

# Tick Tock

*by pokeystar*

Some clocks are more annoying than others.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

Some clocks are more annoying than others.

Pansy groans in her sleep and flips onto her stomach to bury her head in her downy soft pillow. Even unconscious, she's trying to avoid the dream that is invading her mind. There's a sense of urgency and foreboding that lingers well beyond her shower and breakfast each time she plays this scenario out, but she's helpless against it. With one last protesting snuffle into the cool cotton cocooning her snub nose, she falls once more into the moebius illusion that stalks her sleep state.

It's an impossible task. The room is immense...as large as the great hall at Hogwarts...and filled to the rafters with timing devices of every shape and size. Somehow, Pansy knows it's her job to keep all of them going. She flicks the arm of a metronome and sprints to wind a cuckoo clock. She can't be everywhere at once. Hands stop. Sand grains slow from steady streams to bare trickles. Only a single timer remains wound, and the ticking noise emanating from it echoes in the otherwise silent hall.

She tries to follow the sound to its source, but it feels as if the mysterious ticking noise is coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. Pansy panics. Racing down narrow aisles, she bumps into towering grandfather clocks and knocks precariously stacked sundials to the stone floor, smashing them to pieces. The mysterious ticking noise eludes her until she collapses into a heap, tripping over a Keith Haring limited edition Swatch and her eyes fall on an elaborate countdown timer. It's embedded in the chubby tummy of a bisque cupid, complete with gilt wings, a quiver of heart-shaped arrows, cherry red bow-shaped lips, curly black hair and a modest white diaper covering his little pink bits.

Just as she reaches for the precious ticking tot, the alarm goes off and Pansy jolts awake, her heart racing in... Terror? Relief?

Gradually, it dawns on her that the alarm clock is still ringing and she reaches out blindly to shut it off.

Harry rolls over, throwing a leg over hers, and an arm across her chest, his right hand coming to rest on her breast*Naturally*. His cock pokes her in the hip as he presses soft, sleepy kisses along her jaw line. Pansy struggles valiantly to remember if she has anything important to do this morning but abandons the thought when his lips find *that* spot on the curve of her neck. Thirty minutes later, after a hasty shower, they are dressed and sitting down to breakfast when they hear an insistent rap at the dining room window.

Harry gets up to let the bird in and it flies around the room, swooping to land with a thump in the marmalade dish. It's another stork. The third one this month. Pansy eyes the intruder with annoyance as Harry unties the pastel pink envelope from its left ankle.

"Percy and Penelope are expecting again."

"Hurray for them," Pansy mutters, pushing the stork's beak away from the toast.

"Shall we send them a baby gift?" Harry asks, giving the feathered menace a strip of bacon.

The bird flies out the open window, raining bits of citrus rind and gelatinous orange goo along the way. Bartleby the Crup gives a happy bark and licks the wood floor, his

forked tail wagging merrily.

Pansy wrinkles her nose at the dish of befouled marmalade. "I suppose," she says, conveying a distinct lack of enthusiasm in her demeanour.

Harry grins. "Pansy Parkinson-Potter doesn't want to shop? The apocalypse must be nigh."

She sticks her tongue out at him and digs into her poached egg. There's a tiny speck of red floating in the yolk.

*Perfect.*

□

The boys saunter into her office just as she calls for a cup of tea to drink while opening her mail. They are alarmingly awake and smirking, to boot.

She waves them off, and concentrates on checking the latest ad copy to be placed in *Witch Weekly's* fashion section.



Just as she requested, discreet and elegant. She signs off on it and the copy folds itself and glides to the post outbox, awaiting the magazine's owl.

Daisy pops in next to her desk with three steaming cups of earl grey just in time to provide a distraction from whatever torture Pansy's colleagues have in mind, or so she hopes.

"Here is being your teas, miss. Can Daisy bring you fresh baked scones, too?"

The boys nod eagerly, and Daisy beams at them before disappearing with tiny crack. She ignores Pansy's frown of dissent with practised nonchalance.

Pansy transfers her frown to Justin instead. "You know I can't resist clotted cream."

