

Root Cause

by MHaydn

Our writers struggle to produce a PWP.

Warning: Erotica is not their forte.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 21

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Chapter 1

"Teen porn?"

"No. Spicy romance for young adults."

Biff looked unconvinced.

"It's what the surveys say the readers want, and we have to sell if we want to remain in business," said the editor.

"I'm not putting out any such thing," said Biff. "Readers expect a certain quality from me."

"It's a challenge," said the editor. "Use a nom-de-plume and write in a different style and no one will know it's you. Think of it as putting one over on those prats who want such trash from us."

"Erotica doesn't have any impact without romantic feelings," protested Biff, "and I don't have those."

"We know," said the editor, sighing. "But you're a writer. Fake it and compose something deep and meaningful."

Biff departed for his office, leaving the editor to worry about the future viability of their periodical. Back in his office, it occurred to him that perhaps he could use angst instead of romantic anguish.

Like castaways in the South Pacific too warped by civilization to engage in the lush life the islands offered, our characters surveyed their circumstances and despaired.

The editor was thinking that the time of turmoil immediately after the wizard war when people had to adapt to a different life – alienated souls in a strange, new world – matched the challenges faced by Biff and hers truly.

How often the universe impinges upon us and how sincerely we lament over what appears to divert us from higher pursuits that will surely enrich both our

lives and the lives of those around us when, in reality, the gritty demands of necessity that we resent become the prompts to intense activity generating achievements that enlighten the world and astonish even the perpetrators with what has been accomplished.

The editor shook her head in dismay, read another chapter of 'The Sun Also Rises,' and tried again.

The universe imposes harsh demands. We rail against fate. It has robbed us of our chance for greatness. We set about the imposed task with grim determination. Our work produces something worthwhile. We are surprised by the outcome.

It occurred to Biff that the prime time for intermingling would be the period after the civil war when lives were shattered, beliefs were discredited, and old goals were no longer relevant – a time for collision of ideas and purposes. And bodies.

"My aunt wanted to move back to the ancestral country estate, but the authorities insisted on inspecting it first. When they opened the dungeon, one of them lost an eye in the fracas. They went back in force and contained everything although another lost a leg."

"Ferocious aunt you have. What's her name?"

"Andromeda. But, no, it wasn't my aunt who did the damage. It was something lurking in the manor."

"I thought you had another aunt who is no longer here."

"Bellatrix."

"Yes, that's the name. If she were still around, there wouldn't have been any problem. I heard she could hurl thunderbolts."

Draco wondered if the new Arithmancy professor was having him on. He gave him a closer look, but not too close. Draco was not going to gaze into those black eyes flecked with red.

Adolf Galland was thinking that life in the Isles might be more interesting than he had expected it to be. A popular theory in Germany was that the Brit Wizards had had a civil war out of boredom.

"Keep going," encouraged the editor. "The central pillar of their lives has been taken away, and they're all groping for their identities. Bring out hidden facets of their character."

"A knut for your thoughts."

"They're not worth that much."

"Oh, don't bother telling me, sir. I'm certain a mere schoolgirl couldn't begin to comprehend your lofty, abstract ideas."

He put down the beer he had been enjoying and tried to place the frizzy-haired girl now glaring at him. She was a student in one of his classes, but he hadn't learned all their names yet.

"If you insist," he said. "The school is next to a deadly forest. It has monsters in its dungeons, spiteful poltergeists, and dangerous stairs. It claims to have produced the most evil wizard of all time. In the midst of this, its Dark Arts Defense curriculum is a shambles."

"That prompts us toward self sufficiency, sir" said Hermione.

"Right-ho," said Adolf. "Moral fibre stuff."

"I'm willing to buy you a beer as a peace offering," he said, "but I don't know what the school regulations are about such things."

"I'm perfectly capable of buying my own," she said, heading toward the bar.

After she left, he raised his glass and toasted the quick departure of all fiery wenches, but to his surprise, she returned and plunked herself and her beer beside him.

"Tell me, sir," she said. "What brings you to our fair island?"

"To spread evil," he said. "Does that confirm your suspicions?"

He observed her thoughtful demeanor. *By the gods, she's taking me seriously.*

Finally, she spoke. "We may need that."

He asked about her plans. Well, of course, her first priority was to thwart his evil ambitions. After that, she was part of a small group who had returned to school to make up for a lost seventh year. Most had gone on to the real world, but a few thought their futures required the academic background. He could probably recognize them because they were misfits. No, Luna Lovegood was not one of them. She remarked that no one else had ever asked about what she wanted to do. He replied that the information could be useful for the furtherance of his nefarious schemes.

Author's apology: This is not fan-fiction that recreates a beloved character in a cherished setting, but a story using this universe as background where another writer might use WW1. The characters are either original characters or minor characters (that may as well be original) or major characters undergoing change.

Biff and the editor, like Dante, begin their descent on Easter weekend. It takes them twenty-one chapters to come full circle.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 21

Chapter 2

Biff thought it time to bring more characters into the story.

They were one week into the transformation sets of the hexing-gonals when Adolf noticed the class had turned glassy-eyed.

"It's quite concrete," he said. "It's just the movements in space that preserve the figure. Consider the letter T. The only move that preserves it is a reflection about its vertical axis. The reflection is its own inverse. Hence, we have a set of order 2: the null transformation which does nothing and the single reflection."

T for Troll, reflected the class, *which is going to be my grade for Arithmancy.*

"These are known as the symmetry sets since they capture how much symmetry any figure has," said Adolf. "Consider the hexagon. Lots of symmetry. One can rotate it and reflect it and one can always perform an operation to bring it back to its original position. Each action has an inverse. It's a rich set known as the dihedral."

"Dihedral," wrote the class in their notebooks.

Adolf Galland decided it was time for a motivating example. The next day, they were standing in front of a block of granite, and he was displaying a six-sided object.

"To program or not to program," he announced. "This is known as the Bee Routine, a honey of a spell. It is a comb-ination of combinatorial hexes for a wholesome purpose."

Pansy, an innocent bystander who had joined the crowd out of curiosity, was the one who had the nerve to say, "Thou art but a dead man."

Adolf raised his wand.

```
begin dihedral
    while hole < one
        Rotate
        Reflect
        Inverse
    end while
end dihedral
```

There was a grinding noise. Rock dust flew. Two minutes later, the class lined up to see the hole bored straight through the boulder. Draco thought about boring a hole through whatever was plaguing Aunt Andromeda's country estate. Even Pansy was impressed although not enough to forgive him for his abuse of the English language.

The tyger ambushed Pansy Parkinson.

Herr Professor shining bright
Proving theorems in the night,
What immense eternity
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

She concluded that Herr Professor was a bad influence on her.

The editor arrived at her desk eager to put her morning's thoughts on paper.

It is only natural for those who have undergone great pain and whose spirit is entombed in isolation to wish to sever all previous bonds ensuring that the physical and emotional part of their being is similarly entombed, for is there not great solace in the simple absence of reminders of their unfathomable loss, but the human element is constantly at work, and the tendrils that connect all do reach and touch even those who strive for isolation, and they find they cannot resist the responses they devoutly hoped and believed had been purged from their systems in the crucible they thought had ended at least one phase of their lives and eliminated any possibility of a normal existence.

Now that the ideas were elucidated, it was only necessary to permute them into another style. She placed her hand on 'The Old Man and the Sea' and prayed to the god of short sentences.

All of Ravenclaw was shocked. Draco and Theo had talked the sorting hat into placing them into a different house. They had chosen a house they thought was aloof and indifferent. They were wrong. Padma was especially curious. She had discovered that Luna was curious, too. Luna was willing to join Padma and approach the pair. They chose Friday afternoon after tea. They had completed the week's studies. They were free for other activities.

The girls found Draco and Theo in a room. It was close to the common room. There was music. The boys were dancing. It looked like a folk dance. The music was lovely. The dance was beautiful. It was artistry in sound and motion.

Padma and Luna stood transfixed. *Slytherins have soul.*

"Can we have some?" they asked.

Theo gave Padma a nod. She joined arms with him. Draco returned the twinkle in Luna's eyes. The dance was the Syrtaki. The boys waved their wands to begin the music. They took the girls through the first four bars. They repeated until the girls had the routine. They took the girls through the next four bars. The stately intro played and played. Padma and Luna felt the week's stress and strain leave them. They stopped. The boys thanked them for their good company. They noticed they had attracted an audience.

"Can we play too?" asked a young Ravenclaw.

"Next week," Draco told the disappointed crowd.

The four troupers sank into overstuffed chairs in the common room. They watched the fire dance over the logs. Draco mentioned he had seen Luna with the Magical Beasts class. She agreed it was her favorite even though there were serious omissions. Padma felt a twinge about where the conversation might go, but Theo remarked that all courses had their limitations. Draco added that some omissions were serious. Padma mentioned that her week in Potions had its ups and downs. She was going to stop at that. No one cared about a Ravenclaw's intellectual pursuits. But the boys nodded. Basking in the attention of their kind eyes what was she thinking, Slytherins, even ex-Slytherins, didn't have kind eyes she related the details. She prattled on more than she wanted to. No one else, certainly not her family, had ever listened. She wanted to hear Draco and Theo talk about Arithmancy. They were wizards in the subject. They were leaving her and the rest of the class in the dust. It was time to troop down for dinner.

Biff found the editor slumped at her desk, various gods of prose having swept over her and through her like sandstorms through a small Nile village. He coaxed her back to the land of the living with a café au lait and a box of chocolate-covered cherries.

Later, he viewed the empty candy wrappers littering her desk, as crumpled as the characters in their story, and said that suspicions would be running rampant.

Hermione Granger and Pansy Parkinson were on their way to a sunny room full of music with the same purpose but different goals.

Professor Galland had discovered an empty room with windows on three sides next to his office. He had moved a reclining chair into the room along with two side tables, one for his coffee cup and the other for papers and journals. Since no one objected, he became bold enough to equip the room with a sound system. Now, he could look up from his work, enjoy the music, and appreciate the view: the chill, forbidding lake on one side and the dreary, endless moor on the other. Enough to lift any wizard's spirit.

His students discovered his location. After he had answered their questions, they stood in the doorway, listening to the music. He added chairs and tables to the room. He added reclining chairs, sofas, and coffee tables. He appropriated the adjoining room and found oriental rugs which improved the ambience and the acoustic environment. For the first two months, it was Haydn in the morning, Bach and Mozart in the afternoon, and American swing after tea. Sounds tripped through the students, flipping brain cells and soothing the savage breast.

Professor Galland did wonder about the abundance of furnishings available for the taking. The school must be going through lean times after a prosperous and vibrant past.

The trigger was Mahler's Fifth on Thursday afternoons. The first time they heard it, both Pansy and Hermione were puzzled. Both were certain that something so mysterious and compelling had to have a hidden message. Hermione listened carefully. If she ascertained deep purposes, it would be a basis for well-founded accusations. Pansy listened carefully. If she ascertained deep purposes, it would be the basis for new-found hope.

While Pansy and Hermione listened intently, Theo and Padma were in a corner of the room comparing notes for an essay. Luna was standing at the window when she saw Draco walking toward the lake. Before she realized what she was doing, she was down several flights of stairs.

"A brisk day," she said when she caught up with him.

"Clearing my head," said Draco, watching Luna checking the bushes for any sign of migrating Tuft Birds. He couldn't remember anyone ever sighting one.

She took his hand and tugged him back to the warm room and music.

Meanwhile, Hermione, alert for any signs of evil influence from Mahler, saw Pansy smile at Professor Galland, cross her legs, and point her exposed knees at him.

What a slag, thought Hermione, thinking Mahler probably wasn't to blame for that shameless display. Hermione patted her extensively-brushed hair, inspected her newly-laundered blouse, and told herself that Professor Galland no doubt preferred dignified ladies. *Besides, I'm waiting for Ron, and I don't care.*

After Professor Galland returned to reading and scribbling, awareness returned to Pansy. She covered her knees with her skirt, put her legs back under the table, and puzzled over her strange response to just a glance from him. Yes, she had fantasies, but they involved the professor and her relatives. The government was being terribly unfair to people who had acted for the common good. Her parents and others needed someone broad minded who could understand the sacrifices they had made. For her part and for the family good, she would overlook his murdering of the English language. In her wilder imaginings, she pictured him visiting justice on those petty bureaucrats with hearts of granite.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 21

Chapter 3

"Wring it out, baby."

Mravinsky was conducting the Tchaikovsky Fourth and Filius was on the edge of his chair.

It was after dinner, actually a decent interval after dinner to allow the castle elves time to dispose of the debris from the meal and gather for the late night debaucheries from which the students were banned. Horace, Filius, and Adolf had insisted these were formal events, and while they might appear in an evening kimono, they were appropriately dressed and the elves could do no less. Against the initial objections of the castle elves, the trio had waved their wands and directed them to piles of elegant garments that belonged to no one.

"Bathe and dress for the occasion," demanded the wizards.

Despite this imperious decree or because of it or because of the musical experience, the elves gladly brought out the vintage Port that had been neglected during the recent craze for stronger drink.

"It was the times," said Horace. "No one thought about moderation."

Moderation was relaxed Friday nights. In the midst of the elf-provided fruit, nuts, and brandy, the three wizards let it be known that everyone, including elves, should end the evening feeling mellow. To do otherwise would be to disgrace the occasion.

The coming week would be a trial. It might end in triumph or disaster, but at the end, generations of hard-working vintners and artists would provide relaxation.

After several months of this, Filius had a thought. "Do you think life might be too easy for us? Is it possible disaster looms because we have carved out a comfortable existence?"

"Yes, that is a possibility," said Horace, "but that is no reason to feel guilty. If it weren't for this splendid life we have created for ourselves, we would never have asked such a question."

"Both of you have taught long enough that there's no challenge left," said Adolf. "Every weird question or wild stunt students can conjure, you've already seen, many times. Your boredom is no excuse to go looking for trouble, and besides, isn't there an official police force? Aren't they capable?"

"They're not going to tell anyone about a problem they can't handle," said Filius.

"There is one situation," said Horace. "A distant relative, Andromeda Tonks, can't return to her family estate."

Filius brightened. Adolf groaned.

The editor groaned. Men, culture, adventure. Next, there's going to be a shoot-out at the Bolshoi ballet during the refreshment intermission for Dom Perignon. Where's the romance, not to mention the erotica?

The editor reminded herself that the first rule of writing was to get words on the page.

Behind every flood lies the initial trickle, the miniscule rivulet leading the way to the unsuspecting plains that will soon be covered with water, the small seep that wends its way through the weak points of a dam until it cracks at the fissures, and so it is with the small human actions that eventually lead to overwhelming events, although, in the last case, the perpetrators are gifted or cursed with the hopes and fears of where their efforts may lead, and thus, occasions that appear insignificant are oft attended with such emotional burdens that the initiator experiences enough anxiety that performing what should be a simple task becomes a monumental undertaking prone to mishaps and the consequent regrets, with the mistakes especially painful since a simple exercise was bungled.

"Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue," the editor muttered to herself, setting aside her preliminary scribbles and beginning with a new sheet of paper. Where was Biff when she needed him? Given his comprehension of romance, he was probably at some topless bar looking for inspiration.

Three crumpled sheets of paper later, she was staring bleakly at the wall. The spirit of short sentences had not come when called. *Oh lord, why have you forsaken me?* The one from whom the gods had flown threw her pen into the waste bin and headed home.

Biff, returning from a walk to clear his head, smoothed out the paper balls and read the editor's scribbling. His muse had done better than she realized. He retrieved the pen from the waste bin. The ink flowed onto the page.

"Have you ever thought about studying nature? I think you would be good at it."

That was so counter to what everyone else had said and, consequently, what he had come to believe about himself that what she said didn't register.

"What nature?" he asked.

"Nature nature," said Luna. "Animals."

Draco would take it slow. He had become accustomed to being blindsided by Luna, and he had also learned that she was a good-natured and patient person who would explain everything and not hold his ignorance of essential information against him.

It gradually came out that she had to do a field study for her Magical Creatures course. Draco expressed no signs of disapproval whereupon Luna became emboldened enough to mention that she and her father could certainly handle it but an additional pair of hands and eyes would make it much easier.

"That's the way of things," said Draco.

"Well?" asked Luna.

"Well, what?" asked Draco.

"Well, I thought you might offer to help us," said Luna.

Observing the look of surprise on his face, Luna cursed her clumsiness. Any simpleton could have done a better job of approaching him and asking. She had botched it.

Draco, for his part, had visions of freezing his toes in some god-forsaken wilderness while scanning the landscape for fauna that no one knew existed, but the look of hope and dismay on Luna's face made him wish for some acceptable solution. In his desperation, an idea came.

"I was thinking," he said.

"Yes," said Luna.

"I don't know if it's interesting enough or not, but there is an unusual life-form in or about my aunt's country estate," he said.

Luna, swept away on the tide of his possible agreement, could only nod yes.

"But it's dangerous, and it may not be observable," he said.

"Could we take a preliminary look?" asked Luna.

Then she remembered. "Draco, I have to do the field trip over the Holidays, and you may not be able to leave your family."

Draco thought about his shattered family and said, "I think it will be okay if I'm home for Christmas Eve and Morning." Draco thought about his shattered family and how good it would be to only appear Christmas Eve and Morning.

That weekend, with special permission from the Magical Creatures professor, Draco and Luna, accompanied by her father, went to observe the Black estate. They noticed what the authorities, totally focused on forces of evil, had not noticed. There was a band of lush flora around the mansion even though it was the beginning of winter.

Draco, the one more immersed in academia, said that even if they discovered nothing, Luna's report would receive high marks if accompanied by pages of photography, especially twenty-four hour photography. Luna and her father were impressed, but not certain how to proceed. Draco said that he knew who to ask – that fount of knowledge, Herr Professor Galland.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 21

Chapter 4

Biff thought about the story being pieced together. It was like a jumble of jagged rocks refusing to fit together and ready to collapse upon them when their weak creative mortar failed to hold.

"We should have met with you earlier."

"That's okay," Cissy told Filius and Adolf. "My son told us what he and that girl plan to do."

"Luna Lovegood," said Andy. "Maybe Draco will introduce us some day."

"Isn't this dangerous?" asked Cissy.

Adolf was thinking that, from what he had heard, Cissy was a fine one to talk about putting her son in danger, but he said, "It shouldn't be. We'll make the observation of the Black mansion as remotely as possible."

"Remote?" asked Cissy. "How?"

Adolf continued. "A basic principle of observing wildlife is that the wildlife knows it's being observed and this changes its behavior."

"Doesn't that make the exercise worthless?" asked Andy.

"We'll try to minimize the influence," said Filius. "We were thinking of automatic cameras."

Cissy was beginning to understand why her son was working with these two instead of the Magical Creatures professor who would encourage his students to make a pet out of whatever had invaded the mansion. "We want to hear more, we really do," she said, "but we're due for tea at the Parkinsons, and we'd insult them if we didn't show."

"Would it help minimize the influence if the observations were for an extended period of time and the wildlife got used to our presence?" asked Andy as she was leaving.

