotism in the Ministry...how shocking!" Hermione laughed softly. "You are the Chosen-One-Who-Defeated-Voldemort *twice*! It would be quite a boon for Mrs. Havershiems to have you in the family, but I wouldn't be surprised if you win this one."

"Thank you," he said sheepishly, "I really hope you're right."

All through dinner, Hermione told Harry what had been going on in school as he related events in the Ministry. Hermione was amazed that people were following the example of the students and trying to evade Mrs. Havershiems attempts at matchmaking. Harry told her that quite a few eligible girls on the list had tried leaving the country, only to be told that they were in contempt of the law and would be persecuted upon their return. "The count is up to one-hundred twenty-two who have actually gotten married. There are a lot of people who have postponed or delayed their marriages using all kinds of reasons. Apparently there is a huge outbreak of Spattergroit and Dragon Pox, and even the use of herbal sterility promoters and emmenagogues to avoid pregnancy. It's amazing how many we have had to arrest or take to St. Mungo's."

Hermione shook her head. "Yet no one is fighting to get these laws off the books or to terminate the S.H.R.M.C."

"Some have tried, even talked about it, but so far nothing yet!" Harry snorted, his tea coming up his nose.

The next morning, Hermione went to the Elfrida Clagg School of Magical and Danelaw admissions office to enroll. Hermione had left the admissions office with mixed feelings. She had filed all the paperwork, but law school was going to cost her a bundle, and she didn't know how she was going to pay for it.

Within one week, she had been accepted for enrollment. Hermione Apparated to the campus and made her down payment, receiving her enrollment packet including her course schedule, course outline, books and supply lists, and she had been granted Floo access in the private students' center reserved for the magical students.

She went to the student body office to inquire about scholarships or grants, possibly student loans. The financial advisor was sympathetic, but informed her that all the grants and scholarships had been awarded for the term and referred her to Gringotts to apply for a student loan. Hermione had left the financial offices feeling slightly despondent. With her parents still in Australia, she didn't have anyone to turn to for advice, not that her parents would be able to advise her about things in the wizarding world.

She strolled about the campus looking at the old buildings and lush landscape, but her mind was on financial matters. She leaned against a tree, deep in thought until a redhead across the school commons caught her attention. *What an idiot! The Weasleys would know!*

She arrived on the road near the Burrow, infused her Patronus with the words, 'May I come see you?' and sent the silvery otter to the house. Only a minute later, she saw Mrs. Weasley in the doorway waving at her. Hermione Apparated to the front door and looked up at the friendly face.

Mrs. Weasley recovered from being startled quickly. "Hermione, dear, what's the matter? You look like the weight of the world is on your shoulders," Mrs. Weasley said, her expression becoming concerned.

"I suppose I do," she said, her shoulders sagging, looking at the motherly face that had always been so accepting of her. "I need advice and don't know where to turn this time."

"Come in, come in," Mrs. Weasley said, ushering her inside. "So tell me, what is the problem, dear?" She quickly set the kettle on the stove and put some biscuits on a plate. "Does this have to do with you and Ron?"

Mrs. Weasley sat down facing her at the table, and Hermione smiled at how similar the action was to her own mother and felt a pang of sadness. "No, it doesn't," Hermione admitted and told her of her desire to attend law school. "I know my parents would have managed to help me, and I have half of my tuition, I think, but I will have three years to pay for and it's over four-thousand Galleons."

Mrs. Weasley got up to get the kettle and set the tea to seep, then returned to the table. "Most schools in the wizarding community have scholarships for those who cannot afford school." She explained how it worked, but she basically repeated what the woman in the financial services office had said. "You can apply to Gringotts for a loan, but the goblins have particular rules about lending gold."

Hermione laughed aloud, nearly making her tea come out of her nose. "Oh, I'm sure that they'd be more than happy to lend money to a bank robber, especially one who *succeeded* in robbing their vault!"

"Well, it might be your only option," Mrs. Weasley said thoughtfully. "Bill was the only one to go to a trade school to become a Curse-Breaker, but the Goblins took the funds from his paychecks for the first three years. Charlie and Percy simply went to work after Hogwarts, and Fred and George..." Her voice broke slightly and Hermione placed a hand on hers. "Well, George is quite successful, as you know." She met Hermione's gaze and smiled. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"I'm sorry, I can't," she replied with a shake of her head. "But the tea is appreciated."

Hermione left the Burrow after a brief visit and Apparated to Diagon Alley to speak to a goblin in charge of her account, in the hopes of getting student loans. The goblins at the door insisted that she leave her wand at the visitor's desk while another goblin swept her with a sensory rod to determine if she had any other magical devices on her. She was escorted to a private office where a goblin stood guard at the door.

Finally, a goblin by the name of Regruk entered the office. "What can we do for you, Miss Granger?" he asked as he sat down, placing a ledger in front of him.

"I want to attend law school, and I was wondering if you offer any student loans?" she asked and cringed inwardly by his incredulous stare.

"You want to borrow money from us?" he asked, his demeanor becoming a contemptuous sneer, "after our more... recent association?"

Hermione kept her nervousness in check and tried to maintain a calm demeanor so as to try and get on a good footing with the goblin. "Yes, please. I won't be able to go to law school otherwise."

He stared at Hermione, then opened the ledger and ran his finger down the page. "Minus your recent request for funds, you have one-thousand nine-hundred and fifty-nine Galleons, seven-hundred ninety-six Sickles, and five-hundred twenty-eight Knuts in your account." His finger moved to another column. "Your mortgage on the home you bought from your parents is one-hundred sixty-one Galleons, ten Sickles and six Knuts. Your renter is making his regular monthly payments on time and there have been no late fees incurred, giving you a profit each month of nine Galleons, three Sickles and six Knuts." He picked up a piece of parchment and looked at her over his spectacles. "Your tuition for the Elfrida Clagg School of Magical and Danelaw in Castle Hill Cambridgeshire will be four-thousand and forty-six Galleons, thirteen Sickles and three Knuts a year."

Hermione ran the numbers in her head and felt sick. She didn't have enough to pay for the rest of her tuition, and she had three years of law school to get her degree. She had no choice but to look for a job. "But would I be allowed to get a student loan?"

"You will have to get a job with direct deposit to your account," Regruk stated. "If you have viable income, we might be willing to negotiate a loan."

Hermione nodded and exhaled slowly. *That isn't a no.* "All I need is a job? Then I can have the loan?" she asked.

Regruk nodded and closed the ledger. He looked at the back of the goblin at the door, then said softly, "My brother, Griphook, said you only took the cup, nothing else. Only the cup. The vault was a mess to put right, but there was nothing else missing."

"The cup was a Horcrux," she said softly back, wondering why they were speaking so low. "It was deeply regrettable, but if we hadn't retrieved the cup, an artifact Voldemort stole from the rightful owner, he would still be alive. But we only needed to destroy the soul within it, we didn't intend on keeping it. That's why Harry had it repaired and returned to your bank."

"But you only took the cup...nothing else... and you gave it back, plus the sword. Most odd..." he said, clearly puzzled. "However, you released our dragon and destroyed our lobby."

Hermione had hoped that the goblin wouldn't want to talk about this. "We needed the cup so that we could kill the fragment of Voldemort's soul within it. Griphook said you wouldn't give it to us...we couldn't think of any other way to destroy Voldemort unless we destroyed all of his Horcruxes. We were not after anything else. But, the cup and sword weren't ours, so yes, we returned them."

"Yes, the treasure was returned... You are most odd." He stroked his chin. "Griphook said you were odd for wand carriers. I'm glad that dark wizard is dead. My brother said..." He looked at the goblin at the door and at the ledger in his hands. "I will see what I can do. You don't have a viable income... You have to be earning Galleons, but you are honorable. I will see what can be done."

"And I promise to get a job," Hermione said, feeling hopeful for the first time during their meeting.

"Don't ask here. They will not let you near the vaults," Regruk stated firmly. "But our liaison office needs someone we can trust and who will deal with us fairly."

"Work for the Ministry?" she gasped, realizing what he was suggesting. "They would never hire me there!"

"They are not having enough people in all departments," he said, then realized that the goblin outside the door was looking in at them. "I have to go. We are done. Get a job and then make another appointment. I will reconsider negotiations then," he said, trying to hustle her out.

Hermione took the hint and let the goblin at the door escort her from the bank. Outside it was raining again, and she pulled her robe over her head. It had been quite wet for June, despite the month being notably dry over some parts of England. But on this, the twenty-second, the evening was really quite chilly. Hermione pulled her robes tighter about her and walked to the Apparation site. She arrived at Harry's, wet and chilled to the bone.

"Hermione, is that you?" Ginny called out as Winky appeared with a thick towel. "You're soaked!"

"I got caught out in the rain," she explained, handing Winky her robe and jumper.

Winky squealed in fear. "Mistress lays the clothing down for Winky to pick up later," she insisted, holding her hands up as she backed away. She turned and fled.

Ginny whipped her wand out and tried to dry off her friend. "Figures she'd be terrified of clothes."

"I was going to give her a pillowcase if she wanted, but..." Hermione started to say as Harry walked in. "How about I change and come back down." She didn't give them a chance to answer.

Winky was pulling out a pair of warm jersey knit pants and a soft jumper for her the moment she entered her room. "Does Mistress want Winky to makes a bath?"

"No, this is fine," she said, exchanging her clothes quickly, handing Winky the wet ones. "Thank you, Winky. I'm sorry about the robe. I didn't mean for it to be clothes."

"Winky sorry to not understand, Mistress. Winky will punishes herself," Winky said as she bowed, then quickly vanished.

"Winky, no punishment is necessary! Don't hurt yourself!" Hermione cried as she hurried down stairs.

"So, tell us what they said?" Ginny asked the moment she entered the kitchen.

Winky set a mug of steaming hot tea in front of Hermione and disappeared before she could thank her. "I will have to take a job. Law school is really expensive, and I don't have enough in my account, not by half. What I have left will be wiped out with my first year's tuition alone. But you'll never guess where Regruk, my goblin account representative, suggested that I apply," she said with a sigh.

Harry set down his own mug and looked up curiously. "All right, where?"

"At the Ministry of Magic in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. He even seemed to suggest that I work for their liaison office," she replied with a smirk.

Ginny made a small hop in her seat. "Hermione, that's perfect! I heard Dad say that they were really short handed down there. They even enticed Newt Scamander to return to fill the post as Head of the Department until they could get more employees!"

Hermione shook her head. "Oh, like I'd have a shot at working for the Ministry! Have you forgotten I'm despised down there?"

"Only by a small handful in the S.H.R.M.C.," Harry pointed out. "You have loads of friends in the Ministry with connections: me, Ron, Seamus, Neville, Kingsley, Mr. Weasley, Percy... Did you know that Cho Chang and Katie Bell are in Magical Games and Sports? And most of the members of the Order are filling vacancies in various Departments."