He takes a sip of tea and shrugs at her.

"Running behind this morning, luv?" Blaise enquires with an air of exaggerated innocence. He slumps into a pale pink leather Barcelona chair and sets his tea cup on a small Lucite table next to it.

Pansy picks up a wickedly sharp letter opener and pokes it in his direction. "I'm here well before the clients, aren't I? That's more than the two of you can say, most of the time."

"Point taken, boss lady," Justin drawls. He conjures an exquisite pastel scarf reminiscent of Monet's water lilies and deftly drapes it around Pansy's neck, knotting it loosely to stay in place. "But we do tend to remember the cover-up charms, don't we, darling?"

Blaise chuckles when Pansy's hand flies up to her collarbone. "Love bites are so last season."

"Speaking of last season," says Justin as he sits in the matching chair across from Blaise. "Fergie's assistant called again this morning. She needs an outfit for the American Cancer Society event next week."

"What event is that?" Pansy asks. She opens a thank you card from Molly Weasley, whom she dressed for the Minister's luncheon to benefit Muggle-born war orphans...nearly ten years later, funds are still needed to feed, house and school the few children left without homes...and sends it magically to her assistant's desk to be displayed on a wall in the reception area.

Having the Minister's wife as a grateful client is quite a feather in her cap, even with the regrettable ginger hair and freckled complexion.

"She's being named Mum of the Year," Justin replies, giving Blaise a long look that confuses Pansy.

Daisy pops in with a tray full of fragrant scones, clotted cream, and pots of jam. She sets it on the table next to the boys' tea and pops out again before Pansy can order it back untouched.

Blaise slathers a scone in cream and boysenberry jam, holding it up for Pansy's approval. She frowns at him, shaking her head and he shrugs, crossing the room to sit on the edge of her desk, near her right elbow.

"Have you read the *Prophet* today?" Blaise asks, after swallowing the bite he has thoroughly chewed.

That long look from Justin, and Blaise's obvious delaying behaviour have the fine hairs on Pansy's neck standing on edge.

"No. I was a bit distracted this morning." She nudges Blaise's thigh with her elbow, and he pulls the society section from the inside pocket of his bespoke suit, spreading it out on the desk pad in front of her.

His immaculately groomed finger points to the item in question, and Pansy scans it rapidly in complete silence.

### *Speaking of posh pretties...*

*Who's the ultra-glam witch flitting across continents without this season's top top top accessory in tow?*

*Not to name names, but it's clear to **moi** that none of those capital Ps stand for Prolific, Passion, or Pulchritude. This high-profile couple has been married **three years** and no Progeny? Looks like madam is Preoccupied with the Patronage of her Precious little salon, rather than Parenthood. Perhaps hubby*

*should change his name to Pharry?*

"P also stands for Potions, and Poison or Plague," Blaise murmurs, stroking Pansy's hand, which is holding the newsprint in a tight fist.

Pansy gives Blaise and Justin a brittle smile. "I'm thinking of another word that begins with P."

"Prison?" Justin offers brightly.

"No," says Pansy and her smile turns feral. "Pain. A Plethora of it."

□

"She'll have a gillywater and I will have pumpkin juice," Hermione says, dismissing the waitress with a small smile.

"Is it that obvious I need a drink?" Pansy asks.

Hermione gives her a look laced with equal parts sympathy and irritation. "How long have we been friends now?"

"Rhetorically speaking?" Hermione nods, but Pansy thinks about it anyway. "Six-ish years."

"Yes, and I know what that look means," Hermione replies, gesturing at Pansy's countenance. "Besides, Astoria sent me an owl with the column before lunch. Forewarned is forearmed."

"I don't draw friends' blood." Pansy protests. Hermione just gives her a look. "On purpose."

The waitress delivers their drinks and takes their food orders. They hand over their menus.

Pansy lets out a long sigh after the waitress leaves.

Hermione arches an eyebrow at her. "Why are you letting that crap bother you so much? Moi has written much meaner things about much nicer people. I thought you were the Teflon Bitch."