"Very good," said Adolf.

"We need to do a more thorough inspection of the premises," blurted out Andy, "the sooner the better."

Everyone agreed: tomorrow morning.

As they arrived at the Parkinsons, Cissy was prepared to make an extra social effort to take up the gap left by her usually melancholy and taciturn sister, but when Mrs. Parkinson expressed her doubts about her daughter spending another year at school, Andy chimed in with the opinion that Mrs. Parkinson had done the right thing to let Pansy return. The professors currently staffing the place were an active and intelligent lot, and Andy was certain that Pansy would have a good year. This optimism proved contagious, and everyone began to relate how well their sons, daughters, and relatives were doing these days despite the terrible times.

The editor assumed the mantra position. After yesterday's embarrassment of Biff writing her short sentences for her, she was willing to try anything.

It may have worked. After a short period of trying to clear her mind, it occurred to her to depict as mindlessly as possible her own inner thoughts.

What a sleepyhead.

"Are you decent?" she asked, standing outside the door.

"What?" came the reply.

He was still in bed. She swept in and placed the cup of black coffee on his night table. She told him it was eight-thirty in the morning. They had to arrive at the breakfast table before all the muffins were gone.

"It's Saturday," protested Theo to no avail.

"I'll wait for you in the dining hall," said Padma.

"Save a muffin for me," he said.

Fifteen minutes later, he was munching his muffin. She mentioned that Draco and Luna were going on a field trip over the Holidays. He nodded yes. She asked how he knew. He replied that Draco had told him.

That floating feeling which sounds so fine in literary descriptions of romance is not an unalloyed delight as depicted by the more giddy writers, but a close cousin of being unanchored and tossed about by whatever slight happenstance should arise, and thusly, our heroine, normally of a solid disposition, fell into a pit of despair over the disappointment that someone she considered a companion had not arranged that they, too, could participate in an outing that grew ever more exciting and promising as she turned it over in her mind, even though her more rational self was reminding her that her distress was unwarranted and even inappropriate since he probably believed she was eagerly looking forward to joining her family for the festivities, but her emotional self so overrode

her rational good sense that she was still melancholy as they took a mid-morning stroll down to the lake although it happened that her stoical reaction to the pain of rejection came through in her countenance, and he, observing her nobility, told her that she looked lovely this morning, and she so brightened at this that he was emboldened to add they were doing preliminary research in the library and she was welcome to join them whereupon her unanchored self floated through the remainder of the morning on a cloud of hope and expectations.

If he had to be up, Theo would walk down to the lake, up to the small hill on the other side of the castle, and back to the school, clearing his mind of the week's stresses. He would stretch, soak in the tub, and have lunch with Padma, all the while trying not to go crazy thinking about the way she jiggled when she danced, about how she looked when she was flushed and her damp hair clung to her forehead. He wanted to get her damp and make her jiggle.

The music provided by Professor Galland would start at one o'clock which he considered a more reasonable hour to begin Saturday.

She put her pen down. With her editor's eagle eye, she was able to detect when the god of short sentences had dashed off to help another struggling author, probably someone writing heroic adventure stories for young boys.

Meanwhile, at his desk, Biff hewed out another jagged, ill-fitting stone.

"We're doing fine."

"It's only a short field trip."

"We're only going to observe and record."

"Professor Galland pointed out that we can't count on wildlife to cooperate and produce a noteworthy discovery."

"Hence, it's a procedural exercise."

"It'll have academic value no matter what happens."

"We'll conduct it from a safe distance."

Hermione looked at the quartet of smiling faces, wished them good luck, and moved to another table. She was puzzled. She had made an attempt to be friendly and offer a helping hand, but she felt rebuffed. She wondered if she were being overly sensitive.

She didn't understand it. Padma, Luna, Theo, and Draco were obviously scouring the library for information, and she knew she could do that better than anyone. Besides, that foursome didn't make sense. Theo and Draco had never shown any love for or even any interest in plants and animals, and what were Padma and Luna doing with two ex-Slytherins? She didn't want to be prejudiced, but could they be trusted?

Pansy, too, was pondering the intent of the group. Was this a cover operation for zeroing in on a Black family resource? She told herself that the group was acting innocent and not being the least secretive, that she doubted their capacity for clandestine operations, and that their reliance on Professor Galland instead of the Magical Creatures professor could be explained by their depending on a more organized individual. She told herself that her suspicions of Herr Professor being a double agent, a creature of dark allies and darker deals, a creature of strange and forbidden desires, were unfounded. But then why, when she covertly glanced at him, did a frisson travel down her spine? Why did she think a girl would not be safe in his company?

Finally, Pansy was disappointed in Professor Adolf Galland's judgment. Whatever secret project he was up to, he could have made a more intelligent choice than that mismatched quad. A single operative – smart, seductive, and intensely loyal – would have been more suitable.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 21

Chapter 5

"We're wasting our time."

The others looked at Cissy.

They had flown out to the Black estate and had inspected the grounds around the mansion. Adolf and Filius had outlined the plan to use cameras that they had hoped would provide twenty-four-hour surveillance with the film teleported back to the school to be run at fast forward. They had explained thermal imagery and mentioned the students were exploring its possible use.

"What do you mean, Cissy?" asked Andy.

"Draco is not going to use a camera site picked out by his mother, and I don't think any of the others will welcome any parental interference," said Cissy.

"What about Xenophilius?" asked Andy.

"He's come to the same conclusion," said Filius.

"But he still wants to review the arrangement to make certain his daughter is safe," said Adolf.

"Then that's why we're here," stated Cissy.

The professors nodded agreement. "And it gets the wildlife acclimated to activity on the periphery of their territory," they said.

"Just a description of how the equipment works, how it was set up, and how the data was analyzed would be a substantial research report," said Andy.

Once again, the professors nodded agreement.

The editor was appalled. Biff was letting the plot get in the way of the story.

She wanted to clear her mind before splattering some words on the page.

How often it is that the male of the species misinterprets refined manners and modest attire for a prissy mind and how even more often it is that the male of the species misinterprets a dedication to family as a lack of interest in the more passionate expressions of romantic feelings when, but if those of the more robust temperament were willing to apply what little good sense they possessed, then they would realize that refined manners are an indication that even a clumsy advance will be received with graciousness and that a modest demeanor is a perfect cover for behavior wild beyond imagination and that devotion to kin can be extended to all those the yearning female takes unto her bosom, but alas, our upstanding maiden must overcome the obstacles put in place by the very attributes that, in a reasonable and just world, would have smoothed the way to a satisfactory conclusion.

That felt good, thought the editor. *Now, let's kick this clueless wonder down the road.*

She took a deep breath. Dialogue.

Andy and Cissy were sipping tea and watching Teddy.

"This morning was fun," said Andy.

"I was afraid we were being silly," said Cissy. "We were showing them all the places we used to play when we visited our grandparent's country estate."

"They even appreciated it when we showed them our secret places, where we used to hide. They were real gentlemen."

"They could have been less gentlemanly and more appreciative and asked to see more secret places. Maybe the next time, we can make some suggestive comments."

"Oh, Cissy, what are you saying?"

"You know damn well what I'm saying. What do you plan to do, spend the rest of your life squeezing your thighs together?"

"Obviously, you want to squeeze someone between yours."

"Of course, don't you?"

"It's just not on, Cissy. I'm almost fifty. I'm a grandmother. You're married."

"You're a mature and handsome lady," said Cissy. "My husband is in France, and his uncle keeps sending cheerful letters that Lucius is doing fine but he's not in any shape to face an inquisition by the British authorities."

"You shouldn't tempt me with such thoughts," said Andy. "Do you think they could possibly be interested? Are they seeing anyone?"

"Draco says they work almost all the time and when they relax it's with other male professors in the evening with Port, walnuts, and classical music."

"They're leading a refined life," said Andy. "They're on a high plane of existence."

"That can't be good for them," said Cissy.

The editor grabbed the manuscript and ran down the hall. She had to show this to Biff: short sentences with dialogue. She banged on his door to let him know he had a visitor and dashed in breathless. His office was empty.

Meanwhile, Biff, inspired by the two pole-dancers on the stage, was ready to pour his inner self on the page.

Padma had said she wanted peace and quiet, and she and Theo were alone in a small room. She was watching Theo write his essay from a few scribbled notes – no outline, no rough draft, the finished product from his head and a few reminders. She watched the script move straight across the page.

"I like your handwriting," she said when he paused to collect some thoughts.

"You're kidding," he said, looking at her extensive notes and comparing her flowing script with his functional scrawl.

"And you hold the pen nicely, not in some clumsy grip," she said, placing her hand on his and letting her fingertips glide over him.

"You're the one who's elegant," he said, pointing at her extensive notes.

"In all ways," he said, taking her hand.

Her other hand held his upper arm; her knees were touching him; she leaned closer. Her world went out of focus. There was only Theo. She was holding him. She had never felt like this.

She gradually became aware that he was holding her and stroking her hair and her arms were wrapped around him and she was softly moaning as the tension left her. Rationality and a sense of decorum returned, and she pulled away, kissing him on the forehead.

She sat with her hand on his shoulder as he returned to his essay: straight from his head, no outline, no rough draft, and the script moving straight across the page.

Like the remote pilot of a drone, Biff watched his pen move over an alien landscape.

Luna watched the symbols take flight, swirl like a flock of birds, organize themselves into a tight formation, and land on the parchment. She watched Draco inspect the arrangement. It was the correct pattern.

"Was that your last one?" she asked.

"One more," he said, opening his Arithmancy text.

He had told her it was like looking for a rare animal. One poked and hunted until one discovered its secrets. She tried reading her book, but watching him concentrate was too fascinating. Something inside her resonated as his face lit up and he grabbed his wand. Once again, she watched the weird, compelling flight of imagination.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 21

Chapter 6

"Do you always stare into space and ignore those around you, sir?"

She had entered the room to discover Professor Galland sitting at a table by the window. Every fiber of her being had told her to go to the other side of the library, but with pounding heart, she had strolled over to his table and sat down. Several minutes later, he was still staring out the window. She had tried to contain herself, but to her chagrin, she had blurted out her annoyance that her existence was not being acknowledged.

"I wasn't ignoring you. I was thinking about you," said Adolf, "but it wouldn't be polite for me to stare at you."

"It's not polite to deceive, sir," said Hermione. "You certainly weren't thinking about a drab, little bookworm."

Adolf whispered words to what Hermione thought a lovely tune.

By the books
A lovely flower dwells,
And it's called ... Hermione.
With her mind
She turned the fateful tide,
And she's called ... Hermione.
For a thousand pages brought to life,
For the spells she called up for the strive,
For the things she suffered for her friend,
For the things she did to bring an end,
We salute ... Hermione.
Now she's back
And working very hard,
For she's our ... Hermione.

"Beautifully rendered sarcasm, sir," said Hermione, "but if you wanted to score points, you would be better off trying polite conversation."

"Scoring points with a student strictly I believe is forbidden," said Adolf, rising and nodding to her as he left.

'Strictly I believe is forbidden,' indeed, you Teutonic prig, thought Hermione, and I've been in the Forbidden Section.

The editor read Biff's latest effort and concluded they had best finish this romance serial as quickly as possible. The boy was going ape shit. Thank the gods, one of them, hers truly, was maintaining a level head.

It was to be moderation in all things, for is not life ordinary but no less wondrous in its daily round of events, and this was to be the guiding principle for her next undertaking, which would introduce such a spirit of level-headedness into wizard society that it would be transported to new heights with Pansy Parkinson upheld as an unequalled paragon among witches, or that would be the case except such things would not occur in the new, even-tempered social order, and even the progress toward this desirable end would proceed in measured steps because it was not her intent to create a potion that induced mad passion but a concoction that furthered companionship, for who wanted to see such a refined personage as Herr Professor Galland losing his equilibrium over a lady when a brilliantly brewed draught would let him see the friendly traits that another person possessed and induce him to come down off his thrice damned pedestal and at least engage her in amiable conversation, an exchange that would do no more than affirm their mutual humanity, an exercise that would be of much more benefit than his desiring her with every fiber of his being and his longing to be with her forever and his devotion to bringing her the ultimate bliss, which, in her pursuit of a life of composure for all, she must eschew which meant the blame for not bringing such a fulfillment to fruition lay at the feet of that arrogant snob who was so haughty he was unable to notice an ordinary schoolgirl and was so conceited that he was unable to imagine anyone worthy of him, and if she got the chance, she would slip him an elixir so powerful that Herr Professor would be on his knees before her, and then we would see who would spurn whom.

Right on, Pansy, thought the editor.

The editor reread the passage and decided that short sentences were simply inadequate on some occasions.

Back in his office, Biff wondered if he dared sneak in a little plot.

"I don't see why you have to break off your Christmas Holiday to be with that girl."

"Luna Lovegood, mum," said Draco, "and it's a school project."

"I still don't see why it has to be with that girl."

"Luna Lovegood, mum. I know she strikes people as a bit dotty, but she's harmless. Think about the other people involved. You might find some of them

interesting."

Cissy and her sister had indeed found Adolf and Filius interesting. Helping set up the cameras was the most fun they had had in years. The two women had insisted on numerous planning sessions complete with tea and biscuits, and the Professors had been gallant enough to indulge them. The two women had been wracking their brains trying to think of another project that would interest Adolf and Filius, but she would never admit that to Draco.

There were other things she would never admit. That morning, Cissy, as usual, had avoided looking deep into the mirror. She knew what was there: the suppressed memories of Tom Riddle in the Manor, the nightmares about his entering her room, his gazing into her depths as she raised her knees, his hands on them, parting them. The horror of trying to look away as her nightgown slid up, revealing a married woman opening for him. His eyes gleaming in triumph. Her responding to him, responding to him while her husband was in the next room. Her coupling with the Dark Lord while her husband was in the next room unable to do anything about it. She would wake with her orgasm, wondering how much was a dream, wondering how much of it she really wanted. She wanted someone to make the nightmares go away.

Luna will be Luna, thought the editor. *Let's see if I can copy Biff. Begin with an unattributed quote. Write simple stuff without much thought.*

"How's it going, Luna?"

The cameras had been operating for several days, and they had been watching the film.

"There are lots of rabbits."

Draco was surprised she was considering an ordinary creature, but he reminded himself that it might be a good thing that she was interested in an animal that everyone knew existed.

"Do you think there are more around the manor than elsewhere?" he asked.

"If we can establish that, we'll have a quantifiable difference between the growth around the manor and the nearby countryside," said Luna. "Our report will be more than a just description of our scientific method. We can look at other wildlife, too, but rabbits may be easier to observe and count than birds or mice."

Draco was thinking that she didn't sound the least bit loony.

The editor pursued a suitable Biff simile with the relentlessness of a ferret after a mouse in a maze.

Like a clandestine voyeur unable to ask for the best pornographic sites for fear of revealing her debauchery, Padma listened to her sister talk about boys unable to ask the questions that haunted her. How do you know if he likes you? How do you approach him without looking cheap? What if your family disapproves?

The two sisters posed in the racy lingerie they had secretly given each other while letting their imaginations run wild – dare I model this for Theo – before choosing outfits that proclaimed them to be mature and modest young women. They checked the mirror and each other and joined the family for Christmas dinner.

Author's Note: Adolf's song for Hermione is loosely based on 'Erika.'

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 21

Biff and the editor perform one final fling.

Chapter 7

"I'm glad you like the earrings, dear."

"Of course, mum, they're lovely."

The family was at the station seeing Padma off, and Padma and Parvati were both wearing the matching earrings their mother had given them. Padma started to say something, but the thought escaped her when she saw Theo walking to the train. Her mother was saying something about not studying too hard. Had Theo seen her? Would he come over and say hello? Maybe he didn't want to see her anymore. He was walking toward them. Padma braced herself.

"Mum, dad, this is Theo Nott. Theo, these are my parents."

Padma saw her parents stiffen – an evil Nott – but Theo greeted both of them and shook her father's hand.

"I'm returning to complete a ruined year, too," said Theo. "Nice to meet you, but I need to board the train."

"Me too," said Padma, grabbing Theo's sleeve and waving goodbye to her family as the two hurried to catch the train.

What am I doing? I didn't have to grab him in front of mum and dad, thought Padma. It registered they looked shocked, but it was strangely satisfying to see Parvati speechless. *Well, I'm not their little girl anymore*. As she and Theo looked for seats, she felt as though she had just stepped over a barrier.

It's crowded everywhere, thought Padma.

"We should check the luggage cars to make certain everything's safe," she said.

Where did that come from? she wondered.

"Okay, I'll follow you later," said Theo.

On her way to the rear of the train, it occurred to Padma that she had not seen Theo's family at the station. Did he have a family? Was his father alive, in prison? What did Theo do over the Holidays? Preoccupied with feeling selfish for not asking would he want her to ask she bumped into Luna, who suggested she and Theo join her and Draco. Padma replied that she was going to check the luggage cars. Luna volunteered to join her since they might be infested with Mips who liked to scatter clothes. Padma said she would make a loud noise to scare them off and join Luna and Draco as soon as she could. In the next car, Padma saw Hermione sitting by herself. She declined Hermione's invitation by declaring she had promised Luna to scare the Mips away from the luggage before they scattered the clothes.

Stepping into the first baggage car, Padma discovered how cold it was and how dark, with illumination from a single sky light. Her Arithmancy trained mind began to estimate how many baggage cars were needed each student's luggage taking up twice the volume of the student but packed four times as efficiently the train towing the weight of history in its tail, but only seven years' worth, an Arithmancy process she now recognized as a truncated filter.

And where was that paragon of Arithmancy? Had Theo stopped to talk to friends, leaving her waiting, forgetting about her?

There was a shaft of light as the door opened, and she was in his arms.

"I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

She was holding him tight, crushing him to her. She couldn't get him close enough. He was whispering that she was lovely, beautiful. She could feel the growing bulge in his trousers. *It's for me.* She grabbed his hair and pulled his lips to hers. It was clumsy. She didn't care. She moved against him. Something new and strange was happening to Padma Patil.

All the little squabbles with her family over the Holidays, all those things she planned to tell Theo so that the hurt from them would go away, all those things faded into the distance. They weren't important anymore.

Gradually, her desperation subsided. She was holding him lightly. She liked looking into those intelligent eyes. Their foreheads were together. After a longer time than they realized had passed, they left the baggage car and found Draco and Luna.

"Where have you two been," asked Draco. "Don't tell me you got lost on the train."

"We told Luna we would scare the Mips away from the luggage," said Padma.

Luna looked approving. Draco looked quizzical.

"We had to make a good job of it, old chap, don't you know," said Theo.

Draco noticed a beaming Luna, decided in favor of team spirit, and said, "Good. Very good. Very dutiful."

Draco, however, may have misread things because Luna had seen the now-soft face of the former, once-feared, Ravenclaw prefect.

Biff had one more touch to add.

"I did get you something for Christmas," said Theo later that evening as the two of them were sitting in front of the fireplace.

"I brought you something, too," said Padma.

Padma opened hers. It was a silver hawk, perched on a high mountain crag.