"I'd make an appointment with my brother, Percy," Ginny suggested. "He's always liked you, and he would be a good reference."

Hermione sent Percy a letter first thing the next morning, asking for his advice about working for the Ministry. His return letter arrived well before lunch inviting her to come see him at one o'clock. Ginny had been right, he was delighted that she wanted to work in the Ministry, but he was wary about her chances of gainful employment. He promised to talk to Newt Scamander about her and made suggestions of whom to ask for references. Hermione had made an appointment to see Headmistress McGonagall about the possibility of getting reference letters from all her professors. Minerva had been shocked that she wanted to work at the Ministry and promised to contact her professors for her. Minerva even contacted Professor Snape in France on her behalf, and was surprised and deeply grateful that he'd written a letter of recommendation for her, as well as all her other professors.

When she arrived for her interview, Percy greeted her warmly in the atrium and told her that Newt was delighted to have her apply for the job. Josephina Rawlings, Head of Human Resources and Magical Personnel office, was absolutely delighted to accept Hermione's application. She was amazed when Mrs. Rawlings said that she'd already received letters from Mr. Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, even Aurors Savage and Dawlish, and Ludo Bagman on her behalf. She personally escorted Hermione to meet Ernest Whipple, Head of the Being Division, who was quite pleased with Hermione's resume and letters of recommendation.

"I'm enrolled at the Elfrida Clagg School of Magical and Danelaw in Castle Hill, Cambridgeshire," she explained to him. "I would have to accommodate my work schedule around my class schedule, if that's all right?"

He looked up and smiled, a strained but kind smile. He was a thin man, balding, with a round face with slightly saggy jowls, dark circles under his eyes and flushed color to his cheeks. "So you are going to law school? Good for you. The Floo in the atrium is connected to the school, so that is convenient. My daughter has told me so much about you! She was...she told me that you found a potion to reverse the Sterility Curse. Is that true? Did you?" he asked, picking nervously at his thumb as he looked at her.

Hermione clasped her hands together on her lap to hide her apprehension as to where this would lead. "Forgive me if I'm hesitant to answer that, considering that any attempt to sterilize one's self to avoid the marriage law is illegal..."

But Mr. Whipple wasn't listening as he continued undaunted, "My daughter was so distressed over being eligible to wed at only sixteen without any say as to whom she'd be matched to. However, I was relieved when she told me of her...your plan! Not that I'd tell anyone, but really, forcing young girls to marry is incogitable." He turned to look at the pictures on his bookshelf.

Hermione saw a picture of a blonde woman with a shy smile, another of the same woman and a young girl, and a third of the same girl, only older and wearing Hufflepuff school robes. The girl waved merrily at Mr. Whipple from both pictures.

"Certainly there is no reason to make little girls get married so young," he said solemnly.

Hermione recognized the girl immediately. "Marcella Whipple! Is she your daughter?" she asked, and he nodded, turning back to her. Hermione lowered her voice as she tried to reassure him. "She's such a nice girl. Please, I know she's sterilized, but don't worry. There is a potion. Severus Snape developed it, and yes, I know..."

He waved his hands to make her stop talking. "She said you were trustworthy and very smart. I have to say, I'm surprised you want to work here, but believe me, I would be a fool to say no."

"So I get the job?" she asked, stunned.

"As my assistant," he said, smiling. "I do hope you like filing and are well organized; things in this department are a mess with us being so understaffed." He outlined what her duties would entail and told her what her salary would be. "This is only a starting salary, mind. Is it acceptable?"

"Absolutely!" Hermione held out her hand. "Thank you."

Mr. Whipple shook it but didn't let go. "Do you think you could start today?"

Chapter 12

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Trials and Organization

The weather report in the *Daily Prophet* said that there had been a widespread ground frost particularly across the northern and eastern areas. However in the far western part of the country, the weather was quite dry. That wasn't the case from where Draco stood. In Wiltshire, Southwest England, it had been raining in the mornings, warm in the afternoons and freezing cold at night. From his view at the window, the groundskeepers were busy in the gardens, trying to revive the magical plants and his mum's prize roses from the effects of the intermittent weather were wracking. The grass of the grounds was still green at least, and the peacocks were keeping to the shelter of the trees.

His father was still being interrogated on his memories of the war through a Pensieve, his confessions regarding his actions recorded for his trial, and Draco had no way of telling how it was going. His letters were being returned unopened, and his father hadn't sent him any letters at all. The anxiety and the waiting was driving Draco to drink. He'd even heard rumors that a few Dementors were being held in the lowest reaches of Azkaban, simply to administer the Kiss to all prisoners found guilty of crimes against humanity in compliance and support of Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle. Rumor was that the victims were then weighted down and dumped in the sea to drown, although the *Prophet* denied the fact, claiming it had been accidental. So far Draco knew of two people who had already been disposed of in this manner, and it made him sick to think about it.

Draco downed his drink and walked back to his desk. Forcing himself to think of other matters, he picked up Potter's reply to his dinner invitation, gritting his teeth at the arrogant response. Not that Draco was at all surprised, he'd expected to be turned down, but that wasn't going to stop him from succeeding at his plan. He exchanged it for the rough draft he was writing, another attempt at hoping to gain at least an agreement to have dinner with him. He needed Potter to come to the house so that he could try and sway him to let bygones be bygones. He even had his peace offering...an olive branch with diamond dusted leaves and silver olive bells, lying on the table to send with the letter. It was garish, but if it worked, it would be well worth the ten Galleons and sixteen Sickles he'd paid for it.

He picked up his quill and scratched out a sappy sounding bit and began to pace as he contemplated how he should reword it. He hated apologizing; his father had always told him that Malfoys never apologized to anyone, except a girlfriend or wife. But then his dad had been wrong about a lot of things.

He sat down and dipped his quill, and finished the letter's draft. He read it aloud and nodded *Sincere, succinct, unpretentious, even self-effacing... He should respond favorably to this.* Finally satisfied, he wrote a final draft on his personal stationary, the one with a modest monogram in silver, and summoned a house-elf to send Apollo to him. He drew his wand and opened a window. When the owl flew in and landed on his desk, he tied the letter to his leg and held out the olive branch for Apollo to take in his beak. "Harry Potter, same place, and I hope to have a owl," Draco said affectionately to the beautiful owl.

The owl bobbed once, turned, and flew out of the open window.

For several days, Lucius had been hauled from his cell and dumped unceremoniously in a metal chair to show his memories about various Death Eater activities to the investigators in a Pensieve. For several nights, he'd lain in the dark of his cell, one arm over his eyes to ward off the pain that had throbbed in his temple. Lucius wished that hadn't been as involved as he had been. Ten of the Death Eaters had named Lucius as a witness or had tried to lay blame on him or others for their offences. Where once these wizards had been bragging about their exploits...now they were twisting the facts around and trying to claim innocence or having been forced into compliance. Each time, Lucius had been hauled from his cell to withdraw the memories as either a confession or as his testimony to be sent by Auror to the Wizengamot, viewed in the courtroom, and then returned to him at night. However, he knew that he wouldn't be leaving Azkaban until he was dragged to the Ministry of Magic for his own trial. Then what would happen to him was anyone's guess.

During his own confession, Lucius had decided to try a different approach than his peers. Remorse. Considering that his memories had been viewed and the events the interrogators had seen had been seen in every detail, lying hadn't seemed feasible. Telling the truth, emphasizing that he'd acted under coerced compliance, under duress and fear. Fear for both his own life and for the safety of his family had seemed his only option. He'd been acquitted from his previous years of service during the Dark Lord's first rise to power, claiming he'd been Imperiused...Imperiused and marked as a follower...just as his wife and son had been marked this time around. He had condemned his family because of his arrogance, prejudices, and blind ignorance during the first rising. Now, his primary argument in his own defense was enslavement...entrapment because of the Dark Mark.

Four times Lucius had been asked to remove the memories from the graveyard after the Dark Lord had regained his body. He'd been instructed to remove the memories from the battle at the Department of Mysteries, both the meetings and the planning sessions for review several times. Lucius had offered to let the investigators keep those memories, but each time they'd insisted he put them back.

It was like a horrible novel that he'd been forced to memorize every line, and now every single word, action, expression, and reaction were as clear to him as Draco's birth, forever etched upon his mind. Lucius hated the torture of having his memories returned to his head, but he knew that he had no choice. Several times, he'd broken down and cried. Several times, he'd retched on the floor. However, occasionally, he'd seen flashes of understanding and sympathy in the eyes of his investigators. And Lucius did feel some remorse. He regretted ever getting involved with the Dark Lord in the first place.

"No one left the Dark Lord," he'd said repeatedly over the last few days. "Anyone who tried was killed...violently...their family first, often in front of them. I couldn't refuse and watch the most horrid, unspeakable acts be brought against Narcissa and Draco. I complied; I did the minimum necessary to avoid having my family tortured or killed."

At least he hadn't committed murder; torture, yes, property damage and Muggle-baiting, absolutely, threatening and attacking students in the department of Mysteries...regrettably, yes. He'd given the Dark Lord access to his home, money whenever he'd demanded it, and procured artifacts and devices that he'd requested. He'd given Ginevra Weasley the diary that had led to the reopening of the Chamber of Secrets. But had he known what that book had wanted, he'd *never* have relented and given it to her. His son had been attending Hogwarts! Draco could've fallen prey to that Basilisk! Did he regret that action? *Hell yes!* His attacking Potter in 1994? He had been angry over the loss of his servant...nothing more. He'd acted without thinking, without first reasoning out the consequences. Very unlike him, and yes, something he regretted.

Every day of his trial, Draco had brought him clothes to wear, dark trousers and a turtleneck with simple robes of dark blue or the darkest forest green. Draco sat in the first row of benches behind him every day. Lucius only had a moment each day to scan the courtroom, but he'd easily and quickly determined that Narcissa was not present. His fourth day Harry Potter, Ginevra Weasley, and Hermione Granger appeared to testify, followed by Ronald Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Dean Thomas the next. Lucius was stunned by the honest assessment the six young people gave, especially Hermione Granger. The poise with which she conducted herself had amazed him. She even met his gaze with a calm serenity and self-assuredness that bespoke of her maturity. She had really developed into a lovely young lady, a far cry from the bushy-haired buck-toothed little swot he remembered. Although, he did recall that in the Department of Mysteries, he'd been amazed by her tenacity and bravery.

By his fifth day, he realized that except for the day Narcissa had been subpoenaed to give witness, she was not going to support him. Lucius hid his disappointment and anger each day until he was back in his cell.