Pansy giggles at the reminder. Hermione had given her that nickname in the early days after the Final Battle, when they became friendly while restoring Hogwarts to its eternal glory. Most of the volunteers hadn't been ready to forgive or forget, calling Pansy all sorts of imaginative names under their breath or in open sneers. Pansy ignored them all, and kept her chin up so high she almost missed Granger's hand, extended in camaraderie. She adopted the soubriquet as her motto, as a badge of personal honour and perseverance.

It gets her through the rebuilding process, her father's trial, his subsequent loss of wealth, moving to a dim, filthy little tip off Knockturn Alley and her first job as a seamstress at Madam Malkin's, subjected to harassment from employees and customers alike.

Besides friendship, Pansy owes Hermione a debt of gratitude, for suggesting that Pansy was meant for better things than bedbugs in a nasty flat and spit in her eye at work. For believing in Pansy's dreams, maybe even more than Pansy does. She owes the success of Triple P Style to her stouthearted Know-It-All sidekick, as much as she does to Blaise Zabini and Justin Finch-Fletchley for backing her financially and socially.

Nothing stuck to her, she was the Teflon Bitch.

"I am the Teflon Bitch," Pansy says, playing with the napkin under her drink, "but did you read that column? At best, it implies that I don't satisfy my man. Or that I 'm not a woman because I have a business *instead* of children. At worst, it declares that children are afterthoughts, fashionable, mere accessories. Does that mean they can be discarded if exotic reptiles are the new black come Autumn? Do they even read what they write? *Oh, dear...we have a blond. We'll have to return him, he doesn't go with the couch.* It's absolutely horrific!"

"I had no idea you feel so strongly about this," says Hermione with admiration.

Pansy shrugs. "Neither did I. You must be rubbing off on me."

"Be careful," Hermione parries with a laugh. "You'll want to give Daisy clothes next."

"I beg your pardon?" Pansy squeaks, almost inhaling an ice cube. "I'd sooner be pregnant with quintuplets."

Hermione's humour turns to quiet thoughtfulness.

"Do you want to be pregnant at all?" She asks softly, after Pansy recovers.

Pansy shrugs. "Sometimes, I think I do. It was everything I was supposed to be, once upon a time." She looks across the table, wrinkling her nose at Hermione. "But then I come over to your house and..."

"My child is an angel!" Hermione protests hotly.

"Adorable, *really*," Pansy simpers. "What with all the crying, and peeing, and spit up and poo...it's like heaven resides in Ottery St. Catchpole."

"I need a drink," Hermione moans.

"You can't," Pansy says, pausing to sip her gillywater with relish. "You're still nursing Rose."

□

Harry has seen the column as well, and he's more bothered by it than she is.

It's obvious in the way he pecks her cheek as they sit down to a late dinner. A fraught silence stretches between them as they methodically ingest the Indian takeaway Pansy grabbed on the way home from work.

Just as she takes a bite of naan soaked in chicken vindaloo sauce, Harry clears his throat.

"I saw Hermione after lunch today," he says, pushing his half empty plate away.

She drops the rest of her flatbread to her plate. "Oh?"

Harry runs his fingers through his hair, pushing it off his forehead in little peaks, exposing the lightning-shaped scar. "Do you want kids, Pans?"

She wants to be furious with Hermione, but the truth is, she's been expecting this discussion for a while. She decides to be furious at Moi, whoever the hell that is. She can't be mad at Harry. Much, anyways. He's always been very clear about wanting a family. Should she be mad at herself? She doesn't know, but it doesn't sound productive. Or healthy.

"I don't know."

"Have you been lying to me all this time, Pansy?"

Okay. It turns out she *can* be mad at Harry.

"I stopped lying to you on our third date, Harry. It's how Draco knew I was in love with you," Pansy grits out, twisting the napkin in her lap.

"Then why..."

"I have tried to practise baby making with you six times in the last two weeks, but you always fall asleep! You're so exhausted all the time, it's a bloody miracle you got it up this morning. The Prick That Lived!"

"Well..."

