

Moments Before the Wind

by vintage_witch

Harry returns to a battered Hogwarts castle to finish his NEWTs. All seems well, until his magic field is inexplicably bound to the graduate student writing a dissertation on the castle. He finds himself thrust into a mystery of manufactured identity, dementors, architecture, a lost twin, and magical theory. H/G (short-lived), R/Her, and Harry/OC

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world are not mine; in fact, they are the intellectual property of JK Rowling. Other inspirations for this story are Joss Whedon's "Dollhouse" and Mark Danielewski's "House of Leaves," though this is not explicitly a crossover. If you like this, definitely read and watch them.

Warnings: Original Character, Language (both swears and smatterings of bad Czech), Sexual Tension (to become sex), and far too much coffee.

A/N: Thanks so much to the lovely lady_rhian for beta-ing! You're really glad you're reading this version of the chapter ... trust me.

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Chapter One

And this great blue world of ours seems a house of leaves, moments before the wind.

Mark Danielewski, House of Leaves

"Oy! Harry! They're here!"

Harry looked up from his packing at the sound of George's voice. He couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face and placed the last of his clothes back into the trunk. He turned to the door and walked out to the landing.

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were crowded around the front door, a cacophony of bickering and greetings. George was looking a little flustered, but ultimately happy that his family was there. Harry walked down the steps to greet them.

"Harry!" Ginny said, and before Harry knew it, he had an armful of very excited redhead. "It's so good to see you," she mumbled into the collar of his robes. Harry kissed her head and they broke apart.

"Harry dear, so lovely to see you again," Mrs. Weasley said, making her way over to him.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley," he said, before being enveloped yet again by a redheaded woman.

"You look like you're doing well. Feeding yourself all right?" She asked, scrutinizing him at arms length. Her fierce mothering gaze seemed to be looking for any mark on his appearance that he hadn't been properly taken care of since their last meeting.

"Mum, lay off; it's not like we're incapable of looking after ourselves," George muttered irritably from the other side of the room.

Molly hadn't put up much of a fight against Harry and George moving in together at the beginning of the summer. She had, however, taken to firm denial that he was old enough to start looking after himself under less-than-dire circumstances. ("She's absolutely mental over you, mate," Ron had muttered on his birthday, "As if you aren't perfectly capable of looking after yourself. But I suppose now you have to be presentable to society ... can't really carry on with the wild man of the forest routine." Harry had slugged him in the shoulder.)

The decision only made sense. Harry didn't have to return to the Dursleys anymore, and it was convenient for him to be in London to attend the slew of hearings, dedications, memorial services, and public events that had followed the last battle. Arthur had privately expressed his own gratitude at Harry's decision. George had been ... delicate, to say the least ... since Fred's death. It was a load off of Arthur's shoulders to know George wouldn't have to go home to an empty flat. Harry didn't have the heart or the time to go and sort through everything.

"It's good to see you too, Mrs. Weasley," Harry managed to say through his grin.

"Harry! Mate! You ready to take on Hogwarts again?" Ron called from the door.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he called back.

Hermione, who had been fussing over George and the trunks, bustled up to Harry and gave him a quick hug. "It's good to see you again; you look good."

"Thanks." Harry blushed as Ginny gave him a strangely appraising look. When their eyes met, Harry could tell she would have gone further with the compliment, but wouldn't have said anything in front of her parents.

George got Hermione's attention again and they were discussing where to put everyone's things. Ron's new owl hooted loudly, and Crookshanks had already got into something new on the other side of the room.

Harry cleared his throat.

"Does anyone want anything? We've got butterbeer, cider, water ..." Harry asked.

"I'll have a Butterbeer," said Ron.

"Make that two," Ginny added.

"Alright, I'll be right back," Harry muttered.

Harry padded off into the kitchen to fetch the Butterbeers, followed by Ginny. He grabbed her hand, and once they were out of eyesight she pulled him around to face her.

"It's so good to see you," He murmured as they drew closer.

"Mmm." She closed her eyes and leaned in for a kiss.

Harry easily fell into her, the kiss making his stomach flip a bit. The gentle pressure of her lips on his was a solid feeling, like being at home. He felt so thoroughly present. Her skin was warm, and her hair smelled of ginger and citrus.

Harry broke off the kiss before he got too carried away, but held her close for a moment.

"It's been too long since we've been alone together," he sighed.

Ginny let out a light giggle.

"Are you trying to steal my maidenhood, Mr. Potter?"