Theo opened his. It was a turquoise hawk, soaring.

They pinned the emblems on the lapel of the other's blazer.

Where's the editor, thought Biff. It's time for her to sum up the past, foreshadow the future, and inject the missing emotion into the story with one of those spiels that are a delight to unravel.

He decided that if he were alone and abandoned in the middle of a romantic plot, there was nothing to do but to fake it. The show must go on.

He's a Ravenclaw, thought Padma.

It was Friday afternoon. Their last class of the week had been that morning, and after lunch, Theo had reviewed and modified his notes for an essay before turning to the Arithmancy problems. Padma had been ready to quit after lunch, but Theo still working had prompted her to continue. She had watched him solve two problems before he had looked around, had noticed it was teatime, and had declared he needed some air. They had walked down to the lake and back. Halfway through his first cup of tea, he had said, "Aha," and had grabbed a sheet of paper to write down the solution to another problem. She had sipped more tea while he had stared into space and munched a biscuit, probably not knowing he was eating one. She had waited patiently until inspiration had struck again and he had jotted down the final derivation.

Theo looked around, stretched, and said, "You're looking lovely today."

He really is a Ravenclaw, thought Padma, deciding once again to ignore the letters from her mother about friends of the family who had sons who were not Slytherins.

Luna appeared. "Draco finally finished his school work. Let's go dance."

It was end-of-the-week Syrtaki in the common room. The week's poisons were flushed from everyone's system. The house bonded. It was the best place in the world to be.

They were all lounging around, pleasantly tired. A number were watching Luna weave a dandelion garland for Draco. Padma coaxed Theo into a stroll, and they, somehow, ended up in the abandoned room they had found that had an old sofa. The sofa smelled moldy, but Padma didn't care as she stretched out alongside Theo. She snuggled closer and closer. He was nibbling his way down her neck, but this evening, he didn't stop. His kisses moved over her blouse. Padma, wondering if she should do this, pulled slightly away and arched her back to let his kisses flow softly over her breasts. She liked his fondling her. She watched his hands unbutton her blouse. She was breathing heavily. Her blouse was open. Her fingers were running through his hair as his lips and tongue moved over skin and then over silk. She was caressing his temples.

"Just a minute, dear," she said as, wondering if she should do this, her hands reached behind her and she unfastened her bra. For a few confused

moments, his stunned look made her think she had done something wrong, but she recovered and leaned forward until her cheek was against his and she could whisper in his ear that he was her dearest Theo. She guided him to where she wanted him. Her hands stroked his hair as she arched into him. Soft little sounds were escaping her. He could go on forever. But he stopped.

He was holding her. They were slowly breathing together.

Finally, it occurred to them that they should rejoin the others. She took off her blouse, put her bra back on, and turning her back to Theo, said, "Can you fasten it, sweetheart?"

As she was putting on her blouse and buttoning it, she realized she was enjoying the companionable return to rationality and proper decorum. She wanted him to be her partner for every part of her life.

They returned to the common room to find most had gone to bed. When they entered, Padma saw Luna quickly remove her arm from around Draco.

Don't be embarrassed by it, love, thought Padma. *It would be good for you.*

"Oh no!"

The editor had decided to begin the morning by reading Biff's latest effort.

She ran down to his office. He wasn't in. She dashed to his flat and knocked. No answer. She banged on the door. Still no answer.

She opened the door and stuck her head in. "Biff. Biff!"

She found him in bed. "There you are."

He pulled the covers over his head. "Go away."

"Look, Biff, I know what you're going through."

"No, you don't," came the muffled reply.

"It'll be okay, love. Other adventure writers have tried their hand at romance, and they survived."

"Name two," came the muffled reply.

The editor was temporarily lost in reverie thinking about Padma. An intelligent woman had found romance and passion.

"I'll make you some chicken soup, love, and you'll be on your feet and writing an exciting tale in no time."

"I don't want to write on my feet, and what do you know?"

"Trust me. I'm your editor."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 21

Chapter 8

"My first thought is that you should talk to professors who have known you for a long time," said Adolf.

"Do you have a second thought, sir?" asked Hermione.

Adolf chuckled. "I usually do. A second thought is that all your professors will want such a brilliant person as yourself to take up their field."

"But you're not going to suggest that, are you, sir," said Hermione, thinking that Professor Galland probably considered her a defective Arithmantician.

"You're brilliant in everything," he said as if reading her thoughts, "but you will want to be first in your field."

There it is, she thought. *My inner self naked in front of him. Why am I doing this? This is a mistake.*

But he was continuing. "I believe that at this school Transfigurations is held in high regard because of its past and present professors. Would it help to consider that choice while seeing if another field appeals to you more? I've also heard you're concerned about the poor relationship between wizards and other magical beings."

Hermione paused to let that sink in. "I think this is helping, sir."

"Feel free to come and talk at any time," he said.

He thought she looked like a little girl on her birthday.

"After all, I'm completely neutral on the matter," he said.

He saw her expression cloud over.

Did I say something wrong? he wondered.

Hermione returned to her study table and opened her book, but she stared out the window. She had spent most of the Holidays with the Weasleys. It had

been great to see Harry again and to talk to Ginny. She had wanted to talk to Ron about her plans and her current confusion about her future, but all he seemed to want to do was get in her pants. Now, she was thinking that perhaps she should have let him since, after all, he was showing some interest in her, but at the time, she had wanted him to be interested in all of her. Professor Galland was willing to see her as a person with certain talents, but he was unaware that she was a girl. Worse, she had been asking Arthur Weasley about employment possibilities, and he had said that all the places he checked thought that someone as qualified as she could find something better than anything they could offer. Hermione felt desperation on all fronts.

The editor was thinking the best approach was first the ideas and then the prose.

The young and ambitious often pursue their goals so assiduously that anything thought unrelated receives little consideration, and thus, what they conceive of as high virtue limits their responses to what they believe ordinary circumstances to the extent that the natural human interaction expected at such events is curtailed, and it is this restricted participation that causes them to miss the elements that would help the most with their aims, for is not human society a swirl of individuals rebounding off each other in such a random fashion that strict plans make little headway while opportunistic impulses propel the more gregarious forward on what appears to be a wave of luck.

She chanted the mantra to achieve the no-mind needed for transforming interesting ideas into the thoughtless prose that Biff might approve although she had to admit she occasionally found his scrawling of interest.

Adolf wondered what he was doing here. He kept telling himself it was a social opportunity. Pansy Parkinson's parents had invited him to a Saturday afternoon gathering. He was ambivalent, but since Pansy wasn't in any of his classes, he decided it wasn't improper.

He made the rounds and tried to make chitchat. He made sympathetic replies to landowners who complained the urban government didn't understand their problems. He made sympathetic replies to business owners who complained that government bureaucrats didn't understand business. There were occasional remarks that no one was standing up for wizards. One lady let slip that Narcissa Malfoy was under close scrutiny and dared not attend whereupon another added that she may have defected and gone over to her sister, Andromeda Tonks. There were signs of disapproval.

He found himself facing three distinguished looking gentlemen who were inquiring where his real interests lie, about the direction his heart pointed, what his ultimate ambition was. He reflected a bit and replied that he would like to characterize the root structure of the puissant-polynomials. The distinguished gentlemen looked puzzled and then chuckled. They wandered off, remarking that Herr Professor Galland was a sly one. They approved. Their previous champion had failed because he was too blatant and had alerted the opposition.

After that encounter, the attendees became more relaxed. Mrs. Parkinson approached him and confided that he was making a good impression. When the party wound down and he stated he had to return, he received a warm farewell. He left, feeling uneasy.

Biff was wondering what a Zen no-style would do for him. Would it be as inspirational as the exotic dancers at The Pole and the Feather?

"I've run the films over and over again, and I've counted and recounted, Draco."

"You think you've discovered something."

"I was watching the bunny with the brown spot on its back. It was the cutest thing. And I was tracking the one with the black ear. It always seemed so earnest the way it hopped around," said Luna.

"And?" asked Draco.

"The one with the brown spot disappeared a week ago, and I've searched everywhere on all the film, but it hasn't reappeared. Now, the one the one with the black ear is missing. It was so earnest."

"Because of this, you've been counting the rabbits around the house," said Draco.

"I think more rabbits enter that lush growth than come out," said Luna.

As Luna ran the films with the brown-spotted bunny and the black-eared bunny and as Draco was offering sympathy to Luna over their disappearance, an idea came to him – a wild idea, but one with such promise that he was determined to bring it up even if Aunt Andromeda and Professor Galland laughed at him.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 21

Chapter 9

"You wished to speak privately, Draco?"

"It's about the Black estate."

"Go on."

Draco told Professor Galland about Luna Lovegood's discovery that more rabbits were entering the growth than were coming out. It might be that whatever was infesting the place was feeding on rabbits and other wildlife. It lured them in by providing a lush environment. Draco was wondering if that might be used to entice the entity away from the house.

"You intend to tempt the entity by a trail of rabbits," said Professor Galland. "If it works, it might leave the house intact, whereas attacking might destroy the house."

Draco admitted this approach might take a long time, although it would be splendid to move it to a nearby bog. Bogs were infertile places, and once there, the entity would diminish.

"You've thought this through," said Professor Galland. "Write to your mother and aunt. Tell them I think it's worth a try."

Professor Galland mused. "We'll get the entity out of Wonderland by having it follow a rabbit out of its hole like it's late for an important date."

And who's the Queen of Hearts? wondered Draco.

Of course, thought the editor. *Biff is going to write the easy adventure part and leave the complicated human interaction part to me.*

How often those of us of the weaker frame build fond hopes on events that although promising in their initial stages still leave room for doubt, and how often those of us of the frailer build exhaust ourselves reverberating between the encouraging signs that lead to flights of optimism and the cautionary cues that cause concern that all was false aspiration, when, in reality, all evidence either way is slight, and we believe that those of the stouter frame would not expend any emotional capital, but would instead make further inquiries which we of the deficient courage can only desire that some one would take out of our hands, but alas, we are condemned to this tenuous existence in which we seem to hover over a pit of uncertainty, and thus it was that Pansy Parkinson spent the next days after Professor Galland had impressed the guests at her parent's gathering, for Pansy's intuition, even though it had not yet come to full maturity, informed her that Herr Professor, for all his apparently straightforward manner, was a difficult person to fathom, and she further believed that Herr Professor did not put much care in presenting a true portrait of himself, and for reasons she told herself had nothing to do with any personal interest in him, she was constantly wondering if he truly cared nothing for others or whether, for some reason, he did not think others would care for him and consequently feigned indifference to protect himself from rejection.

The editor read and reread her latest effort, failed to see any way to express it in simple-minded prose, and decided to delete it. The story would have to do without it and be satisfied with a lesser vehicle.

Pansy was telling herself there was no reason to be nervous. She was only doing the socially polite thing. If he made fun of her, it would be ungracious of him. She approached Professor Galland, feeling that every eye in the room was upon her.

"Professor, sir," she said.

He looked up. "Yes, Miss Parkinson."

"I, I just wanted to say that my parents were glad you came."

"That's kind of them. Tell them thanks for the invitation."

"I, I hope you enjoyed yourself, sir. It's an older crowd, and they're set in their ways."

"I learned a lot about the problems in agriculture and commerce. Not my fields, but according to you, those there received my comments charitably."

Pansy was dying to know if he had been putting everyone on, and she stumbled out, "What about those root structures, sir?" She half expected him to say that was an academic joke among the well-informed.

"Like to see one?" he asked.

She nodded yes.

He waved his wand, and an equation appeared in the air. He talked about the solution set and waved his wand again. A curve appeared.

They're real. she thought. *He wasn't making fun of us.*

"I never thought about the solution as a picture, sir," said Pansy.

He waved his wand for another equation, and a three-dimensional solution set appeared.

"That's wonderful," said Pansy. "That's wilder and more beautiful than any flower I've ever seen."

"It's lovely, but I sometimes wonder how useful any of this is," he said.

"It's enough that it's lovely," said Pansy, "and I'm certain it's useful. It has to be. The world wouldn't let anything like that just be lovely."

I'm making a spectacle of myself, she thought. *Everyone's staring at me.* She blushed and ran out of the room.

Adolf Galland was thinking Pansy was deeper than she appeared. She had stumbled onto the scientific belief that beauty and truth were related. Watching her hurry from the room, he reminded himself that he should not be thinking about her intelligent face and trim figure.

Biff, sitting in *The Pole and the Feather*, decided to write what he had been thinking about the editor. It was safe. No one would ever know.

Draco woke, shaved, showered, and wondered what Luna would think of his personal habits. Would she be fascinated? Would she think he was a pig? The other day, he had passed a shop and noticed a barrette that he knew would be perfect for her. What would she think if he had bought it?

He paused, decided it was amusing that he was thinking about Luna, and reread the letter from his mother. She and Andy had tried chickens, rabbits, and mice. Whatever it was in the house accepted them all, but mice were cheaper and easier than the other two. Besides, mice could be raised in the old greenhouse and transported to the Black estate without anyone noticing. Draco imagined luring the entity away and then having to deal with a mouse infestation. Would Luna be amused?

The letter also said that Theo Nott and Padma Patil had volunteered to come on Saturdays to clean the mouse cages. They were using spells.

She did not mention that Theo had killed several mice before the defter Padma had shown him the finer points. Nor did she mention Padma gently ignoring Theo's attentions until they were finished whereupon she pulled him behind the stack of straw and snogged the living daylights out of the lad. She chided herself for watching from an upper storey window, but it was so compelling, and she discovered the elves were watching too. The day came when Theo unbuttoned the front of Padma's trousers with her protesting mildly and looking around wildly to see if anyone was watching as his hand felt its way down the smooth slope. Padma was weaving as Theo found her spot. She was pressing against him. She was looking adoringly at him for what he was doing to her. Her look turned to surprise at what was about to happen. Her face contorted, and her fingers clutched him.

Cissy found herself in front of her mirror, primping before joining them for tea. Padma was more flushed than usual. Both women kept tearing their eyes away from where they knew Theo had a bulge.

Biff reassured himself that the editor wouldn't recognize anything personal. Now for the other characters. Biff raged. Pansy and Hermione had to be the most difficult women in all of literature to write into a romance.

It was late Friday evening and a mellow Adolf was about to retire when he noticed Horace seemed eager, but hesitant, to say something.

"What is it, Horace?"

"The wizard world is full of women who are attractive and mild-mannered," said Horace.

"It is?" asked Adolf.

"Yes, it is," said Horace, "and here you are, chasing Pansy Parkinson and Hermione Granger."

"I am?" asked Adolf.

"Yes, you are," said Horace. "Can't you find a better place to stick your dick? I'll find one for you. You're my friend."

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 21

Chapter 10

"Ach mein gott."

Hermione looked up from her manuscript to see Professor Galland gripping his coffee cup and backing back into his office. He was clad in a kimono type bathrobe.

"You surprised me. I didn't expect anyone to be here," he said. "By the way, why are you here? The room is locked." He paused. "Oh, that's right. A lock is no barrier for the mighty Hermione Granger. But why are you here? And what's that cat thing?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I wanted a quiet room, and this room is so peaceful and soothing. This is Crookshanks."

"I suppose the stones still reverberate, days later, to Haydn and Mendelssohn," he said. "Let me make myself more presentable. Can I bring you a morning coffee, too?"

She nodded yes, struck silent by her surprise at his lack of outrage. She had believed he wouldn't appear until noon, and now, she was caught, but he was being civil. The room was reverberating to the vibrations of Adolf Galland.

He returned, dressed and with two cups of coffee, and said, "I suppose you're wondering if I'm failing to rise to the standards expected of a professor because I'm not penalizing you for your transgression or if I'm rising above the standards by not penalizing you."

"Yes," she said. She had been pondering that.

"Well, I don't know myself," he said.

Hermione laughed, spewing out her coffee.

Adolf waved his wand for towels to mop up the puddles. Hermione, gasping and choking, finally blew her nose in one of the towels. It was a mighty honk. If that wasn't mortifying enough for the girl, Adolf covered his eyes and shook his head. Then, he sat with a composed countenance, the very model of a true gentleman behaving as if nothing had happened.

Hermione was puzzled by her feelings of being relaxed and close to Adolf, but she accepted them. It was only later, when more experienced, that she realized an intimate moment had occurred.

Except.

She ran her fingers through her hair in the spontaneous grooming gesture, but she forgot she had taken off her glasses in the subconscious desire to make more eye contact, and ended up untangling her hair and glasses while Adolf and Crookshanks watched.

The editor was appalled at Biff's neglect of Luna's fundamental nature. She wasn't really angry at him for his omission, and she was certain any feelings she had were under control and wouldn't appear in the narrative.

"I should have known you were vile."

Draco looked up at a furious Luna. "Something seems to be bothering you," he said

He first wondered which of his many transgressions she had discovered. He next thought that he had better let her tell him which one it was. There was no reason to reveal another one of his faults by apologizing for the wrong one.

"You don't even know what you've done wrong, do you? That's callous beyond belief."

"Perhaps if you told me what has upset you."

"Don't give me that cool aristocratic shit. And I don't like your superior attitude either, not from someone doing the things you're doing."

Draco had always assumed that Luna had a streak of anger somewhere inside her, and that one day it would appear. He had also assumed that he could talk reasonably with her, explain that he hadn't meant to hurt her feelings, and say that he was sorry he had done so, but he was now thinking he had been overly optimistic. He might not even find out what the problem was.

But luckily, if that's the right word, she ranted on. "You're rounding up rabbits and mice, innocent creatures that never did you any harm, and sending them to their death. What's worse, what's unforgiveable, is you're saying you're doing it based on my work. I'm sorry I did this study with you, I'm sorry I invited you

to join me, and I'm sorry I ever met you, Draco Malfoy."

The crystal brilliance of his plan shattered into knife-edged shards in the hard vacuum of Luna's departure.

The editor's pen kept drifting back to Pansy. Biff had written her as an alienated girl, but one of intelligence and spirit. Biff had given Pansy a trim figure and an intellectual appreciation of beauty. The editor wondered if readers could identify with a clever outsider longing for acceptance. The editor knew she could purely as an artistic exercise of course.

Pansy saw Professor Galland stretch, fold up his papers, and lock them in his study. As he walked by, she asked, "Are you going for another walk, sir?"

"It clears my head."

"Does your head really get clear, sir? I can't imagine it empty."

"What a sense of humor you have, Pansy."

"Are you going to walk through part of the forest, sir? I've always wanted to see it if it's okay that I come along, if you don't object to being seen with me."

"Of course, it's okay," said Adolf Galland.

Pansy's spirits lifted.

"Professors are above such things," he said.

Pansy's spirits fell.

Nevertheless, she asked if he would wait till she got her coat. Let the other students stare. She didn't care about them any more than they cared about her. A few minutes later, she was strolling through the forest, taking in its strangeness. Professor Galland appeared relaxed. Perhaps she could talk to him.

"Are you thinking of going to more of my parent's social events?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "It was considerate of them to invite me, but I'm not certain I belong."

"They want you to join them. Mum will be enticing," said Pansy.