"Every time, Potter! It's tough on a girl's ego and I'm pretty sure it's impossible for humans to conceive by osmosis."

"You know what my schedule is like, Pans."

"Exactly. I can't conceive a child alone and I'm bloody well not going to raise one alone, either."

"You wouldn't have to!"

"I think I would. You promised that as soon as the rogue Death Eaters were rounded up, you would scale back your hours."

Harry fiddles with the peas on his plate, avoiding Pansy's accusatory glare. She thinks pigs will fly without magic before Harry admits the fundamental inequalities in his rosy family plan.

"Ron and Neville both quit the Aurors when Geoffrey Nott was apprehended. But you're still working eighty-hour weeks."

Harry pushes his glasses up his nose and looks at her with an expression that verges on superior. "There are other operations to consider besides the capture of Death Eaters."

"There will *always* be other situations," Pansy says, crossing her arms over her chest. "There is no such thing as *perfect* time to have a child."

"What about you? You work just as hard as I do," he retorts hotly.

"I know. My clients are demanding. They have busy lives, and require my services at odd hours. I breathe, sleep, even eat fashion and it fulfils a part of me that I didn't know was empty. The way you fill a part of me."

"A child would fill you up too." He looks earnest and hopeful.

Pansy sighs. "I did want children, Harry. I never lied about that. I can picture them so clearly in my mind. Tousled black curls, mischievous green eyes, cute button noses." He smiles and reaches to hold her hand in his. "But then everyone started having babies, and I'm not so sure anymore."

Harry frowns in confusion. He's never noticed her refusing to hold Teddy or Rose or any of their friends' kids. Children didn't flock to her the way they did to Molly, Millie or Luna, but they didn't run screaming in the opposite direction, either. He can't figure out where her ambivalence is coming from. "Why aren't you?"

"They're snotty and whiny and puke everywhere. They're dirty and sticky and they want your undivided attention. All. The. Time. And the tantrums." Pansy shudders. "Teddy will be a teenager soon. Do you remember what you were like? I remember what I was like."

Harry's eyes widen in apprehension.

"I like my life. No. I *love* my life the way it is. A baby would change it." She squeezes Harry's hand. "A baby would change everything. I look at Hermione, and Luna, and Ginny and I think, is it worth it? It's like those Jimmy Choos I wanted. They look divine, but they pinch my toes and put blisters on my heels whenever I wear them."

Harry squeezes her hand back. "But you still wear them and you still love them."

"True," Pansy says and sighs again. "But I could have returned them if I wanted to."

□

It's her turn to host the monthly book club meeting.

Fortunately, the cleaning service has spiffed up Grimmauld that morning, and Daisy eagerly offers to whip up some canapés, because Pansy had forgotten all about the meeting until Astoria owls to ask what kind of wine she should bring.

The *baby thing*, as Pansy has come to think of it, is eating her brain, like an Inferi on a no carb diet. She's counting on her gal pals to help her get her head on straight. Or at least, get her so drunk she can't think at all.

Astoria shows up first, with a Cabernet from the Central Coast of California. Draco procured it on a recent business trip to the States.

"I'll open it and let it breathe, darling," Astoria says, setting the bottle on the bar near the fireplace. She glides over to the heavily laden buffet table and plucks up a caviar and cheese stuffed snow pea, popping it her mouth. "Mmmmm, Daisy really outdid herself. I just might have to steal her from you."

Pansy pours two glasses of the deep red wine and hands one to Astoria. "Over Draco's dead body."

"It would be worth it," says Astoria, snatching another snow pea. "I look fabulous in black."

The fire flares with green sparks, heralding the arrivals of Ginny Wood, Padma Chang-Patil, and Hermione Granger-Weasley. There are squeals of delighted greetings all around. Pansy makes sure the ladies have food and drinks just as the rest of the book club arrives together by Apparition.

"The medical community is here! Feel free to keep your pesky little health problems to yourselves until we're too drunk to care!" Millie cries out cheerfully, as she enters the room with Cho and Luna in tow.

"Once upon a time, we actually read books and then discussed them," Hermione says to the room in general with a wry smile.