Harry snorted as he went to grab the Butterbeer.

"Yeah, but first I'll get you tipsy on ... barely alcoholic training-beer," Harry said, eyeing the label with a raised eyebrow.

Ginny laughed and grabbed the Butterbeer out of his hands. She put one hand into her pocket, and slouched off into the living room.

Everyone's trunks had been sorted, and it looked like George had miraculously deflected Mrs. Weasley's curiosity on sleeping arrangements. Harry handed Ron his Butterbeer, which his friend gratefully opened.

"Right, so what's the plan for tonight?" Ginny asked.

"There are still a few things that you lot need to pick up for school - the Potions master finally sent the ingredient lists, but I think most of the books have been taken care of ..." Mrs. Weasley trailed off, staring at the slip of parchment. "Oh, and Ron, your new dress robes are ready to be picked up."

"Oh, and I wanted to go to Flourish and Blotts," Hermione added.

"Good idea. I think I still need to pick up a new journal," Ginny said.

"What about you, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked. "Any last-minute things you need to grab?"

Harry shook his head.

"Good Galleons!" Arthur exclaimed. "We had better get going - it's almost five already!"

There was another great hustle as everyone grabbed their purses or money pouches ... everyone except George.

"Aren't you coming with us, George?" Mr. Weasley asked after making sure everyone was ready.

"Oh - no, I was in the middle of something," George said.

Mr. Weasley gave him a concerned look, but before he could nag at George Harry cut in.

"But you're meeting us for dinner, right?" He asked pointedly.

"Oh, yeah, sure," George said, and forced a smile. "That place next to Eeylop's?"

"Yes, The Bad Egg," Mr. Weasley confirmed.

Harry waved good-bye to George, and they exited the flat en masse.

Their flat wasn't directly on Diagon Alley, but on a smaller sidestreet directly off Diagon. It was near the Gringotts end of the alley, generally a quieter area. Somehow the Wizarding Bank didn't attract as many hip young twenty-somethings. Harry found it was easier to go unnoticed on this end of the Alley, but he was eager to move out of the heart of Wizarding London. Moving anywhere unnoticed was almost impossible. He'd taken to wearing a bowler and prescription sunglasses whenever he left the flat.

"I didn't get to say a proper hello to you, Harry," Arthur said, walking next to Harry.

"Well, hello then," Harry replied.

"I suppose it hasn't been that long since I saw you ... That last hearing was ... Well, right, anyway, you'll be pulled away from it for a while. Do you expect you'll have to come down to London much once the school year's started?" He asked.

"I'm really hoping not. I think that most of the memorial services are over, it's just the hearings now ... I'm only coming down if it's really necessary," Harry said.

"Too right you are, there," Mr. Weasley said gravely. "You'll have enough to be getting on with, NEWTs this year and all. It would be terribly unfair for them to ask too much of you."

It went unspoken between them that this was also because most of the Death Eaters were still at large. Thankfully, this line of conversation was ended as Mrs. Weasley called out to ask Arthur something. Harry caught up with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

It was a lovely sunny day out, and it seemed that Diagon Alley was packed enough with families making last-minute purchases for their Hogwarts-bound children. Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were glad of the chance to walk around and relax. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley went off to pick up their potions ingredients, while the four of them went to pick up Ron's robes and to Flourish and Blott's.

"How's George doing these days?" Hermione asked as they dodged between bookshelves. "He seemed ... distant today."

Harry shrugged.

"I dunno, Hermione. He's just going through a really rough time," Harry said simply.

Hermione scoffed, clearly unsatisfied with this answer.

"I mean, how's he doing with you moving out?" she prodded.

Harry shrugged again.

"We've talked about it. I'm trying to convince him to find another roommate, and I think he will. Then at least he won't be alone, right? And he's getting ready to open the shop again in time for the Christmas holidays. Talking about doing a sort of catalogue thing, so Hogwarts students can get in on it for the holidays ..."

"I think he'll be ok, Hermione," Ron said suddenly. "I mean, it's hard, but if he's starting to work again, that's a good sign, isn't it?"

Hermione looked like she had her doubts, but she decided to keep mum on them.

"I still can't get over how weird it is to see him alone," Ron said darkly.

Ginny finally caught up with them - she'd gone off to get a new bottle of ink. "I found Mum and Dad. Should we go?"

"Yeah, sure. We should probably get to The Bad Egg early, there might be a bit of a crowd today," Harry said. "I'll go fetch George. Meet you there?"