"Join them? Enticing?" he asked.

"Very enticing," she said. "Your wildest fantasies. Beyond your wildest dreams."

Adolf was wondering what made a girl speak that way about her mother. "And you?" he asked.

"I'm the virgin sacrifice, don't you know?"

"There should be a substantial reward for being such a thing," he said.

She looked at him. Was he making fun of her? She didn't know. She said, "At one time, I was tempted, but it went wrong, and now, I'm glad it did."

She hesitated. "Mum and dad had high hopes, and they blame me. They told me my figure isn't full enough."

Various things people had said connected, and he asked, "Were those people at the party the remnants of the last civil disturbance?"

She stepped closer. "I was afraid for you."

He held her arms to reassure the distressed girl. "You needn't have worried."

"They use people," she said. "They spend the day talking to their managers and overseers. They collect their rents. They go to their club for their beef dinner. Afterwards, they sip their brandy, talk about how bad things are getting, and complain that no one is doing anything for them."

"What is it costing you to tell me this?" he asked.

Pansy was fumbling with the buttons of her coat, opening it, becoming physically vulnerable. She was close enough to whisper, "I'm a blood traitor."

He put his arms around her. "You're no kind of traitor."

She opened his coat and stepped into his warmth.

The editor reviewed her work and concluded that the experience of writing an outsider yearning for understanding had taken her out of herself all the way to the land of dialogue.

It was time to let Biff do a little plot. Too bad he couldn't get outside himself and sympathize with a lonesome fellow human. Not that she was personally interested. It would merely do Biff good to expand his literary horizons.

The editor was correct. Back in his office, Biff was not expanding his horizons.

Professor Flitwick was temporarily at a loss for words. What could he tell the most brilliant student he had ever had? How could he tell her there were few opportunities for her, perhaps none?

"The news is bad, isn't it, sir," said Hermione.

"I talked to every contact I had in the government, and I talked to every person they sent me to," said Flitwick. "They all said the same thing. They're all convinced you'd be bored working in their department."

Hermione slumped in her chair.

Flitwick decided to take a risk. "Can you keep a secret, a real secret, one that will hurt people if it becomes known? Can you help someone who deserves a break, someone who might lose a chance for a decent life? Can you help this person even if it means not being completely honest with people you've known a long time?"

"Is this about Andromeda Tonks, sir? I know you and others are doing something with her country estate, and it might be full of family treasure."

Flitwick was thinking there were reasons smart people were shunned. "We're afraid the government will confiscate it as spoils of war on the grounds it belonged to the Black family."

"I suppose, sir, that you would like me to discover the government's plans."

Flitwick was thinking that, on the other hand, there were good reasons to employ the brilliant.

The next weekend, Hermione visited Arthur Weasley and expressed interest in his collection. After touring the batteries and the pinball machine that he couldn't get to work, she remarked that people should be safe in their own homes, free to pursue their innocent hobbies. Arthur readily agreed. Hermione sighed and mentioned there were other people in Arthur's position. Andromeda Tonks had a country estate, and she was clearing it of vermin, but Andromeda was afraid that as soon as it was livable, government agents would appear and cart off harmless objects of great sentimental value to her, reminders of her happier childhood. Arthur said that shouldn't happen to a person who had suffered as much as Andromeda.

Hermione started dropping in on Ron and Harry, who were training for the police arm of the government, the very people who might raid the Black estate. She chatted with them until the day they clammed up and said they couldn't talk to anyone about what was going to happen next week. She revisited Arthur who said the place was buzzing over the possibility of grabbing a secret trove of valuable and illicit artifacts.

Hermione burst into Flitwick's office. "I think the raid is next week, sir."

He listened to her methods and the evidence and congratulated her. He also told her that she should be brought into the operation although she would have to be patient. Those already involved had become a tight-knit team. He did not tell her that she probably needed a new social group. After what she had done, it was not likely that she could whole-heartedly interact with her old crowd again. He felt a pang of guilt. What had he asked of her? What had it cost her?

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 21

Chapter 11

"This is a damnable thing that we're doing."

"Yes."

Andy had remembered and located a drain pipe that carried rain water away from the house. Would the entity respond to vibrations sent through the pipe? Adolf and Filius gave the signal, Andy tapped three times on the pipe, and the two wizards fired small fire-bolts from their wands into the ground wherever it seemed likely the entity had roots. Four days after the beginning of this exercise, the three taps produced a plethora of tendrils eager to rend the tormenters.

"We're ready for the officials. I wish we could send up flares to warn us when they're about to strike," said Filius.

"What do you suggest?" asked Adolf. "One if by teleportation; two if by broom."

"Very funny," said Cissy.

"A warning that the government is coming would be useful," said Andy. "We can place wards around the estate."

They charmed sticks to fire stinging hexes and hid them around the house. The weekend was over, and Andy and Cissy stayed to keep vigil while Adolf and Filius reluctantly returned to school. It was mid-morning Wednesday when an outer alarm alerted the two women. They hid in the place they had prepared next to the drain pipe.

"They certainly sent enough of us," said an advance agent, warily approaching the house.

"Would you rather it was just the two of us?" asked his partner.

"We could quietly scout the premises, and no one would miss a few baubles that happened to be lying around."

The two advance agents signaled that the coast was clear and no danger could be detected. The thirty other members of the unit charged the house and tripped the alarms. They stopped. Someone thought he heard three light taps.

The advance agent looked down. "My foot is sliced off," he said.

He reached down to get it, but toppled over. His partner tried to help him up, but a root penetrated his side. Four other agents ran up, spraying fire. They lost their wand hands. From cover, Andy cast an area spell, and each charmed stick fired its sting. Andy and Cissy stayed deep in their hole as screams and hexes filled the air.

Late that Friday afternoon, when Hermione dropped in on Ron and Harry, they had quite a story to tell.

"We missed the whole thing," complained Ron. "They only let senior agents participate."

"Everyone who went is getting a medal for valor," said Harry. "It began with an anonymous tip that a gang of thieves was going to raid the Black estate."

"Thieves?" asked Hermione.

"Yes," said Harry, "but even if it was the Black estate, we're pledged to protect the lives and property of our citizens, so we sent a force to guard the place."

"But the tip didn't say how many thieves there were, and our people were vastly outnumbered," said Ron.

In his excitement, Ron stood. "But our men stood their ground and fought gallantly enough that the thieves fled. By the time reinforcements arrived, only our agents were there."

"That was brave," said Hermione.

"Very," said Harry. "More than half the agents are in hospital, some of them with ghastly wounds."

Hermione commiserated with Ron and Harry that they hadn't participated and had missed a chance to show their mettle.

That night, at dinner at school, Hermione kept stealing glances at Adolf and Filius. What had they done to fend off thirty-two law-enforcement officers? They looked melancholy as if mass carnage was weighing on their minds.

The editor was thinking that the situation called for a girl more attuned to others than the self-centered Hermione. It called for the responses that the editor knew were deep within her own self waiting for the appropriate opportunity. The editor was thinking that the occasion called, not for the false assertions that the dark parts of the deed were not important which only reminded the wounded hero of his failings, but for demonstrations that his whole life was accepted. The editor halted these musings: Don't think, write.

The female heart, when focused, discerns the secret needs of the one held dear even if the possessor of that sympathetic organ is unaware that she, indeed, has deep feelings, and hence, Pansy, guided nay, driven by impulses that bewildered her conscious mind, managed to intercept Professor Galland on his way to a remote tower whereupon she approached him and greeted him by saying she hadn't seen him in quite some time, and even though this seemed lame to her and she had stumbled it out in confused embarrassment, he responded that it had been quite some time in such a friendly manner that she was emboldened to ask where he was going, and when he said that he wanted to look at the stars for a while, she replied that that sounded like a good idea, and, her heart pounding at her temerity and the possibility of his rejection, she walked with him, and when they arrived, she, terrified at what she was suggesting, remarked that it was cold on the heights, but he folded her inside his cloak where her knees almost gave way as she breathed in his clean, masculine scent, and she wanted to say something to keep him there, anything to keep him with her, but she was mindless, and in this fearful state that he would soon leave, it slowly registered that he was telling her she was a brave girl who had returned to school alone and who had questioned her family's values and how he admired her, and as these words were breaking through her defenses, he added that she was a lovely lady, and his hand had not finished the first stroke of her hair before her lips were on his and nothing else existed for her.

Biff was not happy. The editor was constantly reminding him that a bit of adventure might be okay while their readers recuperated for the next round of romantic frenzy, but too much was not acceptable. Besides, the story had too many witches and not enough wizards. What was he doing, writing some male fantasy about a kingdom of surplus females?

He was in a dilemma. He already knew most readers were women, but the wizards in canon didn't have enough moxie, and if he juiced them up, they would be out of character.

At dinner, the Headmaster had introduced Professor Alain Roeder to the school as a special instructor in Crystals. He would spend the next several weeks conducting demonstrations in the field to the seventh years. A select few might want to enter this demanding field. The students scrutinized the steely gentleman with the iron-grey hair and dark aura and thought, *A select few, indeed.* That evening Adolf introduced Alain to Filius and Horace.

"The famous English Port and walnuts," said Alain approvingly.

Taking a sip, he turned to Adolf and said, "I wondered where you had hidden yourself, my man."

Filius and Horace leaned forward to hear more.

"Hasn't Adolf told you about his adventures?" asked Alain. "It was a famous scandal. I thought he would be bragging."

"It was a misunderstanding," said Adolf.

"That's not the popular version," said Alain. "Tell us yours."

"A female student from Romania, a daughter of some royal family, decided she fancied me," said Adolf.

"Not the only female student to have done so," injected Alain.

"Instead of telling her I wasn't attracted to her, I tried to be kind, and I said I couldn't be involved with a student. This made her think that only my professional ethics kept me from ravishing her on the spot," said Adolf. "She expressed this opinion emphatically enough that both her family and her betrothed, from another royal family, concluded that I had villainously seduced her."

"Europe became too hot to hold him," announced Alain.

Alain addressed Filius and Horace apologetically. "This is probably a puzzle to you. You English do not have the passionate women that one finds in our part of the world. Perhaps, you are fortunate."

Like a Marathon runner discovering a landslide across the official trail, the editor broke her regular stride and abandoned the approved route

"That raid is going to set us behind a month," said Andy. "We don't dare get close to that thing until it's calmed down."

"At least, the government, after saving the estate from largest gang of thieves in wizard history, can leave us to fend for ourselves," said Cissy.

"All praise to officialdom," said Andy.

before returning to the designated path.

What small things trigger the receptacles of our mind and so it was when Draco, fulfilling an earlier promise to a girl who now despised him, found himself repairing the fence for the herd of Razorfanged-Fuzzies who, he could see out of the corner of his eye were buzzing maliciously and egging forward the largest member, who would rush him the second it thought he was not on his guard, but even aware of his danger, Draco was not prepared for his reaction when his thumb brushed a splinter on the wooden rail and a drop of his blood spattered across the snow the snow dirty with dust that did remind him of dishwater blonde hair, and the blood, blood brighter than anything about the pale countenance of the one who had misjudged him so unfairly a reaction that dredged emotions he believed burned out of his system and that now burned through him and so consumed him that the small voice saying, "Draco, the Razorfanged-Fuzzies," was not heard, and as he feasted his eyes on the dirty snow that he knew would never be golden blonde, the small voice was yelling, "Draco, the Razorfanged-Fuzzies are stirring," but he had no ear for anything as his being was captured by the droplets of blood brighter than anything a dotty girl could ever offer him, and his feelings welled up inside him to the point that, when the small voice screamed, "Draco, it's charging," he yanked out his wand and blasted the leaping Razorfanged-Fuzzy into such fiery oblivion that the rest of the horde cowered in the corner of their pen and the Beast Professor never found any evidence of what had happened to one of his beloved creatures.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 21

Chapter 12

"This is ridiculous," said Cissy. "What are you going to do, hum the Mendelssohn violin concerto?"

"It might work, Cissy. It does respond to vibrations," said Andy.

"It'll respond," said Cissy. "It'll eat the violin."

Cissy turned to Alain. "But you don't use a violin, do you?"

"I use crystals which are more valuable than violins, and I would hate to see them eaten," he said, "but we can approach your entity cautiously."

"This is why I invited Professor Roeder to England," said Adolf. "Conducting a few seminars at school is a cover story."

"The honorarium for the seminars is not worth my time," said Alain.

"I take it you're not interested in molding young minds," said Andy.

Alain Roeder had been warned about the Black sisters.

The talk turned to his fee. A week of using crystals to calm the entity would cost one thousand Galleons. Thermal imagery had revealed the entity had a center which appeared to expand and contract rhythmically. This center had moved from under the house and down the slope toward the bog under the inducement of a supply of mice. They rejected using the crystals to give the entity the vegetative version of a heart attack on the grounds that its convulsions might wreck the house. Once the center was lured far enough away, Alain would sever the main body from the vestigial part remaining in the house. That would cost another thousand Galleons.

"Damn that Biff," muttered the editor to herself. "He hasn't left any openings, hasn't created any place where a sensitive writer could inject some human emotions into the story line. Well, if he's going to be that inconsiderate, then let the next scene be on his own head."

"It hadn't occurred to me that one could make a living in Arithmancy," said Draco.

"Applied Arithmancy," Theo reminded him.

The two had talked to Professor Galland about taking up the profession of Crystals the day before the first demonstration by Professor Roeder. He had assured them that one could make a good living at it if one became skilled and that Professor Roeder would accept apprentices if they showed talent. Draco and Theo had asked if Professor Galland had considered a life in Crystals. They were still puzzling over his reply. Professor Galland had said that he had studied crystals under Professor Roeder, but it was a question of spending one's life skillfully applying an understood topic or spending one's life clumsily discovering new things.

"You just want to make Padma hum," Draco accused Theo.

"I want to make her vibrate," said Theo. "Isn't there someone you want to resonate with you?"

Draco shook his head no.

Halfway through the demonstration, Professor Roeder asked for volunteers. Both Draco and Theo managed to tune two semi-precious stones until they oscillated on the same frequency. Once the jewels were vibrating, Professor Galland stopped the experiment before the resonance built enough to crack them. Professor Galland asked for more volunteers, but there were none. Both Draco and Theo accepted his invitation to not only make the stones vibrate in sync but to dampen the oscillation before it destroyed the crystals. It took several attempts before they were successful, and the two boys ended the session exhausted.

Padma took Theo to the study hall for tea and biscuits.

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw Luna hurriedly exiting the room. He walked to the study hall and sat in a corner with a cup of strong coffee. He did notice the whispering going around the hall followed by glances at Theo and him, and he did notice people looking at him as if he were something besides an ogre.

The mood that Friday evening was relaxed as Filius, Horace, Adolf, Alain, and the elves gathered. The first seminar on crystals had gone well, and the school had shown it had students who could master them. Filius asked if Alain minded listening to Tchaikovsky.

"Not at all," he said. The wizards and elves listened raptly, and when the piece had ended, Alain offered his opinion. "Someone once said that Mravinsky is proof that Tchaikovsky should be left to fire-breathing, vodka-swilling Cossacks."

Later that evening, when everyone was mellow, Alain cautiously mentioned the rumor that his friend was getting involved with a student. Adolf admitted that, despite his best efforts, there was some danger of that happening whereupon Alain advised him to extricate himself if at all possible.

Filius and Horace agreed with that sentiment, but they had misgivings about the advice that followed.

"Married women, my man," said Alain. "Lonely, experienced, and discreet."

Biff looked around for the editor. He had finished a pot of coffee, and it wasn't yet noon. He could barely read his own writing, and it was time for the editor to slow the pace of the story with one of her meandering paragraphs, but if she wasn't available, he would splatter the page with some of the phrases buzzing through his head. They could arrange them into something coherent later.

It was the second Saturday after the first seminar at school. There hadn't been any demonstrations during the last week because all the more harmonious crystals that were safe for students had been used to soothe the entity at the Black estate. The team had returned to luring it toward the bog. Despite the evidence that things were safer, Alain thought Andy was getting dangerously close, and he was shouting out a warning when Andy screamed and fell.

The first to reach her was Draco, and he was pulling her away when he stumbled, recovered to drag Andy a few more yards, but fell again. Alain and Adolf ran to place themselves between the fallen pair and a swarm of deadly strands. Each had two wands out, and they were using them like rotary scythes.

Theo, Padma, and Cissy were helping Andy and Draco to safety while Filius picked off any tendrils that appeared behind Alain and Adolf.

As Alain and Adolf were backing away, a panicked rabbit leaped through their swirl of spells. Its sliced sections fell with a plop, and Andy and Padma were violently ill.

The editor was sitting in her office with her feelings dented. After Biff had read her last two contributions, he said, "Okay," but with no enthusiasm, and he had looked troubled. She had wanted to rail at him: the prose fit the scenes, but she left the senseless clod to his own prattling.

Write what you know, she thought. She knew selfish, cold-hearted bastards.

The next Monday, Draco was back at school, trying to ignore his throbbing leg where two strands had pierced it, and trying to review the morning's class notes. He looked up to see Luna.

"May I sit here?" she asked.

He indicated he didn't care.

"Can we talk?" she asked.

He closed his notebook and nodded yes. He couldn't concentrate anyway, and what did a little more pain mean to him?

Luna looked close to tears. What she had once meant to him almost caused him to reach out and comfort her.

She took a breath. "I'm sorry for what I said to you."

"Okay," he said.

His neutrality was daunting. She had been wildly hoping that he would welcome her back, she could have coped with his railing at her, but his I-don't-care attitude nearly crushed her. She summoned everything and said, "I didn't know how dangerous that thing was. I wasn't thinking."

She paused.

"I'm the one who wasn't there when everyone was in danger," she said. "I'm the one who's a coward."

Deep inside Luna, her contrition was turning to anger. So, she had made a mistake. She was sorry. She had said things she regretted, but she had not actively harmed anyone. Who was Mr. High-and-Mighty not to forgive someone who had a moment of poor judgment? She would say one last thing and leave.

"You're the brave one. You saved your aunt."

"Not quite," said Draco in the split second before Luna left for good. "I bungled it, and the others had to rescue both of us. If you had been there, you would have done much better."

Did he really just say that? she wondered. She sat back down.

"I'm really, really sorry, Draco."

"I've said and done many things I wish I hadn't," he replied.

She looked around the room. "This is a quiet corner. Do you mind if I study here?"

"Not at all," he said.

Draco was thinking that her previous rejection of him was rational. He was harming innocent creatures to achieve his objective. Draco was thinking that her reversal was irrational. It was based on happenstance, and he had to be rescued from his impulsive actions.

Secretly, Draco believed that Luna remained disappointed that he and the others had not charged in like commandos to destroy the antagonist. Where was the heroism her feminine soul craved? He had to agree. He had hidden behind young and innocent animals. Having reached that conclusion, he felt no compunction about keeping any true feelings he might have to himself. After all, deep down, she considered him less than a man.