Millie gives her a one-armed hug, while holding a glass for Luna to fill in her other hand. "Once upon a time, we had free time, and uninterrupted sleep. I am here to hear gossip and get sauced."

"I'll drink to that," says Cho. Padma gives her a kiss and a glass of wine.

Ginny tuts loudly. "None of that, please. Remember the rule."

"Leave your spouse at the door," Luna sing-songs. "But doesn't Harry live here?"

"He's at Ron and Hermione's tonight, luv," says Millie. "Right, Pans?"

Pansy nods. "Getting his baby fix."

"He dotes on Rose," Hermione says. "And she adores him. You should see how she makes a beeline for him whenever he's over. She's fascinated with his glasses. And he's so patient and attentive. He's going to make a wonderful father."

Pansy winces and Hermione gives a little shrug in apology. They are in a room full of women who never miss a trick. Their exchange doesn't go unnoticed.

"What's up?" Ginny asks bluntly. She hasn't dodged a subject since she and Harry split up shortly before their wedding. She figures tackling a problem early means less mess to clean up later.

Pansy can appreciate the sentiment, but she's not inclined to think that Quidditch strategy applies universally to life.

"I'm not sure I want to have kids," she says softly.

Cho whistles under her breath. "And Harry does."

"Well, duh," says Luna mildly, voicing everyone's thoughts.

Padma shakes her head. "That's a tough one. You can't have one just to please him. It's a recipe for resentment and disaster."

There are murmurs of agreement from all over the room.

"I know that," Pansy replies. "What I can't figure out is..."

"Is it worth it?" Astoria asks.

Pansy nods wearily.

Hermione clears her throat. "Have you tried making a list?"

"A list?" parrots Ginny.

"Of the pros and cons. Puking, crying and diapers on one side. Unconditional love, the joy of laughter and seeing a person develop in front of your eyes on the other," explains Hermione. "Only you can decide what goes on that list."

"You should keep in mind that the puking, crying and diapers don't last very long," says Cho. Her and Padma's daughter, Felicia, is four now.

"Right. Because once that's done with, there's backtalk, potty training and temper tantrums to look forward to," Millie replies, rolling her eyes. Her little Vince has just turned two.

"Thank Merlin for boarding school," says Astoria with feeling. No one's fooled. They all know she thinks the sun rises and sets on young master Malfoy.

But no one calls her on it, because they all feel the same. About what is said, and what is left unsaid.

□

"Kingsley announced his retirement today," Harry says. He's sautéing mushrooms for the omelette he is making.

Pansy puts a glass of Bordeaux near the stove, and places her hand on his waist for balance as she kisses his neck. "Really? I thought he planned to stay on for another year or two."

"That's what we all thought," Harry replies, taking a sip of wine. "Apparently, Andromeda has different plans."

"Because Teddy will be at Hogwarts in September?"

"In a nutshell, yes," Harry says. He turns off the flame under the pan and faces her. "Brilliant deduction, as usual, Mrs Potter."

He pulls Pansy to him, kissing her with enthusiasm until she breaks away to catch her breath.

"You're in a good mood tonight," she comments, feeling slightly dazed.

He chuckles and nibbles her ear, eliciting a moan of desire. "So I am. I wonder why?"

She looks up at him. He's grinning from ear to ear. "You bought a new broom?"

He winks at her. *Winks*. "Not even close. Need a hint?"

"No," Pansy answers, smirking. "I know why. You've been promoted."

Harry nods. "I knew I married you for more than your looks."

"Well, you are hopeless with clothes."

"Ah, yes. That is true." He cracks three eggs into a bowl and whisks them efficiently. "How would you like to dress the new Deputy Head Auror?"

"Really?" Pansy squeals, throwing her arms around his waist and snuggling against his back. "That's fabulous! Congratulations!"

"Oscar Williamson will be the new head and Kings will stay on through August to help with the transition." Harry pours the eggs into a clean pan and watches as they heat slowly, becoming more solid than liquid. "Then he and Andie are moving to Hogsmeade. He's accepted the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. McGonagall's been after him for years to take it."