For July, it was fairly dry and warm, but the weather was unpredictably changeable at times. So far, it had been sunny and warm in the west of the country, but cool and cloudy in the east. This meant that the Tiree in Scotland had its sunniest July since records began in 1927, and Armagh in Northern Ireland had their driest July ever. Well, according to Muggle records that is, but the wizard papers noted that this phenomenon had happened before in 1834 and 1714. However in the Ministry of Magic, it was typically fourteen degrees Celsius in the atrium, twenty-two in the Department office where Hermione had her desk, and Cuthbert Mockridge in the Goblin Liaison office

kept complaining about the humidity in his. It seemed that the Ministry was severely short staffed ever since the Death Eaters had taken over the Ministry during the war, especially in the Magical Maintenance Atmosphere Control office.

Three of the people working there as Controllers had been sent to Azkaban, never to return, which left only Controllers Reginald Cattermole, Bernie Pillsworth and Curtis Bletchley to handle all the current problems. Moreover, because of the havoc created by people sabotaging the charms used to maintain optimum atmospheric conditions during the Death Eater occupation and the effects of adverse spell interactions that sometimes happened, the environmental spells were still way out of balance. The Controllers were stretched thin; however, only Controller Pillsworth was working full days and even overtime hours on the problems. Mr. Cattermole still took two-hour lunches and left work at four to take care of his war-traumatized wife. Likewise, Controller Bletchley, who was still working, just wasn't the same wizard after his wife had been Kissed before the final battle. He was often seen curled up under his desk afraid to enter rooms reported to have frigidly cold temperatures or places where there was frost.

Hermione rose early in the mornings and worked well into the evening each day, six days a week. Ernest hadn't been kidding when he'd said that the department was disorganized, and being understaffed was only one of the problems. In the last day of the battle, Voldemort had given his followers orders to eliminate all Ministry personnel with Muggle heritage and blood traitors. The so-called trials of the Muggle-born Registration Commission alone had depleted half of the employees and almost two-thirds of the secretarial pool, and since the previous administrations had been so corrupt and misguided, few of the students leaving Hogwarts in 1997 had wanted to join the Ministry. In fact, six of the overworked secretaries had learned to keep their heads down and avoided eye contact to evade getting any additional requests, so it had taken a few days before they started speaking to Hermione.

She had finally managed to reorganize Ernest's filing cabinets and was working on the department's filing cabinets with Nandini Krishnan, between her duties of sorting and answering memos, filling out request forms for Ernest to sign, filling out field hour requests turned in by members or the department for Ernest to approve, and collating incident reports. And it wasn't only the files! The reports and requisitions were incoherent, illogical, and there were so many redundant phrases... and the grammar and punctuation errors!

On her third day, Nandini had introduced Hermione to the Department filing cabinets. Hermione had eyed the wall of filing cabinets with some trepidation.

"Here we have our quarter-monthly...that means weekly, but we're not allowed to call it that... and monthly forms and across there our quarterly...every three months...the ones that go upstairs, and end of year files. Anything over a hundred years old goes in the department archive cabinets in the back room and anything over five hundred years is filed in the basement archives."

Hermione turned to look at her, gobsmacked. *"We keep everything for five hundred years?"*

"Oh of course," Nandini said, looking at her in confusion, "they are needed for migration patterns, environment and social impact, recording human interactions, encounters, and, of course, incident reports...that's a big part of our job, incidents." She turned to the filing cabinets closer to the door. "Not that we don't have crossovers. This first section is Interdepartmental Assistance Requests, and Incident forms, incident forms are on top, requests on the bottom. Spell Usage Incident forms, here. Registration forms by division, then by creature or being, same for any incident report." She moved down the wall of cabinets. "Damage reports...divisionary and interdepartmental, Clean Up and Repair Incident reports...also by division and interdepartmental, Relocation forms, Relocation reports, and then Request Forms for Relocation are here. Census reports, Migrations reports, Wayward or Returning Being or Creature reports...because some of them try to go back to where we removed them from..."

Hermione's head was beginning to hurt; her job was to collate and summarize all the division reports for Ernest. They were only half way across the expanse of the green filing cabinets. *"All these are weekly?"*

"Yep, thanks to our last two, and current Ministers of Magic...quarter-monthly, are kept in these green ones. And grey are monthly, putty are quarterly, and black are yearly," she answered with a nod, her finger pointing at the sections of the cabinets. "Shall we continue?"

Hermione shoved another file, now marked as Centaur Liaison office on the cover, in the proper drawer and closed the drawer a bit too roughly.

"Problem?" Nandini asked.

"Just the usual," Hermione said with a groan, picking up the next on the pile. "Another form report that didn't even identify which office it originated from or what the request form was for until I got a third way through it. These forms are so wordy and repetitious and so many are handwritten."

"That was Roger Shinnery's idea to simplify quarter-monthly reports," Nandini replied, scanning a file.

"What department is he in so I can thank him?" Hermione asked, trying to read the messy handwriting on the report.

Nandini's hands fell to her lap, still clutching the file she'd been reading. "He's... dead. Yaxley came in here, and... Mr. Shinnery shoved me into the utility closet when the attacks started..." She brushed away a tear. "He was a good man and a good boss, but these reports had to be made weekly, and we didn't have enough information to write out a full report each week, so he created this form. It saved time."

Hermione scooted over and handed the distraught girl a handkerchief.

Nandini wiped her eyes and then dropped her hand to her lap again, twisting the cloth in her fingers. "I know it's been a year, but I really liked him."

"Were you under investigation from Umbridge?" Hermione asked, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder.

The petite Indian girl shook her head. "Did you know that he hid eight Muggle-borns in his wine cellar during the war? Two families and a woman accused... of being a magic thief."

Her admission surprised Hermione. "No!"

"He had it dug for him by a Muggle years ago so the Ministry wouldn't know about it. There was a trap door in the pantry under the stairs. He reinforced his floor with Maldranite from a dragon lair and everything to hide them." She turned and looked at the office now occupied by Felix Grossman. "He had pictures, linnographs, I think he called them, from the movie Fantastic. He invited me to his home and showed it to me once."

Hermione tilted her head and bit her lip.

"From Disneyland. The musical cartoon Fantastic," Nandini tried to clarify, looking at Hermione as if she should know what she was talking about.

"Fantasia! He had animation cels?" Hermione gasped, amazed.

Nandini nodded. "In his office. They are still there. Wanna see them?" She rose and led Hermione to the office.

Mr. Grossman looked up when Nandini knocked gently on his doorframe. "Ladies. To what do I owe the privilege, Miss Granger, Miss Krishnan?"

"Nandini told me that you have some Disney cels on the wall..." Hermione's voice trailed off as she took in his walls. They were covered with pictures: lithographs, oils, watercolors, photographs, and drawings of Centaurs. "This is amazing!" she exclaimed as she took a closer look. She paused in front of a series of still photographs of female centaurs and young ones.

"Those were taken by a Muggle who wandered into a forest. We had to confiscate them and alter his memory," Mr. Grossman said offhandedly, but she could tell he was

proud of the collection. "I have a stone more in the files."

It was stifling hot in his office, and her blouse was already sticking to her. "You have an Impervious Charm on the art, don't you?" Hermione asked as she turned around and drew her wand. "*Meteolojinx recanto. Serenitas*," she said with some swishing of her wand. "That should clear away the dampness. *Moderanter clarum*. That should control the temperature a bit and make atmosphere conditions more comfortable... Hopefully, that should do it." The humidity reduced considerably.

Mr. Grossman's mouth fell open as he looked around the room. "I have tried using the *Meteolojinx recanto* for months, but I...how did you?"

Hermione shrugged. "I have been reading about the weather charms at home. Harry has a few books... Oh, I'm so sorry, we're intruding on you."

Mr. Grossman shook his head. "Not a problem. Tell Ernest that I'll have my quarter-monthly report form in by tomorrow."

Hermione nodded, a grimace on her face. "Would you mind terribly putting the name of your office and the type of report it is on the front cover? I'm having a tough time organizing all the files since I have to search through them to decipher where it originated and what it's for. It would help me tremendously if you'd do that on the requests and incident reports, too, please."

He laughed. "For this," he said with a sweep of his hand, "I'd do anything you ask."

"Thank you," she replied and turned to Nandini. "Well, back to work."

Nandini followed her out but stopped between the secretarial desks. "Maybe we should have you visit all the offices. You, know, to see if they will do the same?"

Hermione smiled as she surveyed the Division office space. "Why not, it wouldn't hurt to ask."

Nandini followed Hermione to each office as she approached each liaison office head to ask them to label each report and request more clearly on the cover page and then returned to their task. Harry stopped by just as Hermione finished a large pile of misfiled incident reports.

"Hermione, are you ready to go?"

"Just about, Harry," she replied, stretching. She turned to thank Nandini for her help and chuckled softly at the awed expression on her co-worker's face. "He doesn't bite."

Nandini turned three shades of pink. "That's...he's...here in... ohmygod! It's... you!"

Harry reached out and grasped the hand Nandini was using to point at him. "It's nice to meet you..." he started to say and then glanced quickly at Hermione, obvious that he didn't know the witch's name.

"Nandini, this is Harry Potter," Hermione said formally with a smirk. "Harry, Nandini Krishnan. I'll go get my cloak." When she came back, Harry and Nandini were sitting at her desk. "I'm ready if you are."

Harry said good-bye to Nandini as he picked up his cloak and followed Hermione to the lifts. It was blistering hot in the corridor as they waited. "Blimey, when are they going to get the temperature right around here?"

Hermione was already waving her wand. "*Meteolojinx recanto. Serenitas. Moderanter clarum*. That will hold for a bit. You'd think Peeves had moved in and is messing with the thermostat."

"Hermione, wizards, no thermostat," he said as if reminding her. "So, where to?"

She sighed as she searched in her pocket for the list she'd written down. "I need to make a quick stop before going home. I suppose... No, it can wait."

"Hermione?" he asked slowly, looking at her from under his fringe.

"It's nothing," she sighed, trying to find the list of things she needed to get from the pharmacy.

Harry bent to down a little to try and look her in the face. "Which translated from girl means...: I want...?"

"I haven't heard back from Regruk," she said with a heavy sigh, checking her other pocket.

He put his hand on her wrist as the lift doors opened. He guided Hermione in with him as she pulled out a piece of memo parchment. "Found it."

"Your school list?" Harry asked, and Hermione turned away, a look of disappointment on her face. "What? You haven't gotten your list yet?"

"No, I have it... that's not it..." She turned so that her face was almost pressed against his cheek. "Can't afford to buy my things until I get my loan," she mumbled softly. "And I don't get paid until the middle of next month, since I'm new."

"Oh, okay," he said, stroking her back. He helped her with her cloak, then pulled on his just before the doors opened onto the atrium. Freezing cold, air-conditioned air rushed in, making everyone in the lift grip their cloaks tight about their throats. Harry grasped Hermione's elbow and led her to the Floos. "C'mon, the fire will warm us up." He grabbed Floo Powder and said, "Diagon Alley," before Hermione could utter a word. They emerged into the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione coughing from inhaling soot. "Let's go get your books."