There was more. He admitted to himself that he was enjoying her soft look and her sitting close enough to him that he could take in her aroma. He admitted to himself that he would not jeopardize this by mentioning the real moral dilemmas. Would the entity die if lured to the bog? Would it thrive to the extent of harming the other wildlife? Would it be a danger to the surrounding population? Shouldn't the authorities be alerted? If the authorities were alerted, wouldn't they confiscate the estate and leave Andromeda with nothing? He admitted to himself that by not discussing these questions with her, he was treating her as an inferior, someone not able to face the realities.

Deep under the surface of the world's waters, be they now calm or now stormy, flows an immense current cold, unstoppable, impervious an icy and inhuman entity.

"Did you make that necklace?" he asked.

"Yes, she had, and she explained the details of its construction.

"I think that garland is a nice touch," he said.

"It's probably a bit wilted by now," she said, touching it and stroking her hair. "Would you like to help me get another? There's a place by the greenhouses where these plants grow."

He liked the idea. She took him by the hand and led him to one of her favorite places.

For the first time, Draco thought about getting in her pants.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 21

Chapter 13

Biff was worried. The Luna character was getting to him. Perhaps if he wrote something while no one was looking.

"Do you think Draco still likes me?"

"Can't you tell?" asked Padma.

"He has a deep coldness at his core," said Luna. "I hadn't noticed it before, but it's as if it's Draco versus the rest of the world and he doesn't care."

"If he really feels that way, then he cares," said Padma, "but what he feels is hate."

"I know," said Luna, "but I didn't want to admit it. What's wrong with me? I've faced an uncaring world before."

Padma couldn't think of any kind way to say what she was thinking.

"I know what you don't want to tell me," said Luna. "I was able not to care because I had no hope, but with Draco, I had hopes."

Padma took her friend's hand. "That's the danger of hoping."

"I was pretending," said Luna. "I was pretending he liked me because I wanted him to. It was only after he turned cold and I noticed the difference that I thought maybe he once did like me."

Padma was wondering if, down deep, Theo was cold.

"If I'm around him, I'm going to be emotional and get angry. He touches me where I can't control myself." Luna took a deep breath. "I know what he is now, and I know I'm better off without him."

Padma held her friend, wondering if she was doing more harm than good since her sympathy only seemed to add to the misery, only seemed to aid the descent into despair.

Padma looked around, hoping they were alone. She didn't want anyone to see Luna crying.

How to begin? mused the editor.

How easy it is in our imagination to show interest in another person and how suavely we do it in our fantasies where just a glance at the right time or an adroit comment dropped in a conversation catches their attention and causes them to perceive how much we would offer in a relationship that will blossom in a natural fashion into a partnership ready to meet the storms of life.

Not quite, she thought.

Cissy Malfoy was right narked.

She and Padma had arrived with the mice to see Andy sitting on the sidelines, and the five wizards in formation. Theo had taken the first cage of mice to the release point with no invitation whatsoever for Cissy and Padma to participate. What was that American expression? Sexist pigs.

"This is intolerable," muttered Padma, clearly annoyed at being left out.

When Theo returned for the second cage, Cissy called out, "If you don't have any use for us, we're leaving."

That produced a reaction. It seemed the wizards wanted the witches around.

"We're not frail flowers," said Padma.

The operation was rearranged. The recovering Andy and Draco would operate the cameras and take notes. Padma paired with Theo, and Cissy, as nonchalantly as she could manage, paired with Alain.

As they were keeping the mice where they could be eaten, Cissy asked Alain if he had seen much of their island. He replied that he would like to but hadn't had the chance. She offered to show him the sights. He said that would be great.

Cissy was floating until she heard a voice: "Mum, you're letting a mouse escape."

Her feet touched back down on the ground, and she flicked her wand to levitate the rodent back to where it could serve its intended purpose. Alain nodded approval.

Romance and seduction were back on track. The editor opened her drawer, pulled out the sherry, and poured a lady-like glass in celebration. Then, lady-like, she poured two more before brewing a pot of java writers' friends, all.

The day dawned on a bright, crisp Thursday that saw our characters in the proper place or, more accurately, the improper place for the unfolding of their lives, and before our dear reader offers too harsh a criticism of their actions, we must remind ourselves how little drama is produced by following the rules except, possibly, a tale of spirits ground into dust without once experiencing the potential of existence, and if only a fellow writer would open himself to the opportunities before him, to the hidden depths of a nerdy, but hard-working girl, whose capacity for passion lies smoldering and eager for release, a release that would shake the heavens and singe the mattress clear through to the bedsprings.

The editor decide to wait until the java nudged out the sherry before proceeding.

It was early morning on a bright, crisp Thursday.

Adolf discovered that Hermione had slipped past the locks again and was sitting in the room adjacent to his office, the place the students were now calling the Music Room. He told himself it was his fault: he had offered coffee and conversation instead of detention. This morning, however, she sat staring into space instead of studying. He brought her a coffee and sat opposite her.

"You're troubled," he said, hesitant about being so forward. "And Crookshanks is obviously forlorn."

"It's nothing," she said.

He read a journal article while she sipped her coffee, curious as to why he was certain that she would tell him her problems. He was also curious why he didn't want to hear it if it was about some boyfriend.

He looked up; she was looking at him. "Yes?" he said.

"You're brilliant," she said.

He told her he was glad she thought so. She said it must have been easy for someone as brilliant as he to find employment. When he replied that appearing to be very smart could limit a person's options, he sensed he had struck a nerve. When she said he was successful and must know how to find appropriate positions, he sensed that she believed him to be her resource of last resort.

"I'm certain all your instructors are trying hard to help you," he said.

"Including you?" she asked.

"I'll do my best although it may be pitifully little," he said.

"Oh, thank you," she said, reaching over and taking his hand as Crookshanks gave him the eye and started purring.

In the few seconds he held her hand, Adolf's perspective changed. He had regarded her as a frizzy-haired, over-bearing girl of average looks not someone worth a second glance, but with that contact, her humanity came through. She might be an over-achiever driven by a fear of rejection, and she might be unbalanced because of the discrepancy between her self-image and how she was perceived by others, but underneath that was a decent person longing for achievement and longing for relationships with the people around her. And in her own way, she was attractive, an attractiveness fed by inner beauty. A person one could be proud to be with even with that cat.

He held her hand longer than was proper for the occasion, but when he released it, there was no sign of disapproval on Hermione's part. On the contrary, she was giving him a warm smile.

Unbalanced by her reaction, he waved his wand, and a mouse appeared on the table. The mouse looked around quizzically, saw the cat, squeaked, and ran for its life. Crookshanks was after it and on it, whereupon it brought its catch back to the table to display it proudly before devouring it. Hermione was trying to give Adolf an appreciative look for thinking of her pet even though her complexion had turned a bit green.

Adolf was worried about his mental stability. What in the world made him conjure a mouse for that cat, and what made him think that holding her hand for a few seconds gave him insight into Hermione Granger? One possibility was that, over the last many months, he had been observing her closely, but that didn't make sense. It didn't help his worries that he believed his meager reassurance had let her return to her studies and that he believed that whenever he glanced her way he caught her giving him a fond look.

In another part of the island, it was nearly noon on a bright, crisp Thursday

"But I've always liked the wolves. They're noble even in captivity," said Cissy.

"I can go see them with you if you insist," said Alain, "but I'd rather wait here while you go see them."

After making certain that he didn't mind waiting, Cissy walked over to the pen containing those magnificent animals, but something was nagging at her. She had suggested the zoo hoping it would interest him, and he seemed to be having a good time although she thought his enjoyment was tempered by something.

Usually, she could watch the wolves for quite some time, but she discovered it wasn't fun without Alain. Besides, as she watched the wolves, it occurred to her that they knew they were fenced in. She recalled that Alain had shown delight at each new animal before he became somber. It was their captivity that bothered him. But why did it bother him that much with the wolves?

As she was walking back to where he said he would wait, she was suddenly afraid that he had left because the place had become too oppressive for him. When she rounded the corner and he was still there, she almost broke into a run to join him.

"Were the wolves as noble as always?" he asked as she seated herself.

"Yes," she said, "but I may have made a mistake bringing you here. I think seeing animals in cages upsets you."

"It was a good idea," he said, reaching over and taking her hand, "and it's a marvelous zoo."

His holding her hand sent a wave of contentment through her. A small misjudgment didn't seem important.

She was running the fingers of her free hand through his hair. "You're a free spirit."

"I wish I were," he said.

She was sitting close with her thigh against his, glad the day had gone well and sad that it had to end.

If her vision had included anything beyond Alain, she would have noticed the younger couples regarding them with favor: romance was for all ages.

The editor turned off her telly in disgust. She had hoped the daytime serial-dramas would immerse her in normality which she needed after reading the last several episodes from Biff, but she had changed her mind after three hours of viewing and now, horror-of-horrors, considered Biff level headed. As she left her flat, however, she recalled the inspired messages of the ads for house-cleaning products and the transformations they performed on the homemaker's life.

The next time Adolf found Hermione sitting alone in the Music Room, he had something to show her, something that demonstrated he took her seriously.

"I've considered your suggestion that I offer a presentation of what I do that would appeal to the masses, particularly the female half that tends to avoid this subject matter," said Adolf, "and I produced this flyer that I can post on every empty space in the castle."

DUNKLE WEG

Achtung, Madchen

The Dark Arts: This is tradition; this is culture, studied by witches around the world to hone their character. They also study this ancient discipline to improve their polite grace and their refined femininity. Learning the Dark Arts means learning what it means to be a woman: hot and hard like a heartfelt curse; loveable like an old incantation; and of absolutely deadly passion like a forbidden potion. If you learn this inspiring craft, then you will be a good wife, an exemplarily mother, and a financial success. When your body and spirit are integrated by these principles, the admiration of wizards is guaranteed. So, come, pursue the way endorsed by the enlightened and grow into beautiful, desirable women. The Dark Arts are for you.

"That's not quite what I had in mind," said Hermione.

Biff had decided that the only solution to his problem was to write that infernally mismatched pair out of his system and out of the story.

There she was, looking as unconcerned and as dotty as ever. He knew a smarter option would be to let her drift out of his life, but he sat down across the table from her and said hello. She returned the greeting.

"We've missed you," he said. "The others have. I have, too."

"I was in it for the wildlife project. I wrote the report. I described the equipment and the method. I presented enough evidence to establish that the population of rabbits was denser in the growth than in the neighboring field. The professors like it and think I should do more studies."

"I'm glad for you," he said.

Luna had returned to her book, and it was obviously a signal for him to depart, but he said, "I think something is wrong."

"You've withdrawn, Draco. You're not talking to me."

A change came over her, and real anger erupted. "I'm not going to be left out. I'm not going to be a lesser form. I'm not going to be treated like a freak."

"Well, I'm not going to be treated like a coward," he barked back.

Luna was steamed. "I never said that."

Luna wanted to rage on, he had hurt her as no one else had, but she stopped in bewilderment. He had seen her angry and defensive, but he was sitting calmly and looking at her appreciatively. Appreciatively? Taken aback, she searched inside herself and said, "I did accuse you of hiding behind fluffy bunnies, didn't I?"

He nodded yes.

"I was upset that you were sending animals to their death," she said.

"You're right," he said. "We were. We still are. We're not happy about it either."

That's what she wanted to hear: he had misgivings.

"I should have told you what I was planning," he said, "but I didn't think you would approve."

Luna took his hand. "You can tell me anything," she said.

Draco couldn't back out now. He talked about the moral ambiguity of luring the entity to the bog. He talked about the legal ambiguity of illicit treasure that might be hidden in the country house.

"We may be closer to the edge than we think," said Luna. "The mainstream news celebrated the heroic stand of our officers against a band of thieves, but there hasn't been any indication that the government is going after an outlaw gang."

"That's true," said Draco.

"My father wrote an article that the whole story is a fabrication. He believes the officers ran into a Goblin resistance group out of Wales and were thoroughly trounced."

"And you?" asked Draco.

"I don't believe thieves. I don't believe Goblins either," she said.

"That leaves ...," began Draco.

"Our group," finished Luna.

Biff was appalled. Those two weren't supposed to connect. Maybe the fine ladies at The Pole and Feather could provide the mental stimulation he needed to get out of this rut.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 21

At last, some action. Biff and the editor are pants at this.

Chapter 14

The editor picked up her pen. Biff had introduced a dark character, but it would take someone of sensitivity to display his true depravity and someone of skill to do it in short, brutal sentences.

"I'm married."

"Of course," said Alain. "You should keep your husband, your home, your son."

"Then what do you want from me?"

"Your inner self," said Alain.

"Is that all?"

"And for you to make love to me," said Alain.

Cissy was holding him with the melancholy look of wanting someone she shouldn't.

What a classy lady, he thought.

"Wouldn't you be better off with a young, innocent girl?" she asked.

"No," he said.

Alain held her and made encouraging noises as Cissy began nuzzling him. He gave her a tender squeeze as her lips nibbled him. He could feel her tension draining away. She gave him a soft look. He told her she was lovely. He let her nestle back into his arms. Her head was on his shoulder where she could not see the yellow glint in his eyes nor his tenuous mental fiber that softly threaded its way to her core.

"You're the one I want all you have to offer," he said.

Biff was congratulating himself on his brilliant plan for inspiration. The ladies at The Pole and the Feather were doing their job.

"What are you doing after school?"

"Having tea and a biscuit," he said. "Oh, you don't mean today; you mean when exams are over."

She's serious, thought Theo. *This is important to her.*

Theo had been wondering how much he meant to Padma. He was hoping a lot, but she belonged to an influential family, and he was practically an outcast, and an outcast had no future to offer anyone.

He had buried his dilemma deep and tried to forget it, but he couldn't keep it from Padma. He told her what she already knew, but it was still important that he tell her. His father and his father's friends had made poor choices, and the Brit wizard world viewed the entire family with suspicion. His local prospects were dismal, but he had been successful playing with the crystals, and they were an option. When Padma nodded her understanding, out poured his secrets and aspirations. He had doubts about being able to advance the theoretical state of the art, but Applied Arithmancy was appealing, and a good place to start was Crystals.

"That's a life alone," said Padma.

"That's how Professor Roeder lives, but I don't think being alone is necessary," said Theo. "At least, I hope it's not."

Theo asked Padma about her plans. She replied she hadn't decided. Her family kept suggesting Law or Accounting. Theo said that, with their businesses and investments, her family needed intelligent and practical people, but what did she really want. Padma was thinking she could always count on Theo for a boost.

Later, Theo was enjoying his tea and biscuit and watching Padma sip her tea with her mind elsewhere. By now, he was used to her Ravenclaw mannerisms. She was probably mentally rewriting a paragraph in the essay she was working on. Padma, however, was more agitated than she looked. Theo had asked her what she really wanted as if it were important. She had always been the dutiful daughter even though her parents believed she should have entered one of the family businesses instead of returning to school. She now recognized her return to academia was the first step in gaining independence. And she recognized that her independence required keeping her growing attraction to Theo under control.

Nevertheless, she said, "I found a great view from a tower that was once part of the Ravenclaw dorm. Let's watch the sunset."

Padma was on a sofa, the sun reflecting off the lake, Theo's head in her lap. As one hand stoked his hair, the other strayed down to his trousers. She snatched it back in embarrassment, but Theo took it and returned it. Padma was shocked by her own daring. She had felt his growing bulge against her when he held her close, but she never believed she would have the nerve to hold it.

"Would you like this?" he asked, unbuttoning his trousers and guiding her hand inside.

She was staring out the window, sneaking glances to where only a single garment separated her from Theo. Her hand caressed the material covering something both firm and fleshy. She was afraid Theo would tell her to stop, but he was stroking her hair and telling her she was sweet.

She was thinking she never wanted to let go of her darling Theo when she felt the hard rod pulse and everything turn wet and sticky. She knew he would be angry, but he was kissing her deeper than he ever had. Before she could recover from what she had done, Theo had her skirt up and was kissing the top of her knees. She primly squeezed her legs closer together, but he was nudging them apart. The late afternoon sun shone on more and more golden skin as her skirt rode up and his lips caressed her. He was kneeling on the floor, and Padma, thinking she would never do this, was letting him travel all the way up her spreading legs. He took in the sight of her cotton-covered roundness, inhaled her scent, and kissed her in her most sensitive spot. Padma, the dutiful daughter of strict parents, was moaning and squirming. The setting sun highlighted the beautiful face and the lovely legs as Padma Patil cried out and turned everything wet and sticky.

Time for everyone to catch their breath, thought Biff.

"Mum and Dad are going to be gone next week. I can sneak away from school if you can."

"I suppose I could."

"You don't have any classes next Wednesday. You can tell people you're going clothes shopping, for socks. No one will know if you've bought any or not. I have one class, but no one will care if I don't show up."

Adolf was thinking that Pansy was quite the schemer.

"I can get away," he said, thinking that Pansy was a little animal and he wanted to have her.

"Oh, that's wonderful," she said, launching herself into his arms.

"Oh, Professor, watch your hands."

"Do you want me to?"

"A gentleman would never have asked that question," said Pansy.

The editor tore the reader's letter accusing her of writing mush in run-on sentences into small pieces. There was always the avant-garde crowd demanding existential trash. Where was Biff? She needed to vent. She reached for the sherry, cursing him for not offering support in her hour of need. Several glasses later, however, she was on a higher plane. Her enlightened self decided that a gifted author could cater to all needs.

"What are you two doing?"

Luna and Padma had found Draco and Theo in an abandoned room. There was a board with crisscrossed lines between them, and black stones and white stones scattered around. They were waving their wands and creating opposing figures that appeared to be wearing elaborate armor.

"We're conjuring Bayesian samurai," said Draco.

"Bayesian?" asked Padma.

"It's an approach to statistics where the probabilities reflect degrees of belief," said Theo.

"Are you telling us that you probably believe in samurai?" asked Luna.

The boys nodded yes.

"I recognize that board. It's Go-Game," said Padma. "One of my uncles brought a set back from the Orient."

"Do you two believe you can play well enough to take on samurai?" asked Luna.

"Hearken, o ye of little faith," said Padma.

Luna reflected a bit. "If it's Bayesian, does that mean the vanquished loses faith instead of face?"

"We don't think any game will be won or lost," said Draco.

"We're certain that if one of our samurai falls behind, he will whip out his blade and slice the playing board in half," said Theo.

"I thought samurai had a rigid code of honor," said Padma.

"But does a rigid-code-of-honor have to include good sportsmanship?" asked Draco.

"It depends on the distribution of your belief," said Luna.

"That's the likelihood," said the boys.

"You two are becoming more impossible everyday," said the girls. "Can we play too?"

"Probably."

Biff's plan of finding inspiration at The Pole and the Feather was still working. After the third pole-dancer and an equal number of drinks, he was ready for more creativity.

They heard the thunderstorm approach.

Cissy waved her wand and extinguished the manor lights.

"By lightning," she said.

"Do you expect it to strike?" he asked.

But she had danced away into the dark. "Can't catch me."

He moved to the west wall near a window. A flash revealed her in the middle of the room, trying to spot him but blinded by the burst of light. He moved quickly and grabbed the collar of her blouse, but she shed it and ran laughing from the room.