"Wow. It's all planned out, then?"

Harry nods happily. "The best part is, the Deputy Head is mostly a desk job with steady hours. I'll be working nine to five with an occasional overtime in case of crisis. I'll oversee operations and planning, so I have the ability to make real changes to policy."

"That's fantastic." She's a little shocked. It seems very sudden.

Harry flips the perfect disk of golden eggs onto a plate and piles a mound of Swiss cheese, mushrooms and scallions on top. Then he folds it over, and cuts it in half down

the middle, putting one half on a second plate.

Bartleby wags his tail and whines.

"Sorry, mate," says Harry. "I didn't drop anything tonight. Tell you what. I'll let you lick my plate clean, yeah?"

The Crup gives a happy little bark and lays down, watching their every move like a hawk.

Pansy grabs a couple of forks and opens a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. They sit at the kitchen table and clink glasses before digging in, enjoying their meal in silence for a few moments.

Then Harry takes a piece of folded parchment out of his pocket and puts it on the table between them.

Pansy looks at it, and then tilts her head at Harry.

"It fell out of your bag as you left this morning."

She takes another bite of omelette and chews with calm deliberation.

"I looked at it," Harry continues. "I thought it might be something you need for work."

Pansy drinks some wine. It tastes like a ripe pear on the back on her tongue. With a hint of smoke.

"The con side is awfully long," he comments, and takes another bite of egg.

"Yes," she says. "But I'm told they're minor concerns, since most of them don't last long."

"And the positives are pretty big positives," he adds, sounding hopeful. "Did it help? Writing it all down?"

Pansy nods. "Immensely. I'm still not sure, though."

"I get that. You know, I was thinking of turning the promotion down. I'll miss being in the middle of the action," says Harry.

"Why didn't you?"

"Ron and I had a long talk about being a parent," Harry replies. "He said it was a little hard at first, but he wouldn't trade his time with Rose for anything."

He reaches across the table and squeezes her hand.

"Besides, I figured I owed it to you to knock a few cons off the list."

□

Most Sundays, they go to the Burrow for brunch. In Harry's eyes, Sundays and Molly are sacrosanct. This Sunday isn't any different.

The Burrow is the definition of chaos in Pansy's opinion. The rooms on the first floor are quite spacious, thanks to profits from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, but they feel very cosy filled with two grandparents, six siblings, their spouses, and eight grandchildren. Nine, if one counts Teddy, and Molly does. It's boisterous, frenetic and the complete opposite of Pansy's childhood home.

She loves it, most of the time. It's like catching a dragon's tail, but the energy makes her feel alive.

When it gets to be too much, she retreats to the garden or the attic to visit the ghoul. She brings it new pyjamas every other month or so, because it amuses her to see something Ron-like wearing flannels with fluffy sheep or pink bunnies gambolling over them.

This Sunday, she can handle it without retreating. She plays dress up with Victoire, Dominique, Minnie, and Olivia before brunch is served. She helps Penelope, Fleur, and Ginny clean up afterwards. She leaves them to their tea and chat in the dining room. And then, she looks for her husband. The grandchildren are listening to Molly and Arthur tell a story in the parlour. Ron, Bill, Percy, George, Lee, Charlie and Dean are listening to a Quidditch game on the wireless in Arthur's study. Oliver, Ginny's husband, is providing colour commentary. His accent gets thicker when he's excited. He sounds just like McGonagall when he shouts.

Pansy wanders down the hall, stopping in front of the door to the laundry room when she hears the murmur of low voices. It's cracked open, so she creeps nearer to hear better.

"It seems pretty complicated, Moine," says Harry.

Hermione sighs. "Well, yes. It's not a quick solution, but neither are any of the alternatives."

"Very true, that." Some papers rustle. It sounds like they're examining a book. Pansy rolls her eyes. Of course, they're looking at a *book*.

"If you want this badly enough...I just wanted to make sure you knew all of your options. I know how much it means to you," Hermione explains earnestly.