Hermione froze on the spot. "I can't yet! I told you I can't afford them!"

"I can," he stated as he waved to Tom.

"But..."

"You're my best mate, and I know you. You're itching to read all of your books. So, let's go get them," he said, drawing her away from the Floo as the flames activated again. "You'll pay me back later. So, what's first?"

She looked around to the front door, but Harry pulled her toward the back. "I should just go to Muggle London to get toiletries..."

"After. Bookshop or Quidditch shop?" he asked as he smirked at her. Harry opened the archway and hooked arms with her.

"Robes. Then stationary, and then I really need necessities," she stated, giving in.

He shrugged and led her to Madam Malkin's. He waited patiently as Hermione was fitted for her dark blue skirt and frockcoat. "I love these buttons," the seamstress gushed. "A closed red tome, fessways gules clasped and garnished with gold, the clasps lying downward...so scholarly."

Harry looked closer at the buttons as the witch measured Hermione for the slacks. "It's a book," he said and stood back. "Figures."

"You'll need white shirts, the black jumpers with the school colors on the cuffs and neckline...we have those, and the red and gold baklava," the witch stated, "and the purple-lined black cloak... and black stockings..."

"I was in Gryffindor," Hermione stated and the woman smiled. "I have red and gold scarves and hat."

"Cardinal, not crimson, dear." She pulled out a small note pad. "Come back on... Tuesday for your fitting. I'll have everything ready for you then."

Harry signed the payment voucher to have the funds drawn from his account. They went to Eeylops Owl Emporium and Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop. In the quill shop, Hermione tried to tell Harry that three quills would suffice when he picked up a box of twelve nice, black goose quills. "For how much you write? I know you went through a quill a week at school." He grabbed a bottle of Black Satin pigment ink.

"Harry this is too much!" she argued, opting for a lesser grade. She felt uncomfortable asking for anything beyond only the barest of basics. Her father had always told her never to borrow money from a friend.

"This is the stuff you used at school," he stated, "so I know it's your favorite. I'm willing to lend you as much as you need, so stop complaining. You're not going to break me." He ordered three reams of parchment, signed the payment voucher, and asked for the items to be delivered. "Next, books, right?" Harry asked when they left the shop, pointing at Flourish & Blotts.

Hermione nodded as he led her to the bookshop. Inside, Hermione drew out her list of recommended reading as the shopkeeper walked up to them. Harry took the list from her hand and handed it to the shopkeeper. "She may have any of these on her list that you carry and any other books that she wants. I'll be back to sign the voucher."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Potter," the shopkeeper said, smiling.

Hermione sighed, resigned to the fact that she was going to owe Harry big time.

"I'll be in the Quidditch shop," he said, and Hermione shrugged. "Should I buy you a broom?"

"No!" she snapped, and he chuckled.

"Honestly, buy whatever books you need, and I'll be back. I expect a stack when I return."

Hermione turned to the bookshelves on magical law in the far left corner of the shop.

After what seemed an hour, the shopkeeper appeared by her side. "I have all but five on your list, Miss Granger. You planning on studying law?"

"Thank you, Mr. Arlington. Yes, I'm enrolled in law school in Cambridgeshire." She was about to go find Harry and stopped. "Mr. Arlington, do you by chance have any books on the old laws?"

"Yes, miss," he said and led her to the end of the shelf and around to the next aisle. He turned around and stopped, nearly making her bump into him. "Miss Granger, if I might be so bold..." He looked over her shoulder, and Hermione turned to see what had caught his attention. When she turned back, his nose was only an inch from hers. "Are you still fighting against the ML?"

She jerked back in surprise. "The ML?"

Marriage Law, he mouthed.

She nodded, her brows drawn together in confusion.

He pointed to a stack of books. "These are history books, but they explain a lot. And I have some old books that I think you should read." He handed her *from Discourse on the Origins of Equality, For the Betterment of the Wizardkind: A History of Social Welfare* and a thick book titled, *Escaping the Inquisition: The Trials of the Witch Hunts*. He handed her two more large tomes from a top shelf titled, *Liberty, Law and Intolerance: the Manifesto of Superiority*, and *The Malleus Maleficarum of Modern Times* by Sir Walter Nigel Wentlock, printed in 1080. But the last book really shocked her. *Modern Relationship Advice from the Ancient Wisdom of Arranged Marriages* by Sir Frederick Wallace Brumfeild, esquire.

"Brumfeild, the wizard who wrote..."

"His father actually," Mr. Arlington stated. "It's a book defending magical bonding-troths and betrothal charms as the only means to procure one's spouse. Sound familiar? Healer Stanford Brumfeild grew up in India, I think." He handed her four more books. "These are about periods from the Wizarding Reformation through the Dark Ages of the Inquisition and the Wizarding Renaissance. Most of what's written here is no longer taught in Hogwarts. However, you will find them enlightening." He looked over his shoulder and back to her. "I'm not supposed to sell these. They were on the restricted book list a few months back. I was supposed to burn them."

Hermione covered her mouth to smolder the gasp of shock. "Book burning? In today's modern age?"

He smirked at her. "Do you really think we are all that enlightened? I thought you knew what was going on."

"I do," she admitted quietly.

"I knew you would come in here sooner or later; you always do. So I marked them as destroyed, but..." He took the four books back and they vanished under his smock. "Read them. I'll have them sent with your purchases, but hide them well."

Harry was waiting by the counter, flipping through a Charms book. "Where to next?" he asked when they were leaving the shop.

"My campus book shop, but I have to go there tomorrow at lunch. They close at four," she said. "So, the pharmacy?"

He hadn't minded going with Hermione first to the Muggle drug store for toiletries. They spent an hour shopping in Muggle London, including H&M, stopping to have dinner at Burger King. The next day, he went with her to the campus bookshop, and the day after, he dragged her from the office to go shopping in Camden Lock on the premise of getting something for Ginny, but Hermione ended up with six bags. He'd even given Hermione a reusable Portkey charm that would take her home from wherever she was.

Contrary to what Harry had said about her reading all her school books, Hermione sat every night after dinner poring over the books Mr. Arlington had sent her. Beside the six books Mr. Arlington had shown her in the shop, there were four more books: one on the laws of the wizarding Reformation in the seventeenth century, another on the history of the social and economic changes of the Middle Ages from the wizarding perspective, and a very interesting, very thick book of the trials, tribulations, and social changes in the wizarding world brought about because of the Spanish Inquisitions. All three books mentioned various laws passed in reaction to these events, and the reactions those laws had on wizarding society. The fourth book was a satirical book by a political humorist, William A. Coupe, that listed out many of the old laws, still on the books today, that were so comical at times, Hermione would actually laugh out loud, making Harry or Ginny ask her what was so funny.

But all ten books finally gave Hermione a clearer picture of how wizard-kind reacted to world events and the social, economic, and ethical changes that took place in the world around them. As much as the wizarding world liked to think they were segregated from Muggles and Muggle influence, it was obvious to Hermione that wasn't really the case at all.

She closed the book by William Coupe, still chuckling softly.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked, sitting down beside her.

Hermione handed him the book. "Harry, I really think you'll get a laugh out of this, only it's not really all that funny when you think about it."

"Why?" he asked his face skewed in confusion, handing the book back.

"Because these laws still exist and are still enforced in our world. Many of these laws are truly ridiculous or scary if you think about them; like being arrested for owning a Snitch feather, or someone being arrested for housing a class three or above creature in your bedroom for example? Sound remotely familiar? And the consequences imposed for breaking them are preposterous! Even you may fall prey to them," she said, pushing the book back into his hands. "Please, just read it."

He looked at the book, his brow creased as he frowned slightly. "Just what I need, more reading."

"At least it's funny," she said, picking up one of her school books.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Unpredictably Changeable

August had started out very hot, which was not all together unusual, but then the weather turned rather cold at night and unpredictable during the day. There were frequent thunderstorms and heavy downpours in places with dry and warm intervals, generally cool and cloudy in the evenings. Because of the intermittent weather, Hermione had started taking a light jacket with her, carrying a magically enhanced umbrella that didn't turn inside-out in the wind, and wore heavy boots to work, keeping her nice, black work shoes in her desk drawer. Her coat rack had a warm coat, a thick cloak, a hooded jacket, and two spare robes. She even kept a spare dress, nice moderate-heeled pumps, and sheer stockings for unexpected meetings.

Harry teased her about having moved into her office; however, considering that she didn't own a lot of clothes, it wasn't too far from the truth. In less than a month and a half, Ernest had come to rely on Hermione for a myriad of things, mostly as a second opinion on anything that recently crossed his desk, and included her in all his department meetings. She had even gone out in the field for him because, as it turned out, Ernest was allergic to practically everything: dust, pollen, mould, grasses, fur, feathers, eggs, nuts, berries, wheat, and shellfish to name a few.

Hermione and Samantha Susseckle, a witty Irish brunette from the Mermish Liaison office, had gone out to Bala Lake in Gwynedd, North Wales to follow up on a commotion regarding a kelpie sighting, or as the Muggles called her...a loch monster sighting, on the lake. Bala Lake was unique in that the River Dee ran through it, and it had been the largest natural body of water in Wales prior to the level being raised by Thomas Telford to help support the flow of the Ellesmere Canal. Because of the canal and the unique geography of River Dee, Bala Lake was subject to sudden and dangerous floods. The waters of the lake were also famously deep and clear and home to three magical species: the home of a clan of merpeople, the very rare mollusk, *Myxas glutinosa*, otherwise known as the Glutinous snail...a rare and highly prized potion ingredient...and since the late spring of 1920, it was also the home of a kelpie affectionately named Teggie by the locals. Unfortunately, the Ministry struggled to maintain the secrecy of the merpeople and the kelpie, but the Muggle authorities and local residents continually strived to perpetuate the fame of their lake monster for the sake of tourism. And, of course, Teggie loved the attention.

However, after a very wet June, and several dangerous floodings of the River Dee, the merpeople were more active than usual, and Teggie had decided to show herself again several times. Hermione and Samantha had met up with Alan Phinney and Peter Fish from the Ministry's Water Wildlife Protection Unit to assess if there was any breach of secrecy and to handle any unwanted publicity. Thankfully, Teggie hadn't been properly photographed, only a few, rather blurry vacation photos of a few dark shadows and some ripples on the lake. However, one of them looked like a capsized boat with a wake that was causing quite a stir, even after Peter Fish had proven that it was, in fact, a capsized boat; one he'd magically put in the lake for the authorities to pull out *after* the picture had been taken.

Hermione and Samantha entered the Ministry atrium and walked to the lifts as they headed to the office to give Ernest their report. As the girls approached the open office door, Hermione heard the voice of Aaron Barthelemy from the Werewolf Liaison office, giving his report on a problem he had with two registered werewolves.