He entered the next room and, keeping low and against the west wall, moved to the opposite door where he crouched. With the second flash, he saw Cissy twirling around. He waited in the dark. He could hear the swish of her skirt as she decided to exit this room, and he clutched it as she strode by. There was a startled cry and the sound of a zipper followed by the sound of buttons hitting the floor. He was left holding another garment, but by a distant flicker, he spied her heading up the stairs. He dashed to the foot of the stairs, tripping over the shoes she had removed. She was going to travel silently.

Alain took a moment to clear his thoughts. The sight of Cissy in the flickering light, propelled up stairs by finely-muscled legs, had muddled his head. And how did such a svelte lady look so invitingly round and soft?

He remembered there were another set of stairs. He found them and silently ascended, keeping low. At the top, only his eyes were over the last stair, and he could see Cissy slowly backing toward him. When she was almost upon him, he rose to his full height, and deciding to tease, he growled as he reached for her. Cissy whipped around, saw a pair of yellow eyes looming over her, and shrieked. His hand reaching for her snagged in the front of her bra. Cissy, backing away from a creature of the night that had entered the house, pulled Alain along his hand caught in her garment and his ears ringing with her shrieks. In the midst of this, she recovered enough presence of mind to unfasten her bra and run for the nearest room with the yellow-eyed creature in enthusiastic pursuit. Cornered in the room, she turned to face the monster from the depths as a searing bolt of lightning revealed it to be Alain. Her scream at recognizing what he was reverberated with a paralyzing clap of thunder, and the beast was on her.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 21

Chapter 15

The editor knew the perfect antidote to the sentimental slop that Biff was writing in his attempts to portray romance.

Those of us considered the weaker sex are often not as frail as imagined, and while our softer side wishes only good things for all creatures under the sun, we are well aware of necessity and the grimmer side of existence, and we are often more receptive than those considered more stern to the proposal that whatever gods are responsible for this world were an imperfect lot that left much sorrow in their wake, and furthermore, we do reject the belief evinced by the apologists that, in some way, our feminine sensitivity balances the equation because our lamentations reach the high heavens and hence the ears of those responsible for this shambles, and in rejecting this, we develop a tougher inner core than those who move through this world unmoved by the cruelty of existence.

The editor pulled up a blank page and prayed to any god that would listen to help her render her thoughts into simple-minded Biff-speak.

"I insist," she had said.

Hence, the next Saturday, Draco brought Luna to the Black estate to witness, and even participate in, luring the entity to the bog. To his delight, Luna was well received by the others, for was she not the person whose keen observation had launched this plan to cleanse the mansion without destroying it. He even enjoyed her amazement at the scale of the operation. Like most with an initial idea, she was surprised by its immense consequences.

He took her on a tour around the mansion. She looked sad when she observed that the vegetation around the house had been burned away, but nevertheless, she told Draco that it was a good idea since it made the entity more dependent on the mice being used to entice it away.

"Do you think we can enter the house?" she asked as they were standing on the opposite side and out of sight of the others.

"The door might be locked," said Draco.

She waved her wand, and it opened. That took care of that. They walked as stealthily as they could, apprehensively scanning the terrain with their wands at the ready. Twenty meters from the door, they broke into a dead run that took them through the entrance and up two flights of stairs where they looked around wildly, ready to blast anything that moved. When they finally decided they were safe, they located a window that let them watch the others in action.

Luna, observing Padma expertly herding mice, decided to reveal a confidence.

"Padma's having problems with her family," said Luna.

Padma had mentioned in a letter to her parents that she was thinking about all the different things she might do after she finished school. The next several letters from her mother talked about how much the family needed her. When Padma said she still wanted to explore her options, the next several letters stated the family was disappointed in her and, in a subtle manner, disclosed some of her relatives were angry at her lack of loyalty.

Draco thought Luna was sympathetic enough that he guessed she might be experiencing the same thing and asked about her family.

"Much the same," said Luna. "My father expects me to join him, but I don't have the instinct for conspiracies that he does."

Draco left unmentioned that he thought this a good thing.

"Maybe mum can help," he blurted out.

It took a while for him to get his thoughts in order, but it came to the girls taking advantage of a bit of adult guidance and encouragement.

Luna was in front of him with her hand on his arm. "Oh, Draco, you really do care about people."

He deserved a kiss of approval on his forehead. But he looked so pleased that she moved closer. She was holding him, sighing with pleasure. His firmness. His scent. She was kissing him. He was kissing her back. Her breasts were brushing against him as she moved with something that was awakening and uncurling inside her. His arms around her were the best thing she had ever known.

It could go on and on, but Draco was saying that they needed to get safely out of the house. They returned to the open entrance, and managed a stealthy walk for about ten meters before breaking into a panicked run.

Luna talked to Padma; Draco talked to his mum; Cissy had a conversation with Luna and Padma. Because of family pressure, the two girls had delayed looking for employment. Cissy said she knew how to get all the government forms and said she would spread the word about two talented girls. They could fill out the application forms next Saturday, and when exams were over, she would accompany them to London where they could meet potential employers.

Later that night, Draco was back at school and alone in a room, sitting in an overstuffed chair and dreaming the starry night. A shadow moved into the room and across the floor toward him.

"Am I presuming upon your solitude, your chosen way of life?"

"Chosen for a good reason," said Draco.

"But Theo's your friend; you have your family; and I know Padma admires you," said Luna.

"Are you here for a sanity check?" he asked as she sat on the arm of the chair.

She took his hand and placed it in her lap.

A warm, comfortable lap, he thought. "Are you certain you want to bother about me?"

"It's like having a boyfriend," said Luna.

He coaxed her onto his lap.

"Is this comfortable for you?" she asked.

"It's like having a girlfriend," said Draco.

The editor believed she had one more simple-minded scene in her.

"What did your family say when you told them you planned to spend a week in London with Mrs. Malfoy?"

"What did yours say?"

Luna and Padma piled what they had received in the middle of the table and totaled the heap. There were thirty-one pages of warnings and instructions, five protective amulets to be worn at all times, six rings with spring-loaded, poison darts, three wands designed for self-defense, and one concealed dagger.

This is impossible, thought Biff. I'll never get into the female psyche.

Cissy woke to the early dawn light. She was lying in a tangle with Alain. Lightning strobed images came to her: knickers flying across the room, his dark shape against the flashes, gleaming yellow eyes, reflection in the window of his mounting her, her feet flailing in the air, flashes of lightning outside rending the air, flashes of lightning inside rending her, sweet oblivion.

She made her way to the lavatory to examine herself in its mirrors: front, back, side, repeat. No bruises, no scratches, no marks of any kind. How had that happened? How had she been taken by the beast with no harm? She was returning to her bedroom, a room of darkness with shafts of moonlight, when she heard a growl behind her. She started to scream, but a nip on her shoulder made her gasp. She was face first against the wall, and he was pressing her into it.

Cissy turned and said, "Gently, darling."

She ran her hand down the mane of his hair. "Why don't you accept your heart's desire?" she asked.

Her hands were on his shoulders. "You know what you want."

Her look was cool. "You want an ice queen."

Her fingers were tracing the outline of his face. "You chose me," she said.

Her lips were grazing him. "I'm glad you did."

Her tongue was flicking over him. "You want to possess me."

She was pushing him back to the bed. "I'll let you."

She was straddling him. "You'll be my wizard."

She was engulfing him. "Only you, my darling."

She was sighing with pleasure. "All for you."

Her hips were swaying. "I'll give you everything."

Her face was becoming soft. "I'm yours."

Her moves became purposeful. "Wonderful."

She was smiling. "You have me."

She was breathing hoarsely. "Take me."

Her features contorted. "You beast."

There was a gasp. "Yes."

The ice queen quivered. There was a small whimper. She was lying limp on top of him.

She was gripping the hair on his chest. "Don't leave me."

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 21

Time to insert a PWP.

Chapter 16

Pansy waved her wand to release the house wards.

"I'll make some tea," she said as they entered.

He followed her into the kitchen and sat at the table. After putting the kettle on, she joined him.

She held his hand. "We never get to do anything," she said. "I want to be places with you. I want your idle conversation when you relax and reveal what kind of person you are and what you want to do."

"You see me everyday," he said.

"In front of students," said Pansy. "I can't believe you're such a tight-ass in private. At least, I hope you're not."

Adolf looked dismayed, but Pansy merely chuckled at that and continued. "Quick, do you have any bad habits you can tell me? Do you pick your nose, scratch your bum?"

"What if I'm I tight-assed evil-doer?" he asked.

"Then your companion will need great forbearance."

He sipped his tea. "Are there any biscuits in the house, oh forbearing one?"

"Nothing good. Mum's always slimming."

"Let me show you the house," she said.

She took his hand and led him back into the hallway. "We entered the front door, arriving in the foyer which didn't interest you. On the left of the foyer is the study which you just walked past. Across from the study is the front parlor that you had no inclination to see, and behind the parlor is the dining room which you ignored, making your way to the kitchen and demanding biscuits, which we ain't got."

"Good layout," said Adolf.

"These are the stairs that lead upstairs," said Pansy.

"Good stairs," he said.

"This is my bedroom."

"Good room," he said.

"It's where I had my fantasies about you while I was home during the Holidays."

"Good fantasies," he said. "What was your favorite?"

"Can't you guess?" she asked. "I'm wearing the schoolgirl uniform I'm wearing now."

"I can guess," he said. "You lie down for a brief nap, but when you wake, it's late. It's dark, and you think someone is in your room. For a brief moment, you hope it's that professor who has been glancing at you. You know that when he does, he quickly looks away, and you know he's looking at you're the way he shouldn't."

"You've been teasing him. When you think he's looking, you slide your hand inside your shirt to adjust your bra, acting like your breasts long for someone to hold them. You let your skirt slide up and cross your legs, letting him see smooth skin. Whenever he glances your way, you wiggle in your chair as if he makes the void in your pants ache to be filled. But there is a price for your teasing. The little schoolgirl now wants the professor to be a bad boy. You spend your time fantasizing about his holding you and filling the void in your life."

"You've seen his eyes smolder, and you hope you're driving him wild, driving him to reckless deeds. Would he sneak into your room to watch you sleep? Would he want to see the noble lines of your face and be in the room filled with your aroma? Does he long for you but dare not touch?"

"But does he dare act when you wake and you start moving away, leaving him behind, leaving him regretting he never touched you, for he'll never have to nerve to do this again? Perhaps he does touch you, touching you from the dark, placing a hand on your waist. He places his hand like this, and you stop, startled by your fantasy coming to life, but is it part of your fantasy, is it the one you hope it is? Is it reality where he is driven by a desire for you that causes him to transgress? You don't know. The setting sun is behind him, and he is a shadow, but he guides you to front of your mirror where he can see your face. He's close behind you and he can hear your fast shallow breaths from your fear and your arousal. His hand slides around, just above your belt. You are breathing even harder because you want his hands all over you. You think about your breasts, your breasts so modest beneath your schoolgirl shirt, but waiting for him."

"You imagine the dark stranger cupping firm breasts, tweaking taut nipples, caressing you as your neck arches. You moan for him. He would see what I see in the mirror: your whole body moving, pressing back against him, your eyes shining at your naughty moves as you try to excite him."

"You want him to move his hands down and slowly start lifting your skirt. You want him to admire your legs, schoolgirl legs that have never parted for a boy. You want him to be the first to see them open in invitation. You can see what he sees in the mirror. The skirt rises higher. And higher. The thrill of showing more than you've ever shown before. Your skirt is high enough that his fingers can touch your bare skin. His fingers move over the top of your thighs. You know what he's thinking as they move to the inner softness. How would it feel nestled between those muscular legs? A dark current flows through you, and you want him to push your legs apart, push them apart as an innocent schoolgirl thrills at what he is doing to her."

"His hand is between your thighs, nudging them open. He watches a young girl, pale skin turning pink as she watches herself in the mirror being made to do things she's never done before."

"You hear the dark stranger breathing. You feel your shirt sliding over sensitive nipples, feel his hands on your legs, see your face as the worm of desire uncurls beneath his hand. Will he dare more? What will you allow?"

"His hand moves over the smooth cotton expanse. You can't stop him. You don't want him to stop. The shock of his stroking your center. You hear a long "Yes." It is you on the verge of pleading. You are a swirl of forbidden thoughts. You think about him being the first to have you. He is whispering that you will soon be undone. You see his smoky eyes. You feel warm from the fire behind them."

"He's caressing you where no one else ever has. He has you in his strong grip. You can't escape. You reach up with one hand and grab his hair; the other hand grabs his hip. You are a woman of passion. Whoever has you has a tiger in the night. You know you are more than he can handle. Your attraction to your mate will know no bounds. Underneath your sophistication lies ferocity in your bonding. This stranger in the night will know only a small part of what you offer, but he will know it well. Your body moves against him. Let him lament that he will know only the animal part of you, but this small part will overwhelm him this very night."

"You are moaning with his intimate touch. You will let yourself go. You will scorch the fiber of his being. He will never forget this. He is watching you wiggle in the mirror, watching you wiggle for him."

"He awakens your inner beast. You feel your own surrender coming. He grabs your hair and doesn't let you look away. You watch in the mirror. The look of amazement at what is happening to you. The smile that says you cannot control this moment. The sight of your feral face and your body arching from the irresistible surges."

"You are standing next to your bed, your childhood bed. This will be the special place. Even purebloods can only do it the first time once.

"You hear his hoarse whisper, 'Drop your knickers, Miss Parkinson.'

"You smoothly slide the white garment of innocence over your hips and past your knees.

"The velvet voice will say, 'Lie back like a good girl, Pansy, and spread your legs.'

"Your heart is pounding at what you are doing.

"The best part will be the look on your face.

"A Dark Stranger will know the look, feel, and sound of Pansy Parkinson.

"He will bring angelfire. The last of your brains will ooze out and mark the special place."

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 21

Chapter 17

Biff believed he could write a little intrigue before replenishing his wellsprings with those intriguing ladies at The Pole and the Feather.

It was a Saturday morning, and Adolf was amused by how carefully he was dressing. As he combed his hair one last time, it occurred to him that he would be disappointed if Hermione were not waiting for him in the Music Room. She wasn't. No matter, it was better this way. He could read undisturbed by her or her cat. He poured the cup of coffee he had brought for her down the drain. There was no reason to have a painful reminder that she wasn't interested in his company.

After half an hour of reading the first page of a research paper over and over without comprehending anything, he told himself he was being ridiculous. She was merely busy elsewhere. Her absence meant nothing. He decided to go for a walk to get away from an empty room.

He met her half way down the stairs.

"Are you leaving?" she asked.

"Taking a break for some fresh air," he said.

"Are you coming back, I mean, Crookshanks and I could wait for you if you are. Everything's going wrong this morning. Are you going to walk far? Crookshanks could use some exercise if it's not too far, I mean, if you're going for a walk, if it's not too far, if you don't mind if we walk too, or I could wait for you. Are you coming back?"

They decided they could walk down to the lake while keeping an eye on Crookshanks. They were sitting on some rocks by the water when he noticed she was shivering. He said the wind was cool and waved his wand for his cloak. He liked seeing her in it. They walked back to the warm room where he procured coffee and sticky buns. An idea came to him. He approached it slowly.

As she listened to him talk about the Black estate, she realized that he did not know she had been the one to warn them of the raid. Professor Flitwick had kept her secret. Even so, a pang went through her. She could have caused the death or injury of her friends. She told herself, as she had many times before, that she had believed that Andromeda Tonks would merely use the warning to conceal family valuables. She told herself that the authorities had dealt with that entity before, and they should have known to be more careful.

She learned that they had lured the heart of the monster away from the house and they planned to sever it, hoping the part remaining in the house would die or be easily killed.

"Why are you telling me this, sir?" she asked.

"In a way, I shouldn't be," he said.

"Because you've broken about fifty regulations and are about to break fifty more?" she asked.

"There is that," he admitted, "but the real reason for hesitating is that I don't want to raise false hopes."

"False hopes for me?" she asked.

Andy and Cissy knew the Black estate had been headquarters and stronghold for the opposition forces, and they expected, although they were not certain, that valuables had been stored there for safekeeping with that entity being part of the guard. They expected a lot had been stored there, and Andromeda planned to secretly auction them for needed cash. They needed someone to help sort and appraise what they found.

"I see," said Hermione. "You want to make me an offer, a job of sorting and appraising, but you're afraid it's premature since there may be no treasure at all or none worth bothering with."

"Yes," he said. "I'm taking the risk because it's a job requiring intelligence, and if you do it well, the Malfoys and others can vouch for your skill and discretion. You can become a freelance professional."

Hermione sighed. Did everyone know her secret, her shame: she was not employable in the wizard world? On the other hand, Adolf Galland was making a real effort on her behalf. She was beginning to think he was a caring individual. She told herself not to let gratitude overwhelm common sense.

The editor had been toning her writing muscles by doing calisthenics with 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' in one hand and 'A Farewell to Arms' in the other. She was pumped.

There was a crack as air rushed in to fill a hole 150 meters long, 50 meters deep, and 1 meter wide.

Lightning flashed through the gouge in the earth, searing any plant tendrils trying to reconnect.

The ground between the trench and the bog heaved.

Birds fell out of the trees.

The house shook, but remained intact.

Those assembled were jubilant.

By now, I have it down to a standard procedure, thought the editor. *I express my thoughts in a natural, literary manner and turn it into Biff-speak.*

Who would know what's in the hearts of the self-possessed must wait for them to speak, and when they do speak, it will most likely escape notice since heretofore they have not asked for any attention, and hence, upon the occasion they do try to connect, their effort will be lost in the noise of the daily bustle because anyone present will not be attuned to this unexpected plea for comradeship, this reaching out for another soul in the universe, from a person who seemed to need no such thing, but how wrong one would be, for underneath, are we all not more alike than different, and considering this, it is amazing how easily we accept the isolation of another.

Time to be crude, thought the editor.

"Wow, that was incredible. That was brilliant."

Draco and Luna were back at the castle after severing the entity. Draco was jubilant. To cap it off, Luna was standing at the window with the twilight bringing out those features that struck Draco to the core. He wanted to hold her, he wanted to hear her talk to him, but when he reached out to her, she stood like a monolithic stone. He started to sit on the couch, but changed his mind and settled into a solitary chair. If she was going to go cold on him after all he had done to be her friend, then nuts to her.

He sat there, thinking he should leave. Being in the same room with an aloof Luna was too painful. He sat there, puzzled at why he wasn't leaving. He decided he was angry, and he was waiting for a chance to rage at her when she deigned to notice him.

A sad Luna turned to him and said, "It's over, isn't it?"

"Are you saying we're finished?" asked Draco. "That's sudden. That's heartless. What a callous person you are. What were you doing, tagging along with me because you wanted a little adventure in your life, and now that the adventure is over, it's 'Toodle-oo, Draco, been nice knowing you'?"

Luna looked puzzled. "Are you saying you want me to leave?" she asked. "I can understand if you do."

"No, you idiot, I was saying you wanted to leave me."