Papers rustle again. "It would have to mean a lot, wouldn't it? I think I'm understanding a little of Pansy's uncertainty now."

Pansy nudges the door open all the way. "Which uncertainty about what?"

Harry and Hermione jump guiltily, but make no move to cover up what they're looking at. It's a large, ancient book of spells, she thinks. Pansy walks over, and reads the page lying open.

"Ah," Pansy says. "That uncertainty."

Not so much spells per se, as a dizzying combination of several magicks. Complicated is an understatement.

"It's only an option," Hermione hastens to say, dismissing the book with a flapping motion.

Pansy looks at Harry. "You would do this? For me?"

"I would do this for us," he replies and brushes her cheek with the back of his hand.

It's alluring idea. A good third of the cons on her list are the physical consequences of pregnancy: stretch marks, saggy boobs, bigger feet, weight gain, incontinence, haemorrhoids, *pica*...she has to look that one up, and she is less than thrilled to find out she might possibly develop a craving *fodirt*...bloody noses, nausea, back strain, constipation, acne...

*What happened to glowing?*

Hermione's option would free her from all that. She should be jumping for joy, right? But she doesn't feel joy. She feels a tiny but growing twinge of jealousy in the pit of her stomach. Because a part of her wants to feel her child...Harry's child...grow inside her.

Harry's voice interrupts her fledgling thoughts. "And look here, *the wizard then steps into a pool of warm water and with the spell, captures the life force from the woman and mixes it with the potion of his seed in the water, close to his belly.*" Part of the impregnation process involves osmosis!"

He grins at her and she rolls her eyes at him.

Merlin's moth-eaten shorts, she had married an insane man.

□

The boys come back from shopping with an odd look in their eyes. They swoop into her office, gather Pansy and her things, and Floo her to their flat.

Blaise is tucking a beige cashmere throw over her legs when she realises with a jolt what the odd look is. Protective. She's never seen that look in Justin's eyes before and Blaise hadn't used it since they had Muggle Studies with Alecko Carrow. He knew about her stash of French Vogues.

Justin hands her a double gillywater and she stares him down. "What's going on?"

He sits next to her on the brown leather Chesterfield sofa, and fusses with the cashmere throw. "Did you know Harry gave an interview to *Witch Weekly*?"

Pansy lets out a long sigh. "You really had me worried! I thought you were going to tell me that Lagerfeld had died or something."

"So you know about it?" Blaise asks, his look now uncertain.

"Yes. Harry told me he did the interview as a favour to Arthur. He's the youngest Deputy Head in, well, ever, I think. It's good publicity."

Justin and Blaise exchange worried glances.

Pansy's feet go cold as all the blood in her body races to her heart. "It's not a profile of Harry Potter, hot new Deputy Head?"

Blaise shakes his head grimly. "More like Harry Potter, hot wannabe Daddy."

"Hand it over." Pansy says, and downs her gillywater in one gulp.

Blaise crosses to the sofa, and gives her the magazine.

The Harry on the cover blows her a kiss and pouts when she frowns at him. She finds the article and reads it slowly. On the surface, it's a perfectly harmless puff piece on how much Harry wants to be a father. If she wasn't personally involved, she might come over broody at the endearing portrait of eager parental fitness the writer painted. But she could see the subtext, and it was alarming. She knew things were tense but this... No wonder Blaise had commandeered Justin for a two man rescue squad.

Pansy gives them a brittle smile and throws a handful of powder into the Floo. "Thank you, boys. I'll see you tomorrow at work."

With a whoosh, she's at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Home. Only, it feels like a foreign country at the moment. Somewhere she's never been before. Strange, and a bit scary. She takes a deep breath to compose herself before turning to find that Harry is sitting on their couch with Bartleby in his lap. The little dog wags his forked tail at her in greeting and arches under the hand deftly stroking his back.

"You've read it, then."

Pansy nods and sits apart from Harry on the couch, leaning over to give Bartleby a pat on the head. He licks her hand.

"Tell me the truth, Potter," she says, ignoring his wince at hearing her use his last name. "Have you thought about divorce?"