"Sure," Hermione said.

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The Bad Egg was one of those fashionable new restaurants on Diagon Alley that had opened after the war. Allegedly, they'd had the go-ahead to open, but then Diagon Alley started to feel the effects of the war. Curfews, fear, falling sales, and the general instability had caused the owners of the restaurant to reconsider their opening date. But now it had opened its doors to great acclaim. A bit kitschy, they served mostly traditional English food with some unexpected spice. There was also a respectable selection of curries and cajun dishes.

The dinner went pretty smoothly. Mr. Weasley told them all of a terrible mishap at work involving a Muggle coffeeshop's teakettle bewitched to whistle "1812 Overture" whenever the water was hot enough, and the exploits of attempting to track down everyone who had been in the cafe that day. George had talked a great deal about his new business plans with Ron, who was keen to hear what he was plotting. It seemed that they were on the verge of striking a deal that Ron would help him get products to Hogwarts, but then they decided to think on it.

Meanwhile, Hermione and Ginny were talking about who was likely to be at Hogwarts that year. Ginny was attempting to fill Hermione in on all of the relationships that had cropped up in Gryffindor over the last year. They were wondering how the professors would deal with the students who hadn't attended last year came back to finish their schooling.

After dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley said good-bye to them, and the friends had been left up to their own devices. They'd talked, telling stories and jokes. Ron beat the pants off of Harry at wizard's chess a couple of times already, and even George had stuck around to keep them company.

But now it was late. Ron and Hermione had long ago retired to the guest room, and Harry and Ginny were left to finish packing the rest of Harry's things. Ginny sat at Harry's desk chair, listening to an old Weird Sisters album. The light from his desk lamp played across her bright hair, bringing out captured sunshine.

"Will you miss this flat?" she asked.

Harry thought for a moment.

"Yes," he finally said. "But I'll be glad to be out of the heart of Diagon Alley."

"Would you want to move back here, when we're done with school?"

"I'm not sure, Gin. I'd like to be in a Wizarding community, but I want a bit more privacy," Harry said, putting the last of his things away. He closed his trunk and sat down on the bed. Ginny sang quietly to the song for a moment.

"Remember when they played at Hogwarts?" she asked, standing up and joining Harry on the bed.

"No, not really." Harry's interest in the conversation was dwindling. "I had a lot of other ... things ... on my mind that night." He trailed off and leaned forward, circling his arms around her. She rested her forehead on his and closed her eyes. "Mm, Ginny, it's been too long."

And they were kissing, with no fear of interruption. Oh, it had been too long since they'd been truly alone. Harry had missed this - they'd only caught snatches of one another for a month now. They had enjoyed each others' company at functions, but that was nothing like the heat they created now. Ginny leaned into Harry, eagerly

pressing forward into his embrace. He reached his hands under her shirt, looking for skin, and she drew in a quick breath.

Ginny was reaching under Harry's shirt, trying to get closer. Harry shivered as her fingers traced patterns over his skin. And ... oh ... she was doing that wicked thing with her tongue again ... Harry growled low in his throat and dragged her down onto the bed.

Why the hell hadn't they seen each other more that summer? Being with her made him forget the hearings, the rumors, the search for Death Eaters, George's volatile grief, all of it. Now, it was just the sensation of ... oh, fuck it, it didn't matter anymore. Harry let himself go. His hands trembled as he reached farther up her shirt, scowling as they came to her bra.

"Dammit," he mumbled as his fingers fumbled with the clasps. Ginny snickered, sat up and lifted her shirt off with both hands.

"Easier?" she asked playfully as she lay back down.

"Mhm, yes." Harry reached both hands behind her and unhooked the bra, her breasts spilling out.

Her hands were under his shirt again, and he was pushing her bra out of the way. He broke off the kiss to stare down at her breasts, one of the only parts of her body without freckles, and he traced one of them, trying to find the exact moment they rose from the rest of her chest. She moved in to kiss him, and stifled a moan as his touch grew more firm.

Ginny broke the kiss abruptly and Harry groaned.

"Wait, no ... we need to ..." she was muttering, but then abruptly lost her train of thought and started to kiss him again.

Harry moved his hands to her now-bare breasts, but a feeling of trepidation was creeping in to his mind. He tried to shake it off, but then Ginny was grabbing his hands.

"What's going on?" he asked, as they broke off the kiss again.

"I'm ... not quite ready for that," Ginny said.

Harry blew out the breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"Gin, it's ok, I know ..."