She shook her head. "I don't want to." She took a deep breath. "But if you think I'm an idiot, I will."

It was Draco's turn to take a deep breath. "No, I don't think that. I was angry."

"At me?" she asked.

"I was in a good mood. I wanted to celebrate it with you, but you were stone cold," he said.

"I'm sorry, Draco. I was thinking about Theo and Padma and your mum and Andromeda and the professors, about working with them, and now, it's over, and I won't be with them anymore."

Draco was taking Luna by the hand and leading her to the sofa. "They may travel, and we may not see them for a while," he said, "but they'll always be part of our lives."

I think I have one more small vignette in me, thought the editor.

"There're five people outside the family that we should reward," said Cissy. "Padma, Luna, Theo, Filius, and Adolf."

"I know," said Andy, "but all I can offer them at the moment is an IOU."

"I can lend it," said Cissy. "It's best done immediately. Once we have the estate functioning, you can easily repay it."

"What about Alain?" asked Andy.

"I talked to him," said Cissy. "He refuses to take payment for anything besides using his Crystals. I'm starting to believe his relationship with them is mystical. At any rate, I was thinking 2,000 Galleons each. Do you think that's too much?"

"They did risk life and limb," said Andy.

The editor couldn't find Biff and concluded he was at his usual spot looking for inspiration. Well, she was on a roll, and it was an opportunity to write some adventure with feminine sensibility.

I can't pull this off. I don't even know if I want to pull this off, thought Hermione.

After the entity had been severed, Andy and Cissy had been exploring the upper stories of the house where they had discovered a safe which they had dismantled and had found keys to bank vaults. They had researched the names attached to the keys and had identified twenty-seven prospects. They were people who were in prison, exile, or deceased; they were people with no family or family that wanted to forget them; and they were people of at least moderate wealth. Andy and Cissy had decided that the bank vaults of these people could be safely raided, and they had concluded that the identification papers for these people could probably be found in the official law-enforcement files. They had even pinpointed the person most likely to succeed in this endeavor.

Thus it was that Hermione was on her way to visit her old friends.

It took several visits to bring up the files in the evidence room in a natural manner. Her friends were baffled why she wanted to see such obscure items.

"Don't you think it's part of the history of the school, of the history of wizardry?" she asked.

"That's daft," said Ron.

"You're getting desperate," said Harry. "What have you done, memorized all the books in the library?"

It was several visits before she dared mention the topic again. She couldn't appear too eager. She didn't want to evince such strong interest that they remembered her inquiries. She was already pondering her own behavior. She braced herself for each trip by visiting Professor Galland. He held her hand and convinced her that she was doing it perfectly. That slowly and carefully was best. As she sat closer and closer to him for each session, he also listened to her talk about her feelings of betrayal. He agreed it was morally ambiguous, and he told her that if she felt uncomfortable, everyone would understand if she decided against proceeding. She finally told him that she had decided to proceed. If she did it deftly, no one would be hurt, and otherwise, the money would lie unused in a bank vault.

Two weeks later, Ron and Harry agreed to show her the evidence room. They greeted the guard on duty who asked who she was.

"Just an old friend from school who's visiting us," said Ron.

The guard, who had the walls of his office covered with photos of famous athletes, turned to her and said, "It must have been pretty exciting to see these two play. I wish I had been there."

This stiffened her resolve. Since she wasn't an athletic star, society didn't care about her, and she was on her own. Good came with the bad. The three were lost in a discussion of their favorite topic and paid no attention to Hermione wandering through the evidence room. She and Professor Galland had prepared for this moment. The spells placed on paper concealed in her cloak automatically copied and replaced the real identity papers on file. She would leave with the real documents, having replaced them with forgeries. They were confident these files would never be examined again, but they were taking the added precaution anyway.

Suddenly, the guard appeared. Her heart stopped. Had he noticed anything?

"There you are," he said. "I can't let anyone prowl around in here even if they're a friend of Ron and Harry."

Just a harmless friend of Ron and Harry, she beamed at him.

He was escorting her out when he said, "I have pictures from the newspaper of those two and their team, you know, some of them signed. I still envy you. You were there to see Ron and Harry in action."

"Yes, I was very lucky," said Hermione.

"You must be a good friend to take time off from your studies to drop by to see them," said the guard. "They appreciate it."

The moment she stepped outside the law-enforcement office, a nondescript wizard matched her stride.

The secret service. Her heart fell to the floor. *I'm caught. Prison, here I come.*

"Glad for your safe return," said Professor Galland.

"Don't tell me you were ready to dash in and rescue me," she whispered.

"Your past life has given you a taste for the melodramatic," was the reply.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 21

Come over to the Dark Side. We have cookies.

Chapter 18

The editor shredded another letter from some illiterate about her confusing, run-on style. *Run on this*, she thought, putting her pen to paper.

"You won't get into trouble while we're gone, will you?" asked Padma.

Exams were over, and Luna and Padma were ready to spend the week in London with Mrs. Malfoy.

"We plan a moon-viewing party," said Draco.

"What's that?" asked Luna.

"We watch the moon rise while sipping sake, munching wasabi peanuts, and grilling shrimp," said Theo.

"And watching geishas dance for you, I bet," said Padma.

"I want to stay and be a geisha," said Luna.

"Can you do haiku?" asked Draco.

Luna put her knees together, dipped as if wearing a kimono, and delicately fanned herself with her wand.

If I see you

With another girl,

I'll crack your nuts like a squirrel.

Driven to despondency by the unavailability of the flaunted goods at The Pole and the Feather, Biff took the bite of realism as an opportunity for artistic expression.

Pansy Parkinson was not happy with Adolf Galland. She had talked to Professor Roeder. Did he know Professor Galland? Indeed he did. Professor Roeder thought Professor Galland the most gifted student of Crystals he had ever had. Professor Galland could have been one of the foremost practitioners, commanding huge fees for his services. Pansy asked Adolf about this. Now she was pondering his reply: "It's a question of expertly performing an established routine or clumsily doing what's never been done before." She understood his reply. She couldn't understand why he had made the choice he had made. He could have become rich and famous. Pansy was confused. Adolf had condemned himself and any family he might have to a life of penury when they could have had a life of luxury. Pansy was angry. Adolf was selfish in the extreme. Pansy was hurt. She had been disloyal to her family by warning him of their intent to ensnare him, but he was not showing any regard for her well being.

Well, if that was his attitude, she could show that she didn't care about him. Her parents had been urging her to visit Lucius Malfoy in France. She told her parents they were right. She should stick with her own kind. They began gushing about all the suitable wizards that the Malfoy family knew, but Pansy had her own agenda. She had always considered Lucius handsome, and it was obvious his wife was neglecting him. Lucius Malfoy, unlike some twit she could name, understood the importance of wealth and power.

That was therapeutic, thought Biff. Now for something with just a small amount of bite in it.

"How did it go?" asked Theo.

Luna and Padma had returned from their week in London.

"Very well," said Padma. "Luna got several offers too."

"From Magical Beasts, I imagine," said Theo. "And you?"

"The best offer was from the Tax Assessment Office."

He thought, *She's going to become one of those*, but he said, "Tell me about it."

"The work is really hard," she said, "but it's important. If the taxes aren't fair, there's a lot of resentment and evasion."

He was thinking there would be a lot of resentment and evasion anyway, but he asked if she had told her family. She said she hadn't, and she was afraid they would regard her as a traitor since they were businessmen. He suggested telling them that, in a few years, she would know all the best ways to reduce their tax burden.

She was in his arms. He was thinking the most beautiful woman in the world was going to be a taxman, and she was saying, "Oh, Theo, I knew you would understand. I knew I could count on you."

The editor felt ready for another adventure scene filled with feminine sensitivity.

"You don't have to help us, you know," said Andy. "You've already earned your ten percent."

"I'm sitting around waiting for the results of my exams. I'm going spare," said Hermione. "I need a distraction."

"It will be more than a distraction if we're exposed while impersonating depositors, love. The goblins take a dim view of people removing funds from their bank. Adolf and Alain will be stationed by the entrance ready to do whatever is necessary to rescue us. They take a dim view of anyone interfering with their schemes. The building may not survive."

While Hermione was thinking it was Andy's turn to be melodramatic, Andy was explaining the problem. The goblins would become suspicious if the volume of withdraws were unusually high, but they had to act quickly before the goblins realized vaults were being emptied by people who should not be able to do so. A point in their favor for the latter was the poor communication between the goblins and the wizards. Thank goodness, Hermione hadn't yet improved the relations between the groups.

Several days later, a young girl accompanied by her mother appeared at the bank to withdraw her inheritance from her uncle in exile. As the girl was producing her key and identity papers, an old man was complaining to a clerk about a mistake in his balance. The old man was crotchety and, apparently, had failing eyesight, and he was drawing everyone's attention as he refused to accept the clerk's demonstration that the balance shown on his receipt was correct. The commotion was almost as loud as the girl's pounding heart. As she and her mother made their way to the vault, fear both blotted out her surroundings and made her start at every small thing. Once there, she tried to control her trembling fingers as, under the guise of counting the money, they stacked a small number of coins as a shield wall and removed all the rest. They had returned to the lobby before she realized she wasn't breathing. They had gone with the dumb, buxom blonde theory, but she knew that every leer in her direction was really a glare of suspicion. Halfway down the front steps, her knees buckled and unseen hands walked her slowly to a tea shop while she was mentally screaming that they should run, run, run.

It was a week later that an attempt went pear shaped and the newspaper was filled with accounts of damages and people admitted to the hospital. Hermione ran to see Professor Galland, but he was in the Music Room full of students, and she couldn't approach him. It was an anxiety-filled hour before she could get him alone. First, he reassured her that Cissy, Andy and the others were neither harmed nor exposed. She asked how they managed to escape from a goblin bank without a scratch and without being unmasked. He replied that they had unleashed containers carrying sprigs from the Black estate entity, angry sprigs.

Hermione was outraged and became even more outraged when Adolf said, "In addition, we tipped off Xenophilius Lovegood that the wounds suffered by people at the bank were similar to the wounds suffered by the law officers at the Black estate, and he is writing an expose about it being a bold daylight robbery by the Welsh Separatist Movement. The goblins and officials are willing to let a story of a failed raid spread as the explanation that puts them in the least unfavorable light."

"Luna and Xenophilius are our friends," said Hermione. "Ron and Harry are my friends. Do you use everybody?"

"I can see you're angry and for good reason," he said. "Using the plant tendrils was the best distraction that caused the least damage, but we did hurt innocent bystanders. Xenophilius is ecstatic, and his magazine is selling, but we are manipulating a person with whom we should be honest."

Adolf shook his head. "I have no excuses. I went into this with my eyes open and prepared to commit mayhem."

"You tried to keep me out of this, didn't you?" she said, half accusing him and half vindicating him. An inner voice was reminding her of previous, thoughtless, unprepared adventures when she was a young schoolgirl, but she was not going to let him off the hook on this one.

"You went once. Draco went once," he said. "After that, our nerves cracked, and we couldn't bring ourselves to use you or Draco anymore."

"You don't have to protect me," she said. "I'm just as capable as any of you, you arrogant prig."

"You're angry at what we did, and you're angry we didn't include you," he said.

"Yes," said Hermione. It made perfect sense to her.

Adolf was deciding to be amused at female logic.

She glared at him. "Are there going to be any more raids?"

"It's over," he said.

He decided it was not the time to tell her that the total haul was 120,360 Galleons. Nor was it the time to tell her that her share for providing information and participating in one of the raids was 12,236 Galleons. He could also wait to tell her that Andy could now repay the loans from her sister and begin to live comfortably. If he did so now, she would think he was trying to bribe her conscience. On the other hand, he might be able to reach her with rationality.

"We still need you. Andy believes she will get the maximum return if all the artifacts are correctly priced, but the arrangement for appraising will be different," he said, "you will be paid by the hour."

"I see," she said. "It will require extensive research, and part of the ethics of appraising is that one neither gains nor loses because of the valuation."

Author's Note: The monetary amounts are based on the observation that, in canon, wizard society mirrors Brit society. Approximate numbers for median and average wage for the year 2000 are 3000 Galleons and 4500 Galleons.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 21

Almost a PWP.

Chapter 19

"I know you're used to more luxurious surroundings," said Luna, "and my father always has papers scattered around."

"I like this," said Draco, settling into a sofa facing the fireplace. "It's comfortable."

"Should I get a tea, fetch a biscuit, peel a grape?" asked Luna.

All that could wait. Draco wanted to hear about her trip to London. She told him his mother had been a life saver. She and Padma had been nervous enough about the job interviews that they could barely function, and they had been continuously apologizing for their ineptness, but Mrs. Malfoy had shrugged it off and said she had put up with Draco for eighteen years and she could survive two girls for one week.

"I think mum needs a daughter," said Draco.

As she related the trip, Luna moved closer and closer. She had her left arm on his shoulder when he made the remark about his mother needing a daughter. She said that nothing seemed to bother him these days and moved closer. He replied that he was scared to death of that thing they were luring down to the bog. He knew Luna didn't approve, but he wanted to poison it. It was a menace. Luna said she agreed with him, that thing wasn't safe, and snuggled closer.

She had planned to lead Draco into a rational discussion of the future, their future. Did they have one? She had planned to approach the subject by talking about other couples. Did he think Theo and Padma had a chance? What about Professor Roeder and the older women? Had he noticed the way Pansy and Hermione looked at Professor Galland? She had to make a level-headed choice. Even now, losing him would devastate her.

The plan never came to fruition. She told him she had missed him, and when he said he had missed her too, she was all over him.

Draco hadn't been thinking of a rational discussion so much, but rather how to get out of an emotional pit he had dug himself into. He had let his fondness and admiration for Luna sway him into thinking he could have some kind of relationship with her, but he had taken a hard-headed look at his past behavior and a clear-headed look at Luna's behavior perhaps a bit kooky, but still beyond reproach. He couldn't imagine Luna or her friends or her family accepting him.

That, too, went out the window.

Suddenly aware of what she was doing, Luna jumped up, announced they needed a tea, and dashed to the kitchen. When she returned, however, Draco took the teacup she offered him and coaxed her into his lap. She was telling herself that she should both act normal and behave properly, but being in his lap was eroding her defenses.

"When I was just a little girl, I believed in Whispering Whiffles," she said. "They confide what people are thinking in the ear of innocent girls. Of course, sometimes they just whisper what the girl wants to hear."

"Tricky little devils, aren't they? When was the last time they whispered to you?"

"New Year's Eve."

"That was five months ago," said Draco as something whispered in his ear that he would learn more about this girl if he just listened instead of asking. Besides, he was content with her sitting quietly in his lap.

Her fingers were curling his hair. "They whispered that you would be sitting on this sofa beside me as we watched the fire," she said.

He gave her shoulder a small squeeze.

"They whispered you would be paying more attention to me than the fire."

He nodded yes.

"I'm not certain I should tell you anything more. They do whisper all kinds of things."

He let his hand massage her shoulders and watched her become even more dreamy-eyed. She was sighing as his hand worked its way down her spine. Her spine arched, and he regarded her breasts. *A refined lady*, he thought. "You're lovely," he said.

She was embracing him. *Omigod*, he thought as her breasts, firm and soft, pressed against him. He heard her whisper, "They told me you wanted to get your hands on me." He could hear her breathing. "It made me tingle," she said.

Tingle, thought Draco. *Tingle. That's a good idea. Let's tingle.*

"I do want to hold you," he said. "Did they whisper that I think you're intelligent and attractive?"

He accepted a tender embrace. *I love the feel of this girl. I love the looks of this girl. By the gods, I hope I'm not falling in love with this girl. What am I going to do?*

"And you're very sweet," he added.

Her embrace became more than tender as she said, "You wouldn't think that if you knew what I let them whisper to me, if you knew how much I enjoyed listening to them."

"They said 'Do this,'" she said as her lips found his with the gentleness of a young girl finding romance.

Luna sat up straight. "But I should grow up. I should listen to myself, not anything else."

Draco wanted to tell her, really wanted to tell her, that she should pay attention to the Whispering Whiffles, that they were making wonderful suggestions, but his core of pride prevailed. If she didn't want him of her own accord, then he was better off without her. *No, you're not*, an inner voice raged. *Tell her to heed those Whispering Whatevers.*

Draco's innards were in turmoil. What should he do? What could he say? He wanted Luna to stay where she was. Would she leave if he said the wrong thing? Would she leave if he said nothing? If he acted too slowly, would she decide he didn't really care for her? If he acted too fast, would she be offended?

"I like your company," he said. *Omigod, how lame could one get?*

"Do you have any plans?" he asked. He groaned inwardly lameness doubled, tripled. She was doing so well a little while ago, and now, he was blowing it.

Her finger twirled his hair. "Do you mean for the rest of today, Draco, or for the rest of the year?" she asked.

She noticed his dismay and regretted teasing him. Almost. He had been doing and saying lovely things a minute ago. Why had he become distant? Had he suddenly decided he didn't like her that much?

"Let me get you more tea," she said.

She wants to get away from me, he thought.

While she was in the kitchen, he idly picked up a copy of her father's magazine and started reading. He cursed himself. He should be making his excuses and leaving, not waiting around to get kicked out of the house. He became engrossed in one of the articles. It was the weirdest thing he had ever read, but fascinating.

When Luna returned and saw him reading the magazine, she almost dropped the teacups. She was mortified. He would be thinking all the terrible things people thought about her and her father. She could leave quietly by the back door and never have to face him again.

He looked up and said, "Your father makes connections. He constructs a coherent story. I have my doubts about his conclusions, but I see where you get your ability, although you're more cautious and more empirical than he is."

What!? thought Luna. She did drop the teacups.

Having missed the best moment to make his escape, Draco, deciding to act like a true gentleman regardless, rose from the sofa to wave his wand and clean up the spilled tea and broken china. Luna was looking at him strangely. As he passed her, heading for the trash bin, she took him by the upper arms.

"Draco?" she said intently enough that it caught his full attention and the tea and broken cups fell to the floor again.

"I'm starting to think you like me," she said, "as a person."

"Yes," he admitted, "but that's not entirely good. It makes me nervous and anxious around you."

Why am I admitting this to her? he wondered.

Luna, taking his confession in stride, said that his brewing tea while she helped was the very thing to calm him. A wave of her wand disposed of the previous disaster, and she led him into the kitchen. She hovered close as he filled the kettle, brushed against him as he located the tea leaves, and generally got in his way. He smooched her up. That would teach her not to get between a Malfoy and his cuppa really teach her: her breasts were getting perky.

"One lump or two?" asked the maiden.

"I'm getting a sweet tooth," he said.

The way he looked at her when he said that cracked the last barrier that Luna had. Long suppressed urges came to life, and her lips were crushing his. Her inner core was braced for rejection, but his arms went around her and pulled her close. She went delirious with the thought that he wanted her. All the affection and need that she thought she would never get to express welled up and she was all over Draco and Draco was returning all of it. She was aware of his hardness against her softness. She wanted that, too.

She caught her breath and said, "Let's go sit on the sofa."