He won't meet her eyes.

"Aren't I enough?" Pansy asks in a small voice.

Harry stops petting the dog and looks at her in consternation. "What are you talking about?"

"In that interview you said you want a family," she says. Now she can't look at him. Bartleby moves to her lap and she runs her fingers over his wiry coat. "Aren't we already a family? You, me, Teddy. Ron, Hermione, Arthur, Molly, Ginny, Oliver, George..." Her voice catches in her throat and she can't go on.

Harry scoots closer to Pansy, and puts his arms around her. "Yes, love, you are my family. But please, be fair here. Am I everything to you?"

Pansy nods, and a tear rolls down her cheek.

"Then you'll close Triple P Style to be with me all the time?"

Harry grins when she leans back to give him a look of abject horror.

"See? I have an empty spot in me that's waiting for a child. Our child. With curly black hair, mischievous green eyes and a cute button nose." He kisses her forehead.

Pansy takes a deep breath and finds a closely held fear. "What if I can't have children?"

"Well, then. We can adopt, right? Or there's always good old osmosis." He makes a face, and she laughs.

"You'll clean up the puke?"

"I will," Harry vows solemnly.

Pansy wipes the tears from her eyes, and grins. "All right. Let's try."

□

The bottle of champagne pops as Draco opens it, and the little group at their table watches the cork sail through the air into the hedge that borders the garden.

"A toast," he proposes as he fills the glasses in front of him. "To old enemies, old friends and new beginnings."

Harry wraps an arm around Pansy, and lifts a glass with his free hand. "Hear, hear!"

"To the new couple, may joy and happiness follow where ever they go," says Ron.

Everyone at the table clinks glasses and responds, nearly as one, "to the happy couple!"

"My wife and I thank you very kindly," says Neville as he strolls up to their table, holding Hannah close by his side. "For the good wishes, and especially for sharing this day with us."

"Where's the honeymoon, Hannah?" Seamus asks, wagging his eyebrows.

Hannah blushes prettily as Neville kisses her cheek. "I don't know. Neville won't say. But I'm sure it will be lovely."

"If he lets you see any of it," says Seamus and Lavender elbows him in the ribs. "Ouch! What's that for, woman?"

"Not everyone is as randy as you, husband dear," Lavender says, rolling her eyes. "I was lucky to get one meal that wasn't room service."

Seamus pats her large belly. "Don't go acting like you didn't enjoy it, luv. Everyone knows this one's our fifth."

"Oh, you!" Lavender exclaims, and smacks his hand away. "Don't get me all hot and bothered."

Everyone laughs and toasts her quick retort.

"Speaking of hot and bothered," says Percy awkwardly, with red spots dotting each cheek. "Are you two planning on kids straight away?"

"Well," says Neville, "We're not sure. Hannah has the pub to think about and I work at Hogwarts, as you know..."

"No better birth control than a bunch of hormonally unbalanced teenagers, is there, Nev?" Pansy asks. "Lay off, Percy. They just got married five minutes ago. Let them have a honeymoon first."

Neville gives her a look of gratitude. "Would you mind repeating that over by my grandmother's table? I know you Slytherins strive for subtlety, but you'll need to say it loud because she's going deaf."

Everyone laughs and Draco slaps him on the back.

"I can shout it from here if you'd like, Longbottom," he says.

"Go on, then," says Harry. "Save my gorgeous wife the walk."

Draco and Harry mock-stare each other down for a few seconds until Draco throws up his white handkerchief, and sits next to his wife.

"You know I can't, old chap. Mother would kill me," Draco says, gesturing to where Narcissa sits, conversing pleasantly with her sister Andromeda.

Everyone laughs again and waves gaily to Neville and Hannah as they leave to greet their other guests.

"How are you feeling, wife of mine?" Harry whispers in Pansy's ear.

"Just fine, husband dear," she whispers back. "But what I'd really like to do right now is undress the Deputy Head Auror." And she nips his ear, smiling at his low groan.

Pansy might not be totally sure about a baby, but the baby making business? That, she's behind one hundred per cent.