Harry shifted uncomfortably as she moved away from him on the bed. They had agreed not to go further than snogging for a while, but he had a feeling this wasn't about that.

"It's just ... I was thinking the other day, about what happens after Hogwarts ..." she trailed off.

"Yeah? What about that?"

Ginny sat up, picked up her bra, and refastened it. She was blushing to her roots.

"I mean, what the papers say about us and marriage ... it doesn't sound all that bad to me."

Harry sat up, his heart thudding against his chest. No, no, this was too soon ...

"Gin, we've got our whole lives ..." he said.

"I know that!" she snapped, and she was standing up, looking for her shirt.

"Then what is it? What's the rush?" Harry asked, also standing.

"I just ... I don't know!" She ran a hand through her hair, made a face as she came across a tangle. Harry put his arms around her, and some of the tension in her shoulders eased. "I just don't know if I can handle the gossip without ... confirmation."

Harry sighed.

"I can't give you that kind of confirmation yet. But I want to be with you, and we'll make it work."

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"This compartment is empty," Ron announced, and Harry quickly ducked into it with his things in tow. Ron came in behind him.

"Oh, hurry up, Ginny!" Hermione called. When Harry looked back at the entrance to the compartment, he saw Hermione dancing impatiently from foot to foot.

They had only just escaped the crowd. Even Ron looked a little irritable from the attention of the people on the platform. They had suspected that there might be a few reporters looking for a statement about the safety of Hogwarts castle, about the emotions they faced in returning to the site of the last battle, that sort of thing. They had in no way been prepared for the crowds of parents who all wanted to personally thank each of them for their role in Voldemort's defeat.

The Hogwarts Express was filled to bursting with students. The new class of first years was almost double the usual size because many Muggle-borns and half-bloods hadn't been able to start school. From what Ginny said, the school had felt almost deserted last year because attendance was so low. There were still some more families this year that had chosen to homeschool their children, but by and large the majority of students were back to school.

"It was stupid to think we could avoid all those parents," Harry said as Ginny and Hermione entered the compartment and slammed the door.

"At least we got here early," Ginny said, tucking her trunk underneath the bench.

"Honestly! You'd think that they didn't expect us to come back to school! As if we'd somehow passed all our NEWTs from God only knows what forest," Hermione said.

Ron smirked.

"Oh yes, mail-order tests. Or perhaps our professors were grading us in the battle." Ron imitated Professor Flitwick. *"That's right, Mr. Weasley! Excellent wand form on that jinx! Take on one more Death Eater, and you'll have an O!"*

Harry stood up and adjusted his trunk. He hadn't had time that morning to shrink it down to fit in his shoulder bag, and was now regretting that. *Still, it's a small price to pay for normalcy, he thought to himself.* He wouldn't trade this ride back to Hogwarts for the world.

"What took you so long, Gin?" Ron asked, digging in his bag for the sandwiches Mrs. Weasley had packed for them.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "That damn Skeeter woman! She wanted to know if Harry and I had chosen colors for the wedding yet. She said she suspected that our wedding colors would be the leading trends in fashion this year."

"Did you explain to her again that we're not getting married?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but she won't listen to reason! She said that people seemed to like the idea of yellow and blue, and it would be nice if we chose complimentary colors." But then Ginny smirked. "I wish I could have told her that they would be orange, lime green, and lavender. That would teach them not to meddle in our business."

Harry laughed. He could see it now: Ludo Bagman shaking his hand in dress robes of striped orange and lavender, with lime green lace as trim; whispers behind hands at the next wizarding event about the Very Poor Fashion Sense of war heroes.

"So if McGonagall's Headmistress, who will be Head of Gryffindor?" Ron asked.

"Ron, don't you listen at all at Ministry events?" Hermione asked. "Never mind. They announced it at last week's fundraiser. It's Professor Sinistra for now, but she doesn't want to continue on. If the new Defense teacher can manage to keep a good foothold, they suspect the job might transfer to her."

"Oh right, I remember that now," Ron muttered.

"So how many people will be coming back for an extra year?" Ginny asked. "I mean, I'm glad that you lot are in my class now, but there were a lot of students missing last year, and there should be a lot of new students this year."

"Hm, I wonder," Hermione said. "And what with all the damages the castle suffered, where will they put all of us?"