"... had been caught cheating at the Cork County games in Armagh. Something called Road Bowls, or I think the local blokes called it *Long Bullets*. Anyway, it's each player throws an eight-hundred gram bowl, or bullet...I think that's what the locals call it...along a country road course, up to four kilometers long, and the fewest throws to traverse the distance wins the contest. One werewolf, Reginald Blane, he had apparently been using the Repelling Charm to make his iron bullet bowl hurl around the designated country lanes while his mate, Thomas Spent, made an exuberant amount of wagers on *Bowl Odds*, thus making a reasonable fortune."

"What?" Ernest asked. "Those two haven't caused trouble before."

"They made at least nine hundred Muggle pounds."

Ernest looked up, saw Hermione and waved her in. "That's enough to provide new clothes and food for several months," she replied sitting down. Hermione knew Reginald and Thomas and felt sorry for the men. These two were normally residents in Draperstown, near the Sperrin Mountains in Armagh, and were quiet, withdrawn men, relying on fishing and foraging for food.

"They agreed to relinquish the small trophy and agreed to do community service for nine months to atone for their misdeeds," Aaron stated, looking at Hermione with a sideways glance. "I tried to make them return the monies, but they claimed to no longer have it. Supposedly they bought food and new clothes."

"But isn't that reasonable?" Hermione asked. "I don't mean cheating at the games...that's wrong, but they were only obviously trying to find a way to feed and clothe themselves. The only other solution would be to help the men find jobs."

Aaron was incensed. "You can't be serious! I can't find them jobs! They're werewolves for crying out loud!"

Hermione rounded on him. "These laws are so unfair! First, they can't work to make an honest wage so they are condemned to a life of vagabonds, forced to steal or scavenge for food and clothes, or to find any means necessary to survive. Then the Ministry comes and levies fines on them...which they can't pay...so we are forced to have the Werewolf Hit Squad go and arrest them." She took a deep breath to calm herself. "I am trying to help these men! I know them. They are nice guys who lock themselves up in a self-dug basement during the full moon. Did you see how they live? In a one-room shack with clothes so old I wouldn't use them as rags. And, they are

starving. So making them pay a fine is a joke, and I'm tired of having werewolves arrested for trying to find ways to eat!"

"But they're breaking the law!" Aaron argued.

"Neither one of these men have bitten anyone...ever!"

"Quiet you two!" Ernest shouted to gain their attention and held up his hand to keep Hermione from speaking. "I know you were friends with Remus Lupin. Fine, Hermione, write me a proposal...a viable proposal...that would enable them to give up gambling as a way to earn money for bread and new shoes, and I'll sign it. Aaron, find them a job...any job. Let them grow potatoes, carrots, or something. Let them breed...I dunno...rabbits or those dwarf Abraxans the wizarding families love so much."

"You agree with her?" Aaron asked, falling back in his chair in shock.

"I agree with Hermione that if you pass laws that take away a man's ability to provide for himself, you then force him to take matters into his hands to find a way to eat and survive," Ernest stated, looking warily at Aaron. "I have tried for years to change the law to allow them to have jobs and own homes in remote areas so they can be viable, productive members of the community and not thieving outcasts. Hermione is right, these two werewolves have built a basement that they can lock themselves into each month. That shows a desire to keep themselves away from others when they are dangerous so they don't attack anyone."

"Yes, that's true. There hasn't been a single case of werewolf attack in Draperstown or anywhere in Armagh in years...well since when Blane and Spent had been attacked." Aaron lowered his gaze to his hands. "I'll see what I can do."

"And, Hermione," Ernest said with a sigh, "you cannot single handedly take on every cause in the office."

Hermione blushed, saying, "Yes, sir, I know."

While Aaron muttered, "No, only half of them."

Hermione gave him a sharp look, adding, "But it's just so unfair..."

"Enough," Ernest said, holding up his hand. "What happened in Bala with the Tegid Kelpie?"

Ginny was trying so hard not to laugh as she read the letter that had arrived by owl that morning. "Harry, I don't think Draco has ever written an apology before in his life," she managed to say in a calm rational, laugh free voice. "So I'm sure writing this one was quite a challenge for him."

Harry scrunched his face and rested his chin on his fists at the table in the kitchen. "This is his response to my letter asking the git where he ever got the idea I'd want to have dinner with him...in his house!"

"What did you tell him?" Ginny asked, looking at him warily.

"Pretty much that," he answered her, then looked abashed at her angry glare. "I didn't put in the git part, only that we were hardly friends."

"How many times has he written you?" she asked.

Harry looked away. "For a month now...I dunno, six, maybe seven letters."

"And you wrote him back, didn't you?" she asked, looking at him incredulously.

"Once or twice. What?" He held his palms up, his elbows resting on the table. "We weren't fiends...ever! He was a right git to me all through school!"

"Harry James Potter! People change!" she snapped. "At least he's trying to make an effort now."

He wondered what had her wand in a knot. "What? He never really admitted to being in the wrong. He only said that after his stint in Azkaban and his memory-reviewing interrogation during his confession, he realized that he had been ignorant to many things."

"Show me his letters," she demanded with a stern expression that reminded him of her mum.

Harry knew better than to continue the argument when she was being so unreasonable. He asked Kreacher to get them for him and handed them to Ginny. She read each one, sighing or shaking her head, occasionally smiling and then biting her lip... He tried to read her expressions, wondering why she seemed interested in Draco's invitations.

"I dunno, he also states that having housed You-Know-Who and being in such close personal proximity to him, he saw firsthand how demented the wizard really was and fully regretted taking the Dark Mark. That has to account for something," Ginny argued, glancing at the neat penmanship of the letter. "It even looks like he took his time writing this."

"Do you really want to go have dinner at Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked, dropping his hands to the table. "The guy is a prejudiced git!"

"People can change! Don't you remember me telling you in my letters how different Draco was? Remember how in September, Hermione wrote to you that Draco stood up for her down in the dungeons, and all last year he was actually nice...working with us to fight against these ridiculous laws the S.H.R.M.C. was passing. He even took us to his house to search his library."

"Yeah, I'm sure that wasn't self-serving and... What?" he asked when Ginny scowled at him.

"Look, he was different this year; he even called me Ginny," she stated undeterred. "He befriended Hermione, was polite to Luna, Bernice, and Shelia... and many of the other Muggle-borns. He told me he'd realized that the old adages that he'd lived by, the old prejudices, were incredibly short sighted. Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy isn't the superficial git he was before the war...the war changed him...considerably!" She got up and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked, reaching out a hand to try and stop her.

"To tell him we accept," she said as she left the room.

"YOU CANNOT REALLY MEAN TO *EAT* OVER THERE?" he shouted after her.

Ginny popped her head back around the doorframe. "Yes, I do, and so are you."

"But, Gin," he whined, rising up from the table to intercept her before she sent a reply by owl.

"Besides, like it or not, he's not a bad guy to know once you..."

"Get past his spoiled rotten git side, right?" he finished for her.

"Yeah, once you get past all that, he's actually rather charming when he wants to be," she replied as she drafted a quick acceptance to dinner.

"Fine, we'll have dinner with the ferret," he said as Ginny tied the letter to his Snowy owl.

"Whatever you say, scarhead," she replied with a warm satisfied smile.

Ginny Weasley had replied to his invitation to dinner. It was unexpected, having her attend, but a nice added bonus. Ginny was Hermione's closest friend beside Harry and Ron. Draco tried saying the names out loud to get used to using Potter's first name. It felt odd, after years of calling him Potter, or much worse.

His house-elves were under instructions to cook a meal similar to one from school, a good hearty meal and nothing too elaborate since Draco had no idea what Harry liked to eat. At present, Draco was deciding whether to use the dining room or set up dinner in one of the sitting rooms as he searched through his wardrobe. He didn't want to use the huge dining room table. Draco still had nightmares that involved that table. He definitely wanted to show Harry the Quidditch pitch on his grounds, but the nights were still too cold to fly comfortably.

He'd selected his dark red robes, trimmed with subtle silver threadwork, not quite Gryffindor red by any stretch of the imagination, but still red. He was searching through his drawer for that silver belt buckle that Pansy had given him... the one with turquoise on it from Sedona, and the turquoise and silver cloak clasp she'd given him at Christmas to complement it. The Muggle silver buckle would do well if he was supposed to be showing that he'd changed his mind about Muggles. Draco pulled them out and laid them on his robe. It was a bit off, but not totally unacceptable. With a lightweight black turtle-neck and black trousers, he would look good, not that he didn't always look good.

He picked up the *Daily Prophet* he'd tossed on the bed and stared at the headlines on the front page.

Lucius Malfoy, Confirmed Death Eater, To Be Released Monday

The first picture showed his father after his initial questioning: mud streaked hair, cut lip, black eye, bruised cheek, with a neck brace, and a Muggle cast on his left hand, holding his prisoner ID card...an image of his once proud father, beaten and broken by the Azkaban guards. The second article was of Lucius, emaciated thin from poor food, pale from lack of light and dirty from lack of proper grooming, sitting in the interrogation chair with the Pensieve in front of him, a long silver memory strand being pulled from his temple.

Lucius Malfoy: Remorseful Death Eater or Skillfully Acted Charade?

Lucius Malfoy claims that he'd known what You-Know-Who was like, and he would have never rejoined him except for the fear he had for the safety of his wife and son. He regretted ever getting involved with You-Know-Who in the first place, but he hadn't had any choice. "Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater, there was no recanting. Those who tried were killed..."

Draco couldn't stomach reading the article; he remembered all too well the punishments for betrayal, disloyalty, or abandonment. That and the image his father withdrawing the memory strand and the Pensieve was enough to make Draco's skin crawl and get prickly with goose-flesh and make his palms sweaty... even his lips sweated at the memory.

Money Can Buy Anything Even An Acquittal

The last article made him grind his teeth. It insinuated that Draco had bribed Harry, Hermione, and their friends to lie on his father's behalf. He'd wanted to write a rebuttal, but his solicitor had warned him against it. Anything he said would be misconstrued and would only darken the name of Malfoy further. Besides, the *Prophet* was known for getting things wrong anyway.

Draco dressed, combed out his hair and checked his appearance before heading down to greet his guests. He passed by the dining room and called for a house-elf. "Set up dinner here, but at one end. I want this to be informal and personal. Also, serve the meal family style like they did at Hogwarts and use the glass goblets from Spain." *That will be casual enough.*

"Yes, master," the elf replied and vanished.

He surveyed the room and walked over to the nearest portrait. He'd replaced Abraxas Malfoy for his great-great-grandmother, Clarisse Mignonette Malfoy, and his great-grandfather, Nicholas Deveran Malfoy, and a family portrait of his mum, dad, and himself. "Now, please don't scowl or frown at my guests. This is a very important night to reclaim the Malfoy name. The Dark Lord...he fell and this is the bloke who vanquished him. Great-great-grandmother Clarisse, you set the standard of Malfoy hospitality for generations, and I need your example of charm and graciousness tonight," he implored her.