Talk turned, for the next hour, to the changes that they would be seeing at Hogwarts. It was well known that the castle wasn't finished. The Ministry and Board of Governors had hired one of the very best architects in Europe to do the repairs, but there was no way that the damage could be restored fully before the next year started. The castle itself seemed to resist changes, which had set back the reconstruction for three months.

As his friends talked about mundane concerns of school beginning, Harry allowed his mind to wander. When he'd decided to go back to school, it was perhaps more a device to buy some time for himself than it was to finish his education. Hermione had been glad to hear that he was interested in finishing out his education, Ron was glad to have his best friend with him, and Ginny was glad they would finally have the chance to be in a normal relationship (as normal as it could get, at least). And Harry was grateful for all of these things, but mostly he felt exhaustion and had little clue what to do with himself.

But now that he was on the train, apprehension had started to seep into his mind. The castle had always been a great comfort to him, but now he knew that comfort would be tainted with the memories of the battle. He had always had a relationship with the other students that moved between hero and villain, and he was beginning to worry that he wouldn't get a moment's peace. Especially with double the size of seventh years.

It would be strange to be a student again - it was not a role that he was naturally good at. Hermione, who had always been top of the class, would have no trouble falling into her old habits. But Harry was badly in need of practice.

Relax. It will be hard, but you've been through worse.

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It was getting on evening when a knock came at their compartment. Ron got up and opened the door.

"Password?" he joked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was just -"

"It's ok, I'm just joking! Are you looking for anyone?" Ron asked as he opened the door fully.

Their unexpected visitor was a woman, about George's age. She clearly didn't attend Hogwarts, or at least hadn't before this year. She seemed startled that someone had answered her knock - perhaps she had been looking for some solitude as well. Her clothing was very smart, almost formal, but there was something relaxed about the edges. She had curly auburn hair pulled back into a loose bun, and clear blue eyes. On her face she wore a look of mingled melancholy and worry. Her eyes were darting between the members of the compartment, as if sizing them up.

"Um, well, not looking, exactly, but -"

This time Ron cut her off.

"Hold on, let's start over. Hello, my name is Ron Weasley. Who are you?"

"My name is Nora Svoboda," she said. Nora and Ron shook hands, and Ginny invited her in. Nora perched on the edge of the bench next to Hermione, but she didn't look uncomfortable - more that she had uncommonly good posture.

"I was just looking for an excuse to stretch my legs - my compartment is very crowded. Do any of you know how long until we reach Hogwarts?"

"It shouldn't be too long now," Hermione said kindly, "usually about another hour. Where are your things? You could sit with us for the rest of the ride."

"Oh, well thank you very much," Nora said, relaxing into the seat. Harry thought he detected a hint of an accent.

"You said you'd never been to Hogwarts before. Are you a new professor?" Ginny asked.

Nora snorted derisively.

"No, actually ... I'm the graduate student that will be doing some supplementary studies on the school."

"Oh really? So you're working with the architect?" Hermione asked.

Nora thought for a second.

"Yes, I suppose you could say that." She thought about it for a moment, and then nodded - as if to confirm that what she'd said was true. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your names?"

Ron laughed. "You're really not from around here, are you?"

"*Ron!*" Hermione hissed.

"What?"

"I'm Hermione Granger," Hermione said, holding out her hand. Nora shook it and smiled.

"Ginny Weasley," Ginny said, waving.

"And I'm Harry Potter."

Nora's eyes flicked to Harry's hairline, but only briefly. She leaned forward in the chair, and buried her face in her hands.

"How stupid of me! I thought it might be you, but I wasn't sure - you look very different in person than in the papers ..." she babbled, her face going crimson.

"No, don't worry about it ..." Ginny said. Nora opened her mouth as if to protest, but Ginny firmly continued, "*Really*. It's refreshing, actually."

"Where are you from, Nora?" Hermione asked. She seemed determined to make up for Ron's rudeness.

It took Nora another moment to relax back into the seat. "First it was Prague. I mean, I was born in Moscow but my family didn't stay there, and I don't remember it. But I went to school in Stockholm, and have been getting my degree in Metaphysics and Magic there," Nora explained, smiling around at each of them.

"Oh, which school in Stockholm?" Hermione asked, leaning forward in her seat.

"Um ... the Magnussen Institute for Magic. It's fairly new ..."

"The Magnussen Institute?" Hermione asked, leaning forward eagerly.

"Yes, the Magnussen Institute. Have you heard of it?" Hermione nodded fervently. "I was on the Magical Structure and Theory course originally, but I've also been trained in magical design and post-structuralist magical constructs."