The elegantly coiffed woman smiled at him and nodded serenely.

He turned to face his own family. "And, Mum, I really need you to show that same hospitality. Please, this is for all our sakes."

Narcissa sat up straighter and Lucius squared his shoulders. "We know how to address a guest, Draco," Lucius said from his frame.

"And, a guest in this house will be afforded every courtesy and respect that our position and social standing demands of us as hosts, and we will honor the name of Malfoy by our example," Clarisse said loftily from her frame to Lucius. "You'll smile, young man, and be serene and proud, but you will not embarrass me. Is that clear?"

Lucius's image nodded politely to the one-time Malfoy matriarch.

An elf appeared next to Draco and bowed deeply. "Master, the guests is arrives at the gate, sir."

He turned and walked into the foyer to greet them. Harry followed Ginny in and helped her to remove her cloak. "Harry, Ginny, thank you for coming," Draco said and indicated a bench on the side of the room. "You may place your cloaks on there, and the house-elves will tend to them."

Ginny was looking around, but Harry didn't take his eyes off Draco.

"Dinner will be a while, but if you like I can show you around?" Draco offered to break the ice.

"I'd love that, Draco," Ginny said. "I read that your great-grandmother bred exotic orchidaceae and bromeliads."

Draco smiled. *This is perfect.* The solarium where the orchids and bromeliads grew had a wonderful view of the grounds and from the top of the enclosure where the high-canopy bromeliads were, one could see the Quidditch pitch. "Yes, she was famous for them," he said and held up his hand for her to follow him. "Mother was also quite fond of Lady's slipper orchids and Cymbidiums. Her sunroom has a selection of her favorites, many that are in bloom now."

He and Ginny talked about cultivating orchids, although she knew far more about it than he did. She was pleased by the sunroom that led to the solarium. The solarium was an enormous room with a huge magical tree in the center. The trunk had crevasses, twists, knots, and even supported shelves that were home to many of the varieties of his family's orchid and bromeliad collection. Two-thirds of the walls surrounding the room were glass with a multi-tiered waterfall on the wall, creating a mist, many small pools, and a pleasing sound. Small exotic birds fluttered about and sang as they walked up the curving staircase. The staircase even passed behind the waterfalls and along small pools containing tiny fish and exotic water plants as they climbed.

At the top, Ginny turned to survey the scenic view. "Oh, Draco, this is amazing!"

"That's the Abraxan stables over there, the magical herbal garden you see in *Magical Home and Garden* occasionally. Tildon Toots and Mum are friendly. The swan pond...

witches like having their wedding pictures taken there, and in the back in this direction," he said, turning slightly, "you can make out the Quidditch pitch."

"Very impressive, Malfoy," Harry said, watching some fairies frolicking in the water or resting on lily pads at the top of the waterfall. Ginny gave him a stern look. "Is it a full regulation or a half pitch?" he added to sound more conversational.

Draco chose to ignore Harry's tone. "Full regulation. The Tornados used the pitch when they had that fire that burned down theirs," he said, crossing his arms.

"Bet you loved flying with them, didn't you?" Harry asked, turning to look out the window.

Draco chuckled softly. "Yeah, I did. What seven-year-old wouldn't want to fly on the broom with a famous Beater?" Harry turned to look at him. "I snuck down against my mum's wishes and sat on the stands to watch."

"That's dangerous!" Ginny said in awe. "Didn't one of the team managers or the captain send you off?" Harry looked at her, a deep furrow between his brows. "Bludgers. They're charmed to seek out warm bodies, preferably moving ones... That's why kids cannot be in the stands without an adult witch or wizard. Kids make good targets for the iron balls."

"That's what I found out. I nearly got bludgered and had to be rescued. Dad really yelled at me for that one," Draco said with a smile as he recalled how red his father's face had gotten. "I had to ask permission after that, and one of the managers did sit with me from then on." The sound of a small bell rang out. "Oh, good, dinner's ready to be served. Shall we?"

"So, you're a Tornado fan then?" Harry asked as he followed Draco down the stairs.

"I have always liked the Magpies, actually. Goyle likes the Harpies, and we go to all the games," Draco said over his shoulder. "How about you? Do you have a favorite team now?"

Harry shrugged. "Ron supports the Cannons, and Wood now flies for Puddlemere United."

"Puddlemere is playing against Ballycastle next week, I think. I could get us tickets if you'd like to go," Draco suggested.

Harry looked torn between wanting to accept and annoyed by the suggestions. "We'd love to go," Ginny said, butting Harry in the side with her elbow.

"Yeah, sure, why not? You can ask your mate, Goyle, to come. Be like old times," Harry replied, moving a step to his right away from Ginny.

Draco suppressed his smirk. "You know I read that they might introduce a net for the goal hoops."

Harry perked up. "Yeah, I heard about that. What's up with that? I mean, I know that there was a problem of standardizing baskets in 1883. Couldn't regulate the size or something..."

"Some wizards would like to see a revival of the old baskets. Nets are supposed to replace the baskets to make it so the Quaffles don't get lost," Ginny stated. "But I don't see that happening."

"There is a guy in the wizarding town, Port Muldoon, just north of Port Isaac near Wadebridge that has put in a patent request for goal nets. If he gets his patent, his family of net makers will be supplying a standardized net for all the teams," Draco explained.

"Ron's bummed about it. He got his first Quaffle at the Cannons game when he was nine. He found it in the marshes when we were walking to the Portkey site."

Draco smiled. If he could keep the topic on Quidditch through dinner, maybe Harry would loosen up and enjoy himself enough to come back.

Hermione was sitting at the desk in the library, parchments and books spread out before her, when Harry and Ginny came home. "So, how did dinner go?" she asked not even looking up.

Harry plopped down on the sofa. "Well, enough, I suppose."

"Liar, you enjoyed it, and you know it," Ginny stated as she walked across the room. "I think he was trying hard to be a normal bloke. We had lamb chops, bubble and squeak, and trifle blancmange with a bickie for afters. He had some of the trifle boxed for you." She set a box on the desk and turned away.

Hermione eyed the box suspiciously. "Shouldn't you have given this to Winky to put on a plate?"

"Just untie the ribbon and it opens, silly," Ginny said as she sat down and curled up next to Harry. "There's a fork inside. Oh, and before I forget, you are invited to the Puddlemere game next week. You can't say no, I've already accepted for you."

Hermione looked at her in outrage that she had been roped into going. "Gin, I can't. I have..."

"If I have to go with Malfoy..." he started to say, and Ginny nudged him in the ribs, making him jerk, "and Goyle, so do you." He looked at Ginny with a confused scowl. "What?"

"Be nice. Greg and Francine will be invited, and I am going," Ginny said and turned back to Hermione. "Harry is going to owl Oliver Wood, and maybe we'll get to go to the after party."

Hermione sighed. "Fine, I'll go. I'd be more comfortable if Ron came, too, but I'll go."

Harry moved his arm from around Ginny and shifted so he could get up. "I think I'll write a letter to Wood. Cho can see he gets it, rather than going through his team publicist."

After he left, Hermione got up to sit next to Ginny. "So, how did it really go? What did Draco want?"

Ginny shrugged. "I think he wants to remain friends, but really, Draco was downright nice. Why are you so suspicious of him?"

"I wanted to just let this...Gin, Draco petitioned for me. He asked me to marry him before we left school. I refused him, but I don't think he's going to let it go."

Ginny sat bolt upright. "He petitioned for you? After everything we did to fight this law? When? I heard that he was considering one of the Greengrass girls... Astoria, I think?"

Hermione shook her head. "He did and was turned down...the S.R.H.M.C. didn't approve the match and told him he'd have to pick a Muggle-born. So he picked me."

"Well, I think he made a great choice!" Ginny laughed at her scowl. "Don't, really. Who else would he have chosen? First Ron, then Draco Malfoy...Draco did say that you were going to become pretty popular," she said, shaking her head. "I know that Bernice received an inquiry from Roger Holman, a Gary Scarborough, and Mr. Harper. I think Charles Harper has changed his mind about Muggle-borns, but Bernice said she'll snap her wand before consenting to him."

"She's sterile," Hermione stated offhandedly.

"And Charles Harper knows about the potion. His family is well off, connected in *theright circles*, and his dad was in Azkaban, accused of being a supporter. Also, Charles is the only boy in the family...the heir," Ginny pointed out. "If the Harpers don't get what they want...a bride to produce the next heir...they can make things difficult."

Hermione brushed her hair back with her hand. "This just keeps getting more and more frustrating. The longer this goes on...the more desperate things seem to get. Bernice is in Healer training, isn't she? That's a good three years before she's eligible anyway."

"Except the Harpers can show right to labor or continued education and establish funds for children, including Au Pairs and governesses," Ginny stated. "So if they can prove there is a way around the sterility..."

"Bernice...and the rest of us are sunk!"

"Exactly."

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 14

Many people were affected by Voldemort—his followers, his victims, and the innocents who had been caught up in the war. After the war is over, how are they dealing? As the Wizarding world recoups, rebuilds, reorganizes, and adjusts to the social and economic changes caused by the aftermath of war, there are still people fighting to correct the wrongs that are out there. Hermione is one, so is Draco. Lucius is another.

Auspicious Friendships

Tuesday after Auror training had let out, Harry had gone to Draco's, intending to pick up the tickets for the Puddlemere game on Friday. Draco had met him at the gate in his Quidditch pads and holding his broom, apparently having missed his note, asking if he could stop by. Seeing the familiar gear had stirred up many fond memories for Harry, and he had been longing to fly. Especially since Ron, who had been seeing Heidi Tipton in *Magical Games and Sports*, kept extolling his daring catches and agile maneuvering during his flights with Heidi's brother, Brandon, one of the Chasers for the Cannons. Somehow, Draco had persuaded Harry to borrow a broom, pad up and toss a Quaffle with very little encouragement. They had flown for hours, dodging a leather training Bludger and racing about the pitch until the lights had turned on. Only, by the time he'd arrived home, Harry had realized that he and Draco had forgotten all about the tickets.

So, Harry had stopped by the next day after Concealment and Disguise and had ended up back on the pitch again for a short game of 'Chasing the Snitch.' It had been loads of fun, and Harry had won best two out of three. Time had escaped him, and it had been really dark by the time Harry had come home, sweaty, windblown, and grinning. He'd entered the house expecting Ginny to be really peeved at him. However, it had been Hermione who'd given him the cold shoulder and disappeared to her room, slamming her door.

Hermione paced her room furious at Harry. She knew exactly what game Draco was playing, even if Harry was too blind to see it. First had been dinner at the Manor, then the promised tickets for a Quidditch game, and now Draco was enticing Harry into flying with him on his regulation-sized pitch. Draco had even sent presents: a shimmering olive branch with silver olive-shaped bells that Harry had hung on the door, a book on famous moments in Quidditch, and a thick book on curses, jinxes, and hexes and their counter spells, translated from the original Slavic text.

Truth was, Hermione had found the spell book fascinating even though she'd had to explain its import to Harry. All of the spells were of the Indo-European languages organized by century and region. Most of the spells themselves were written in the Cyrillic alphabet with a definite ancient Greek influence rather than the Roman Latin dialect or in the Old Macedonian in the Glagolitic alphabet. And, while most of the pronunciations of the spells and counter-spells were difficult to learn, Harry did recognize three curses as ones the Death Eaters used while fighting, which renewed his interest in the book. Hermione copied down several of the spells she just couldn't figure out in a letter to Viktor, hoping he'd be able to help her pronounce them properly.

However, it was hardly a simple trifle or ambiguous gift considering it was given three weeks before Harry's birthday. That, added to the regular delivery of flowers, meant that Draco was still trying to win her over. She wished he'd just accept that she was not going to marry anyone. Especially anyone who went through the S.H.R.M.C. for approval! She'd been fighting against the S.H.R.M.C. ever since they'd started passing laws restricting who could marry whom.

Hermione knew that the only reason Draco was interested in her was to get around the marriage law clauses by picking the least objectionable Muggle-born he knew...her. "Not that he hasn't proven for six years what a low opinion he has of me, calling me a Mudblood every chance he got," she snarled, kicking her shoe that was lying on the floor into the wardrobe. Granted he'd been quite different the last year, even amiable and helpful in fighting the ridiculous laws, but that was simply self-serving in her opinion. "Old nemesis laying aside old grievances to fight a common foe...nothing else," she mumbled aloud, as she flung herself on her bed.

"If you say so, dearie," Lucretia Black-Prewett's portrait said with a knowing grin as Callidora Longbottom, who was visiting from her frame, laughed.

Draco sat in the courtroom on Thursday, waiting with bated breath as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot organized the parchments before him. His father, strapped to the chair by the magical chains, looked worn and haggard, even with his hair well brushed and in his new Prussian blue and grey robes. Draco was sickened by the amount of weight his father had lost this time around. He'd lost quite a bit of weight after his first stay in Azkaban, but with good food, exercise, sun, and care, he'd recovered well enough. Now, even his hair looked ragged and thinner.

Tiberius Ogden finally looked up, well down, at Lucius and straightened his spectacles. "According to the reports of our interrogators, and from the memories viewed in the Pensieve, we have sufficient evidence to lock you away for life, Mr. Malfoy. However, I am most intrigued by your insistence that you only returned to Voldemort's inner circle for the well being of your family. Why you'd return in the first place...I have a hard time justifying your return to Voldemort as a loyal follower when you repeatedly claim that you no longer wished to do so. It is truly boggling... However, in many of these cases for Voldemort supporters, not just your own, we see this reoccurrence repeatedly. Likewise, your claims, and those of others in your same position, have given the interrogators repeated images of what happened to those who refused. Ghastly, absolutely ghastly.

"Furthermore, I am utterly amazed by the testimony of several upstanding members of the Order of Phoenix, Hogwarts staff members, and from Mr. Harry Potter, in particular, as well as Miss Hermione Granger, Mr. Neville Longbottom, and Miss Luna Lovegood, who all gave testimony on your behalf that you took no part in the battle at Hogwarts. And I have several accounts from witnesses in Hogsmeade that you showed great restraint in dealing with them, often giving leniencies and warnings, even bravery on occasion in trying to avoid having any of the residences harmed by your fellow Death Eaters. Most confusing."

"I have many regrets of my actions during the three years of the Dark Lord's second rise, but I had no choice but return to him," Lucius said softly.

"So you and many others have said," Chief Warlock Ogden stated, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Lucius.

"It was the Dark Mark," Lucius said with a heavy sigh. "Through it he could summon us to him, but he could also use it to find us as well. It was our connection to him, and once branded, we were magically bonded. We were his to do with as he pleased...enslaved. Fleeing was not an option. Those who did were eliminated...gruesomely and violently. Their families tortured, murdered, sometimes fed to his snake or... or..." He turned his head and closed his eyes. "Worse, so much worse," he choked out with a grimace on his face. "Narcissa was my life, my love. Draco is my only son; I couldn't... I just couldn't..."

"I have seen the memories of those who witnessed such accounts," Mr. Ogden stated, placing his elbows on the bench in front of him and resting his chin on his fists with his thumbs under his chin. "From what I remember of you during the interim of peace, you were a fine, upstanding member of our community and a philanthropist." He laced his fingers together, his thumbs still under his chin, and pressed his lips against his fingers. He stared at Lucius for a long time, apparently deep in thought.

Chief Ogden lifted his head up slightly and looked at the far wall. "The Wizengamot has voted, fifty percent in favor of a life sentence, fifty to allow you to be released on probation under magical tracking and monitoring." He paused again. "So the decision is mine. The list of charitable donations to your credit is impressive, and you have done so much for our community. And so much against it."

Draco felt the man's eyes rest on him and his eyes locked, held by this man's gaze. This was it, the decision. Draco tried to maintain a calm outward appearance, but knew that he was failing. He wanted his father home with him. Draco knew without turning that his mum was sitting serenely several spaces down the row, but he didn't look at her.

"Mr. Malfoy, it is my decision that you be remanded home, under probation with constant magical tracking and monitoring."

The outcry in the room was deafening.

"You must submit your wand to the office of Magical Equipment Control two times a week, and clear any travel from your home with the Aurors. You will be required to remit payments to be arranged with my clerk, Merilynn Elizabeth Lovelle, for such charities as to be determined by the Wizengamot. That is all." He picked up the parchments and put them in the box by his side and handed the box to a clerk.

The chains fell away from Lucius, and Draco rushed forward. Mr. Shackbolt, Harry Potter, and Mr. Williamson immediately surrounded Lucius as Mr. Pugliese helped him to stand. "Son, you should come with us," Mr. Williamson said to Draco as they led his father to the door.

Harry was really looking forward to the Quidditch game, surprisingly enough, considering that he was going with Draco and Goyle. It was still weird, his being friendly with Draco Malfoy, the git who'd been a total prat all through school, but Harry was beginning to let go of some of his reservations, even if he was slow to recognize it. He'd been to Malfoy Manor three times this month, and each time Draco had been not just nice but, well, likable. When Draco wasn't being a righteous git, he was fun to talk to, and they were evenly matched on brooms.

Harry had told Ron that he, Hermione, and Ginny were going to the Puddlemere game as soon as Draco had promised to get tickets. Ron had gotten excited about going to the game and had managed to get tickets through his girlfriend's connections.

Ron came over to Harry's for a late breakfast before the game and planned to Apparate with them at their appointed place and time. Hermione strolled down after a bit of a lie in, in her Muggle jeans and a sapphire blue sleeveless tank top and her hair tied back with a blue ribbon. "Oi, supporting Puddlemere now, are you?" Ron asked waspishly.

"What are you on about?" Hermione said curtly as she moved to sit at the other end of the table next to Ginny.

Harry looked up, his mouth full of eggs, wondering what was wrong. He'd hoped that they had worked things out. They hadn't seen each other for six months, and he'd hoped that they were getting along again.

"You're wearing Puddlemere blue," Ron pointed out, indicating her top with his fork.

"I just threw on something comfortable. I plan on wearing robes to the game, of course," Hermione quipped and then added coolly, "Good morning to you, by the way."

"Morning to you. Did you have a nice lay in?" Ginny asked as she sipped her breakfast tea.

"Oh, Merlin yes! I can't believe I got the day off. If I'd gone in, I'd have to go to the Hebrides coast today," Hermione replied, sitting as if to turn her back to Ron. She started telling Ginny about a wizard who had reported his missing wife to the Aurors that ended up involving her department, too. "Turned out she was one of the Hebrides Silkies. He had a picture of her. She was very pretty, but she had the sad, bright-eyed look of a seal and long webbed fingers in her pictures..."

Ron shrugged and started to talk to Harry about Quidditch, comparing the latest scores and ranking. "Puddlemere is third in the season, only because they beat the Wimbourne Wasps by four hundred points. The Cannons are up this year, tenth in the league! And they play the Wasps next week. Might move them up to ninth in the league if they win."

Harry glanced at the clock. "Oi, if you girls are going to change, you better get a move on!"

Both girls scrambled to their feet and Apparated upstairs to throw on robes. The girls both had on simple sleeveless robes, Hermione's robe royal blue and Ginny's a deep aquamarine, and comfortable sandals when they came back down. Harry complimented them, but Ron simply nodded, grunting, "Nice," before asking if everyone was ready to leave.

When they arrived at the Quidditch stadium in Yorkshire, Draco, Goyle, and Francine were waiting for them at the gate to the pitch. Hermione and Ginny, dragging Harry with her, hurried over to greet Francine and Goyle. Ron hung back, scowling at Draco and Goyle before waving, and disappeared into the crowd. Harry had hoped that he'd have more time to talk to Ron or that his seat was close to them, but he was gone before he could ask.

He turned back to the girls, watching Ginny and Hermione talking to Draco and Goyle and laughing. Even though Hermione and Ginny were friendly toward Goyle and Francine, both greeted them warmly, Hermione was standing stiffly and only made quick glances in Draco's direction, keeping her attention on the others in their group. When Draco suggested they find their seats, Hermione had followed Goyle and Francine up the stairs in the stands, talking about Francine's pregnancy, obviously far friendlier terms with the couple than she was with Draco. But Ginny, who'd looped arms with both Harry and Draco, talked about the newly proposed broom regulations and the new style for the Bludgers all the way to the stairs as if Draco had been a longtime friend.

Goyle led them to their row, going in first so Francine could sit with Hermione. Draco squeezed in next as he passed Harry and managed to situate himself between Ginny and Hermione, which left Harry on the end. Ginny shrugged her shoulders and laughed at Draco's smug expression. Hermione jumped up to leave with Francine for the loo, and when the girls came back, Goyle jumped up to give his girlfriend a hand, so Harry ended up sitting next to Goyle and Francine with Draco once again between Hermione and Ginny.

"Gin, what's going on?" he asked, confused.

Ginny shrugged. "Draco wanted to sit by Hermione, I suppose, and Francine said she should sit on the end since she'll probably have to visit the loo during the game."

Hermione turned and greeted the wizards on her other side. The blond wizard's eyes widened when he realized who she was, and his jaw dropped as he looked at her companions. He nudged his friend to get his attention. "Dick, it's Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley... and he's Harry Potter!" he said, lightly smacking his friend again to get his attention.

His friend turned, his eyes going wide, obviously equally as gobsmacked. "Blimey, you here, at a Quidditch match!"

Hermione laughed as Draco grumbled, "Of course! Like she's never been to a match before."