Harry and Ginny exchanged looks - the only magical theory they had ever been introduced to had been the disastrous year Professor Umbridge had taught Defense Against the Dark Arts as a theory-based course. No one had been terribly impressed with the teaching style.

"What does that mean?" Ron asked.

Nora thought for a moment.

"Mostly that I've studied the way wizards relate to the places around them and how magic attaches from wizards to places or things, and vice versa. More broadly, magical metaphysicists study what magic is and how it operates," she answered.

"That's so fascinating! I've heard of Magnussen before - it's a very competitive school," Hermione explained. "When did you start there?"

Nora whistled, thinking back.

"We start pretty young. I think I was nine? Yeah," she nodded.

"I would love to pick your brain sometime ... I've got some ideas that I'd like advice on ..."

"Of course. I'll be at Hogwarts for the full year, it would be nice to have people to talk to."

Harry looked Nora over once again, sizing her up. She seemed genuine, but Harry still had his doubts. Hermione had engaged her in some obscure topic about magic that he wasn't really able to follow, and Nora was gesturing animatedly with both hands. He noticed that there was what looked like a tattoo around her right wrist - there were two bold, dark bands running parallel, and a border of dots on the outside of them. Between the lines there was a repeating geometric pattern that seemed to shift before his eyes.

"Is that a tattoo?" he asked, interrupting their discussion.

Nora looked down at her arm, and back up at Harry. She looked as if she'd half forgotten anyone else was there, but quickly recovered.

"Oh, it's just a tattoo," she said dismissively. "I've had it for years. Do you want to take a closer look?"

Harry nodded, and Nora held out her right arm. Harry gently guided her hand closer to him, and examined the tattoo. The filler that made up the design between the borders shifted subtly, a play of lines across her skin. It worked like an optical illusion, tricking Harry's eyes into seeing shapes.

"Does it mean anything?" Ginny asked, gently taking Nora's hand from Harry.

"It did, a long time ago. Not anymore," she said.

Ginny looked up again, a question on her face.

"Maybe I'll tell you later," Nora said.

"I haven't seen many wizards with tattoos," Hermione commented.

Nora shrugged. She drew her hand back from Ginny and crossed her arms.

"I guess it might be a cultural thing. I've noticed English wizards shy away from body modification more than others." She looked thoughtful for a couple of moments. "Something like the Dark Mark might make people more cautious about tattoos."

Ron looked suspicious.

"Just like that? You didn't recognize us, but you know about the Dark Mark?"

"I told you, you look different in person than in the papers. And yes, I did follow the war here closely. Not everyone did, but you have to know that Voldemort had connections in Eastern Europe." She shuddered. "We - my mother and I, and a lot of other people - worried that if he was able to take over the Ministry here, he would use his connections to take control there."

Harry didn't know what to say to that. The five of them sat awkwardly for a moment, no one quite knowing what to say. It was infinitely clear that no one particularly wanted to continue this line of conversation.

Nora glanced down at her watch. "Oh! I must be going - I need to gather some things from the other compartment. We'll be there in an hour, yes?"

"Yes. It was nice to meet you," Hermione said.

Nora smiled widely, and the effect was stunning. The sadness melted away from her face, and Harry realized she was actually quite pretty.

"It was very nice to meet all of you. I'll let you enjoy your privacy."

Once the compartment door had clicked shut behind her, Ron turned to the group of them.

"So ... did any of you think that was weird?"

Ginny nodded.

"She seemed a little too surprised that it was us. Do you think she was looking for us all along?" Ron asked.

"Don't be silly, Ron," Hermione said dismissively. "She's been living in Sweden, it would only make sense that she couldn't pick us out. I'm honestly glad that she found us - it will be nice to know someone with insight to what's going on at school. She could come in handy."

"For what? Remodeling the common room?" Ron asked.

"No," Hermione was looking pensive again. "I have a feeling that there's something more than reconstruction going on. They wouldn't need a metaphysicist if it were just repairs. Sounds like the castle might be a lot worse off than we know ..."

Harry shrugged.

"There was a lot of damage. I wouldn't think too much about it. If it was really that bad, we wouldn't be able to go back to school," he said. Reluctantly, Hermione let the subject drop. Normally Harry would have been interested in continuing the conversation, but he was feeling strange ... like there was a buzzing in his ears he couldn't shake.

The light outside the train fell, and the group turned conversation again to other topics. Soon, they were changing into their Hogwarts robes, and the train was pulling into the station.