"We have a friend who plays for Puddlemere, Oliver Wood," she replied, which made Harry snicker softly at the slight stretching of the truth. Hermione hadn't known Wood all that well at school, since he had been three years ahead of them.

"Blimey, you're friends with the Keeper?" Dick exclaimed in amazement.

Goyle asked Harry a question, making Harry turn around in his seat. "Sorry, didn't catch that."

"Are you excited about seeing your ol' team mate?" he repeated, smirking slightly.

"Er, yeah," Harry admitted.

"He was a good player, but I remember he used to book the pitch really early for practices," Goyle remarked, as if trying to engage Harry in conversation.

Harry shrugged his shoulders, about to respond, when the official Quijudge from the Department of Magical Games and Sports began the announcements. Two referees soared onto the pitch as they were introduced and the Keeper of the Balls carried out the Quidditch trunk to the center of the field.

Much to Harry's stunned amazement, Greg turned out to be an all right bloke. At a half-hour time-out, they talked about what had happened at Hogwarts, the marriage law, and how he and Francine had gotten together, until the game started. Greg had even cracked jokes, and they debated the advantages of using Muggle appliances over magic during another long timeout. Greg had been fascinated that Harry had learned to cook on an electric range top stove and laughed when Harry told him some of his mishaps in the kitchen.

The game between Puddlemere and Ballycastle had been an awesome game.

The game had been a tie until a Bludger had hit Oliver Wood seven hours in, letting Ballycastle score twice before Puddlemere's Seeker had caught the Snitch, so Puddlemere had won by one-hundred and thirty points. The post-game fireworks, courtesy of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, were huge, blue, blooming flowers, Catherine wheels and gold streamers for Puddlemere and huge red bats for Ballycastle.

Draco and Greg held out the Portkey, so they could go to the victory party. Wood had revived by the time the six of them had been allowed into the banquet hall.

Wood had been thrilled to see Harry again and introduced their small group to all of his teammates. Likewise, the Puddlemere Quidditch players had been thrilled to meet the famous Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ginny Weasley.

By the end of the after party, both Greg and Francine had been invited to Harry's for dinner. Harry had extended the invitation to Draco, simply to be polite, thinking that he really should've had his head examined.

Saturday at Harry's didn't start out smoothly. Harry was still amazed, seeing how familiar Ginny and Hermione were toward Greg and Francine, and the change in Greg from what Harry remembered from school was remarkable. He truly was a reformed wizard in Harry's opinion.

Ron exited the Floo, dusted himself off and turned to greet his friends, only to stop short when he saw who was already in the drawing room. "What's he doing here?" he said, pointing to either Draco or Greg or possibly both.

"I was invited, so I came," Draco said calmly with an affable smile.

Harry quickly walked over to Ron. "Ron, I er, after the game, I..."

Ginny had hurried over to defuse the situation. "Oh buck up! Ron, they're my friends," she said with a firm but friendly tone. "A lot happened last year, and Draco and Greg have really been trying to turn over a new leaf, so you should cut them some slack." She hitched her thumb in Draco's direction. "Draco's not so bad once you get to know him...or Greg."

"I thought I knew him rather well, didn't we, Harry?" Ron snapped, putting his hand on Ginny's arm as he maneuvered around her.

"Some people do grow up, Ron," Hermione said from where she was standing, talking with Francine and Greg.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron snapped, his ears turning red.

"Hey, cool it!" Ginny snapped back, grasping Ron's arm.

Francine turned to Greg with a worried expression. "Maybe we should..."

"No, you're welcome here, both of you," Hermione insisted firmly, turning to Greg and Francine. "I was hoping that..."

"Don't you remember all the times he attacked you? Or the time he..."

"Oh, shove it, Ron!" Ginny snarled. "Before I do your nut!"

"Perhaps we should have drinks?" Harry suggested, obviously at a loss as to how to defuse the situation. "Anyone want a butterbeer?"

Hermione laughed at the tactic, remembering her mum doing the same thing at a family gathering when her dad and uncle had been at odds over her granddad's small motor boat. Kreacher appeared with a tray loaded with butterbeers. Ginny handed a butterbeer to Draco as Hermione handed one to Greg and held out another for Ron to take.

Ron was too busy scowling to notice. "So when exactly did you and the ferret become friends?"

"Francine, what would you like?" Hermione asked, giving up on Ron and sipping on the butterbeer herself.

Harry grasped Ron by the arm and pulled him aside.

"Ah, tea would be nice," Francine said softly.

Hermione nodded, turning to ask Winky for tea, but the house-elf wasn't in the room. She shrugged and smiled at Francine. "We weren't exactly cordial during our first years at Hogwarts," she said, indicating toward Greg.

"Oh, I know all too well how you two were in school," Francine said with a soft chuckle. "You and your friends against Draco and his. Everyone knew!" She excused herself to go talk to Harry and Ron.

"Maybe I should go talk to him, too," Greg said, watching his fiancée trying to calm Ron down. Ginny walked over to join Harry and Ron as well.

"Why don't you tell me what your plans are, you know, what you plan on doing for a living," Hermione suggested as Draco came to stand by her.

"I've been offered a job with Dalton Troll Securities," Greg said with a bemused smirk. "And my uncle said that I can work with him, if I want to apprentice to him that is. He repairs homes, a carpenter. I like drawing houses and turns out I'm right good at doing floor plans and designing cabinetry. Some of it's hands-on-work instead of wand work, but I liked building forts as a kid."

"Greg, that's fantastic!" Hermione said, smiling. "Harry hired a wizard, Denton Brodie, to do work on his house. He had a wall replaced in the entry, among other things."

Greg smiled. "Denton Brodie is my uncle," he said proudly.

Hermione glanced over at her friends. Francine was talking to Ron, who looked as if he'd calmed down considerably, even if he was shooting dark glances their way, most likely at Greg and Draco.

Kreacher and Winky arrived with trays of pigs-in-a-blanket, mini quiches, cheese and crackers, fresh fruit, and bruschetta, things she was sure Harry had seen when he had been living with the Dursleys. Hermione quickly piled some on a small plate. "Winky, please hand this to Ron," she asked her house-elf when she carried in a tray of veggies with two dips, hoping that the food would shut him up.

Draco watched her with an amused smirk. "I thought that you wanted to free all the house-elves in school."

"I don't like enslavement, but I have come to understand the house-elves a bit more over the years," she said coolly, turning to glare at him. "I am appalled when I find out that families are cruel to their servants, and I intend to find a way for them to be able to dissolve the house-elf enslavement if their masters are mean to them."

"It's the master's fault, then?" Draco asked.

"Most like their masters, Hermione," Greg said between bites.

"I know that Dobby was miserable under your family's *care*," she said to Draco, stressing care sarcastically.

Draco smirked. "He was always breaking...the other four are quite happy."

"I'll believe that when I see it," she said, helping herself to the fruit and bruschetta.

Draco picked up a pig-in-a-blanket, examining the morsel. "You're welcome over any time you like. I seem to have made that offer before in regards to the library." He bit off half, and his eye brows rose as he chewed.

"Thank you for extending the invitation to use your library," Hermione stated, "but I'm afraid I have to decline."

Goyle was holding one of the pastry wrapped weenies by the toothpick as he examined it closely. "Er, what's this?"

"A pig-in-a-blanket," she replied. "It's a common Muggle hors d'oeuvre."

Greg popped it in his mouth. "Emm! Eph is good!"

Draco picked up a mini quiche. "Just so you know that the offer stands; you're welcome in my home any time you'd like, for as long as you'd like."

"Thank you," Hermione replied absent-mindedly as she watched Ron glare at them from where he was leaning in the doorway. Ginny was still apparently trying to talk some sense into him, but it was falling on deaf ears. Ron turned and left the room.

"... books, Hermione?"

"I'm sorry, Draco, what did you say? I was distracted," she replied, turning to face the guys.

"I was wondering if you'd managed to buy all your course books yet," Draco repeated and sipped on his butterbeer.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Harry took me shopping for them," she replied, smiling at Harry from across the room.

Draco eyes flicked from her to Harry and back. "Is that why you're working at the Ministry?" he asked, watching her intently.

"Girl's got to pay for law school somehow," Hermione said dismissively, helping herself to an hors d'oeuvres.

Edithe arrived for Sunday dinner with Graceilla wearing her favorite rose-colored robes. She desperately wanted to look nice for Stanford Brumfeild. Graceilla's home was wonderfully arranged, each furnishing sized just right for the location where Graceilla had placed them. Even the pianoforte was the perfect size for under the parlor window.

Edithe always felt so special dining at Graceilla's home. Her table was set with the Royal Dalton Litchfield, a pattern she was sure had been named after Graceilla's lovely mother Eugina Litchfield. The Waterford goblets sparkled and the sterling was perfectly polished...

Her friend really knew how to make a guest feel special. After a delicious dinner of plum grouse and sprouts, they all adjourned to the sitting room where Graceilla brought out her lovely Irish Belleek teacups, saucers and tea service. The lovely white china with its adorable shamrock designs was so special in Edithe's mind.

"So, Miss Havershiems, my niece informs me that you have been trying to make good on my proposal for improving our future magical generations," Healer Brumfield stated, balancing the teacup on his knee.

Edithe felt her cheeks flush. "Please, I'd be most honored if you'd call me Edithe," she said, gazing at him in adoration. He smiled and repeated her name, "Edithe, and I'd be pleased if you'd address me as Stanford. No need for friends to stand on formalities, is there?"

Edithe clapped hand to her chest, gushing at being given such an honor as to consider him a friend.

Graceilla told Stamford that they were meeting some resistance.

Stamford turned to Edithe, his brow furrowed in confusion. "I thought that the insolence of those children had been resolved?"

Edithe told him about the actions of the students, and how their rebellion was spreading to the general public. "We've had secret weddings to curtail, a rash of unplanned pregnancies, a few suicide attempts, and now some of my unions are falling apart... They want to absolve my carefully chosen unions! It's horrible!"

Stamford sat listening to her, nodding occasionally and stroking his lower lip with his finger. "Why not simply use the Dextrarum iunctio, the Fede Charm on each census form. They are signed, yes? It's simply, *mani in fede*, 'hands in trust' or 'hands in faith.' I have the signet somewhere: fede rings in the form of two clasped hands, right hands, surmounted by a crown, symbolizing faith, trust or 'plighted troth.' Each person who signed their census would bear the mark of the Claddugh. Those who are matched by you the heart would be turned inward toward the hand, indicating that their heart was captured...betrothed. Would solve your problem nicely."

"Can I do that?"

"Don't see why not? You've got the law to back you," Stamford said as he popped a mini pastry puff in his mouth. "I can send you a copy of the scroll with the specifics of the spell when I return home, er, on Wednesday, actually. I'll be out of town until then."

Edithe smiled in reverent awe of the wizard, amazed at how clever he truly was.