Once there, she was in his lap. Her kisses were warm and soft. Her thoughts spiraled out of control. She would offer him soft Luna, hard Luna. She would care for him, support him. She would fight with him and struggle with him.

But now, she wanted him. Her breasts ached with their loneliness. She was fumbling with her buttons. He was telling her she was beautiful. He was tending her breasts with his lips, his tongue. He was the one she wanted between them.

Her secret place ached with loneliness, and she guided Draco's hand under her skirt. His hand caressed the smooth skin and firm muscles. She liked it, but

a final remnant of primness had her knees together. Draco was giving her a loving look while his fingers gently pushed at them. A delicious feeling of surrendering went through Luna as her knees separated for Draco. He was the one she wanted between them.

She was giving him an adoring look as he parted her thighs. Her skirt slid up, and he could view the whole scene. The image would never leave him, and he knew he would never get tired of Luna spreading her legs for him.

She wiggled a little when his finger slipped under her knickers. It had tickled. When his finger slid into her, the hot slickness gave him a start, but he reminded himself that Luna was a girl. Even imperturbable, ethereal, loony Luna had a furry quim between her legs, and she would get wet for someone. It was still a bit of a shock that he was the one.

"Tell me what you like," he said.

She liked it all: his gentle exploring, his adoration, his astonishment at what he was doing. She was murmuring he was her darling, caressing him with soft lips, showering him with affection. She was moaning and telling him not to stop. His lovely, ethereal Luna was gasping and squirming. She was giving him a helpless smile. Her ethereal quim was drenching his fingers. Her thighs were crushing his hand. He held the flushed and panting girl, thinking she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Oh Draco, let's go to my room."

She was pulling him up the stairs, pulling him into her bedroom, pulling him close. He let her undress him; he let her tear her own clothes off; he let her pull him inside her.

Being in Luna was like nothing else in the world.

Draco was going wild. He couldn't last. He had to last. He mumbled the numbing spell that was part of the Malfoy tradition: One took care of one's witch. He wished he hadn't. He wanted the whole thing back. But Luna gave him a knowing look. She knew what he had done. What little rationality he had left was thinking this woman was incredible.

The rest of his consciousness was worrying about what an animal he was. Her gasps filled the room as he pounded into her, into sloppy wet Luna. It was too good. He wanted her too much. All attempts at control failed when Luna wrapped her legs around him. Torrents of words were gushing from the lady: sweet things, lewd things, demanding things. She was demanding that he do her. Draco was riding the lushness and wildness of Luna. He was reveling in his discovery of an exotic beast.

Plunging into the jungle. He would go on safari forever.

"Draco."

Even through the spell, he could tell something had happened. He stopped. Luna was floating as her tight muscles went limp.

No one had warned Draco that his special lady's ecstasy would neutralize the numbness spell. All the things that Luna was and meant to him flooded in upon him, and she took the last thing he had left inside him.

He collapsed on her, totally spent.

He regained awareness to find that he was lying on top of her and she was running her fingers through his hair and looking at him adoringly. He embraced her and held her.

Luna finally said, "We need to rinse off."

They were drying after their shower when Luna said she wanted to go out for a coffee. He watched her dress. She was, once again, the imperturbable, ethereal Luna. A person might think she was untouchable. After she was dressed, however, she paused and declared something was missing. She dropped her knickers, placed them on the night table, and waved her wand. Into the top band of lace was woven

I "heart" Draco

She stepped back into her undies and said, "I'm ready. Let's go."

At the coffee shop, she wanted to share a strudel. She brought it back to the table and said it would be best if both got equal shares whereupon she cut it precisely in half. Then Draco watched her carefully divide the crumbs that had flaked off from the division. He was thinking he hadn't seen this side of Luna when she glanced sideways at him and chuckled at his concerned expression. Ravenclaw witches. He wondered what Theo had to put up with from Padma. But he couldn't muse about it too long, because Luna was feeding him strudel from her half.

He was telling her that he wanted to spend more time with her, lots more time with her, and if she liked, there was a place with lots of rooms and lots of space, and they could be together and have lots of privacy.

"Are you asking me to stay at the Malfoy Manor, Draco?"

"Yes."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

Her affirmative kiss was worthy of a true couple.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 21

Dark stones and dark places.

Chapter 20

The second week that Adolf and Hermione were cataloguing the treasure at the Black estate, Adolf opened a box and took out a tray. When he removed the cloth cover, he exclaimed, "It's the Five Stones."

Hermione gave him a quizzical look.

"We have to keep these together," he said. "As a set, they'll fetch at least 100,000 Galleons."

Hermione chuckled in disbelief at the price. "Who would a wizard rob and kill to get that amount of money?"

"For these? Any one he had to," answered Adolf.

Hermione gave a start. What was she involved in?

Noticing her dismay, Adolf said, "If the wizards of Great Britain didn't want you involved in this type of work, they could have offered you employment. There are many things you could do for them and do well, better than anyone else."

Hermione was thinking that was a weak argument, but Adolf added, "Effectively, the wizards of Great Britain are expelling you."

Hermione's heart hardened.

A week later, Adolf was worrying that Hermione's heart had hardened too much. She was sorting through the artifacts or researching in a library day and night. He thought the books she was reading were as evil as the objects they described. He arrived one morning to find her looking absolutely haggard. He was upset enough that he failed to be diplomatic.

"Hermione, what have you been doing? Did you stay up all night reading?"

"It was an interesting volume," she said.

"What was it about?" he asked.

She shrugged off the question. Adolf was almost relieved that she knew she shouldn't do such things, but any relief was short lived as he realized the dark side of magic was taking its toll. It might take Hermione.

"You need to take a break," he said. "We could go on a holiday."

She glared at him. "I don't dare. This is my one and only chance. Aren't you the one who reminded me that the British wizards want to expel me?"

I blew it. I'm losing her, he thought. Maybe I never had her.

"Okay," said Biff, "so much for the overachiever who's alienated everyone. Think you can restrain yourself and deliver a simple emotional scene."

"Better than you can emote, you insensitive lump," was the reply.

"Mum, we're sleeping together."

"Okay," said Cissy. "I'll inform the house elves."

She turned to Luna. "They put your things in the guest room, but they can shift them to Draco's room."

Luna was surprised. She was hoping they could stay together and not sneak around to do it, but she expected Draco to gradually work up to the subject. Had Mrs. Malfoy accepted her? Luna hadn't told her father how intimate they had become although she supposed he had guessed.

Cissy was thinking her son and Luna shagging was wholesome compared to her looking into the fathomless eyes of a dark wizard as he possessed her. Even worse, she wished he were dashing into the room, right here, right now, capturing her with those eyes, ripping off her clothes, and taking her on the hearth rug as her feet waved at the ceiling.

Now, now, dearie, she chided herself. Mustn't drop your knickers in front of the children.

She poured more tea for them, and said asked if Luna had accepted any of the employment offers. Luna replied she was waiting. She was hoping the school could come up with the funds to hire her.

"More academic studies," said Cissy. "I recall the Magical Creatures course taught us about individual animals, but not how they behaved in groups."

"No one has ever thought that important," said Luna.

"It's amazing what we overlook," said Cissy.

Cissy offered to show Luna part of the grounds, and a few minutes later, they were standing beside a fish pond filled with rain water.

"We once had fish, but we neglected them when Voldemort was here, and they died," said Cissy.

Cissy was aghast. Why was she confessing a terrible thing to a stranger, a stranger who loved animals?

Luna took the hand of her lover's mum. Cissy recalled that Luna knew loss. And Luna was a fighter for the other side, but a fighter.

"Would you like to see what's left of the greenhouse?" asked Cissy.

"Very much," said Luna.

Supplies for the peafowl were kept in the greenhouse, and Cissy showed Luna the proper ratio of seeds to pellets. Later, they would visit the kitchen for any leftover fruit and vegetables.

"They love celery leaves," said Cissy.

The next morning, Cissy entered Draco's room. She had something to ask him. She stopped, backed out, and quietly closed the door. The image stayed in her mind as she walked downstairs: Luna sleeping with her head on Draco's shoulder and her arm across him as if she was shielding him from a harsh world. Cissy was thinking that Luna had it backwards. Draco had been raised by his father. He had been raised to be cold and cruel. We're cold and cruel, Luna. What if it worked out? What would Lucius say? He better say nice things, or she would bitch-hex him back to France.

Real bonding occurs during moments of rational self interest, thought Biff.

The three were having tea in a pavilion some distance from the Black country house.

"Have you thought about investing your windfall?" asked Andy.

Hermione was instantly suspicious. "In what, Malfoy Enterprises?"

"We're not that rapacious, my dear," said Cissy. "We were thinking the London Stock Exchange."

"What about the Statue of Secrecy?" asked Hermione.

"That's to protect us from impetuous pranksters," said Cissy.

"Fred Weasley gave his life to protect his family," said Hermione.

"I wasn't thinking of the Weasleys," said Cissy, "but now that you've mentioned them, I should say that Fred Weasley was a brave man who fought for what he believed in."

There was an uncomfortable silence until Andy said, "The war took its toll, but to return to investments, you're right. We do it secretly."

Andy and Cissy outlined the limited opportunities in a stagnant wizard society. Hermione replied that they should use their wealth and talent to improve matters. The two sisters said that, alas, such a thing was beyond their abilities, especially since they were marginal members of society. Hermione experienced a twinge as she recalled that she too was a marginal member, but the recollection made her receptive to the virtues of stocks and bonds, even though she had always viewed the market as a combination of rigged game and mob psychology. The two sisters suggested some reading material and pointed out the potential of compound interest over a witch's long life span.

The editor was shaking her head over the last bit of rationality from Biff. "Emotions, emotions, emotions, you cerebral twit," she raged. And why wasn't he showing the world what a cad that Alain Roeder was.

"My sister has warned me about revealing this treasure. I don't know why I trust you enough to show it to you," said Andy. "You, more easily than anyone I know, could take some valuables and wipe my memory."

"That would be unworthy of an English gentleman, Mrs. Tonks" said Alain.

"There are fewer of those than you might think," said Andy. "Besides, you're not English."

"We Germans also have foolish ideals," said Alain, "although there are differences."

"Like what?" asked Andy.

"English wizards worry about feminine purity; German wizards think it a sin to neglect a lady."

"German gentleman wizards may think that way, but everyone keeps warning me that you're almost a Dark Wizard, and we are next to a cache of jewels radiating evil."

"But they wouldn't affect a pure lady, would they?" he asked.

"Pure like this?" she asked, waving her wand. She was adorned in cream-colored silk that flowed over her curves and, when she twirled, displayed the tantalizing, mature, and knowing woman underneath.

She was dancing, an enticing dance, hands over her head, hips swaying, costume emphasizing her full figure. She was dancing for the devil, tempting his spiky member. A were-beast was motioning for her; his bite would send a fiery liquid through her veins; she would do what he wanted. A wolf was loping toward her; a wolf from the Black Forest was coming for her. He was close, his eyes shining yellow, his hot breath over her, his hands in her hair, his hands on her silk-covered elegance. Wolfie was nuzzling her breasts; she was saying, "Yes, yes;" she was petting her wolfie. Her wolfie was growling, reaching under the flowing skirts, licking sensitive spots. She was getting rid of the last part of her costume, the costume for her enticing dance, a dance costumed by desire. The long, lupine tongue was at her; the long, lupine tongue was slurping; she was yelling, yelling for the beast she had enticed, yelling for the beast turning her into an animal, the rough beast on its way to her promised land.

Then it was her Alain, his black eyes now flecked with yellow. Of course, it was her Alain, her own wolfie gentleman. She was all over him, kissing her wolfie, whispering her deepest secret into his ear. "I have a furry place for you, waiting for you." He was in her secret place, taking, demanding. She was in her secret place; she was a Black family daughter deep in the Forest. She was a wild thing in a place no one knew about, but Adolf was there. Then, there was only her and Adolf and the dark place.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 21

At last, Crookshanks offers his opinion.

Chapter 21

The editor had arrived that morning to find Biff snoring at his desk. There were enough coffee cups scattered around that she was surprised he was sleeping instead of ranting and raving incoherently about this lousy story that would never end. She gathered up the episodes he had written and took them to her office.

"I broke my own rules: only married women; only one at a time," said Alain.

"I thought you were making both of them happy," said Adolf.

"That makes leaving them even harder. You can't imagine the pent up passion in those two," said Alain, "but that only gives me a window of opportunity, a chance to escape with a whole skin."

"How do you plan to do it?" asked Adolf.

"There're two farmers in Southern England who have hired me: one for an irrigation ditch and another to build a pond. I'll tell the girls I'm off on a job," said Alain. "When I finish, I'll return to Germany. I travel light."

"You're not going to say farewell?" asked Adolf.

"That's painful, but two sisters, my man. What was I thinking? Well, I wasn't, and I have to pay the price."

"What about Theo Nott?" asked Adolf.

"I gave him instructions on meeting me in Germany. I swore him to secrecy, wizard's oath, on the grounds that a number of people considered me a Dark Wizard, and I couldn't have them tracking me."

"He agreed? What about his friends in England?"

"He'll miss his girlfriend, but she's the ambitious daughter of a prosperous clan. He knows he can't have a harmonious relationship with her and her family unless he's a success, and given the local hostility toward his family, this is his best hope."

"If he weren't brilliant, he'd be doomed," said Adolf.

"That's true of many of us as you well know," said Alain, "but as you well know, he wouldn't be in a pickle if he weren't brilliant."

The editor checked on Biff. Still asleep. She had to admit he looked cute, and she was lamenting that she was two years older. She shook her head. It must be the insidious influence of this story. Well, the solution was to leave Biff to his adventure yarns. She smiled as she recalled the times he had dashed into her office to relate some lunatic, climatic sequence he had just concocted.

Down in the dungeon, Adolf had returned again and again to the Five Stones. Even in her current muzzy state, Hermione was worried. She was afraid those black stones were an evil version of crystals. She was afraid they were calling to him, calling to him to bring them to life. Through the dark mists swirling through her mind, a shaft of light appeared: she had to save Adolf, save him from himself.

She found him in the middle of a room. His hands were moving over the Five Stones. There was a glow. Sparks were starting to fly. Thanking the gods that he wasn't using his wand, she threw a cloth over the stones.

His head snapped up, snarling his fury. Hermione stepped back. The red glints in his eyes were blazing infernos. He was going to scorch her where she stood. Hermione stepped forward. So be it.

Wild thoughts raced through her mind. A rational Tom Riddle who planned carefully, who didn't bother with torture, who efficiently eliminated those who stood in his way. Crystals around the school. The castle cracked in two and falling. She and her friends dead. She thought of Pansy who had left Adolf because he wasn't interested in wealth and power. "He's weak," Pansy had said. So be it.

Adolf had placed his hands on top of the cloth Hermione had thrown over the stones and was giving her a quizzical look.

He recognizes me, she thought. I'm going to live.

More wild thoughts. She remembered the question Adolf occasionally asked students about who was the King of Prussia while Haydn was writing his symphonies. The punch line was that they didn't know and they didn't care.

She took him by the hand and led him upstairs.

"We need to take a break," she said. "We need to get away for a while."

He was staring blankly into space.

"We can go together, but separately," she said. "I mean, we can travel together. What do you think of Cardiff? We can take the train. There're boat rides when we get there, and castles. We can walk around. There're tea shops."

He returned from wherever he was and said, "That might be a good idea, Hermione."

Okay, thought the editor, even buzzed out on caffeine, Biff can write an action sequence.

Adolf watched Cissy and Andy talk about Alain in Southern England and how they were certain he would thrive in Great Britain. He observed their bewilderment when they received his letter that he was in Germany. He watched them wait for another letter. The day came when they asked him if he knew where Alain was and when he would return. He saw their stricken look when he told them that he had no idea.

Adolf saw no hope of telling the two women that this was the other side of the coin. Alain was true to his art, and his art would serve him in return. Andy and Cissy need not fear that he was after their money because Alain believed that depending on them instead of his Crystals would be a betrayal of his Crystals: He would be tempted by an easier life and neglect the demands of his discipline. Andy and Cissy could trust Alain as they could no other because, ultimately, he could accept nothing from them.

The editor was biting her lip. Biff might not know shit about romance, but somehow, he knew heartbreak. Did that mean he was more familiar with romance than he wanted to be? She turned her attention to the last thing he had penned. Perhaps he had brought things to a conclusion; perhaps they could end this madness.

Adolf braced himself as he let Hermione into his flat. He knew what to expect.

"You haven't put your books away," she said.

She was re-shelving them as he waited for her to discover he hadn't sorted his socks. He heard her exclamation when she checked his bedroom for stray volumes. He entered to find her standing beside a pile of clothes.

"It's clean clothes," he said. "It's not laundry."

That did not seem to mollify her.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "You might as well say it."

He put his hands on her waist. "Go ahead. Say it."

It was a quiet voice: "You need someone to take care of you."

"And you?" he asked.

"Me?"

"You need someone who cares for you," he said.

Hermione Granger had never thought of that.

Crookshanks had trotted behind as a dutiful familiar should. He had seen many things in the castle. One, unknown to most, was that little geek girls were the most selective about their partner. They were also the most heartbroken when it went wrong. Thus it was that when Hermione reached out to Adolf, Crookshanks had his claws crossed. He wasn't worried about his mistress's clumsiness. Both were too deep to let that concern them. It was their depth that bothered him. Ships could wreck on that bedrock. But Crookshanks was heartened: Adolf was welcoming all of Hermione's advances; he was treating her affection as a treasure.

Hermione was in front of a mirror. He let her see someone holding her and looking at her adoringly. He was running his fingers through her hair as if it was luxurious. He was telling her she was lovely. He was nibbling his way down her neck. He an aloof man. She an honored partner in public. He tending to her in private. Hermione's face softened, his fingertips over her skin convincing her she was the one for him.

His mistress was guiding Adolf's hands to her shirt buttons. Crookshanks knew his mistress wasn't the most curvaceous, but the wizard was telling her she was lovely. He was acting as if he found her pleasing. Very pleasing.

Crookshanks watched Adolf whisper something to his mistress. Crookshanks watched his mistress reach under her skirt and slide the innocent white garment over her hips and past her knees. Adolf whispered again. His mistress pulled Adolf to the bed where she fumbled to get his trousers open. Crookshanks had roamed the castle at night, and he had seen girls with boys, but now, his own mistress was spreading her legs.

Crookshanks' ears perked up at the mounting. How did she feel? Soft? Firm? Welcoming?

The sound of Hermione Granger: murmuring encouragement, sighing with pleasure, wet.

Crookshanks' nostrils flared at her love reek. Heady. She was whole-heartedly, happily enthusiastic. It was becoming more than pleasurable.

The look of Hermione Granger: wrapping her legs around her lover, pulling him in against her, getting more of her wizard, wiggling for him.

Hermione become a wild thing, her face contorting. Crookshanks' eyes gleamed as his mistress's thighs quivered. His fur bristled as he whiffed the tang of her orgasm.

Later, Crookshanks was on the kitchen table and watching Hermione make coffee. Slowly make coffee, pausing to dote on Adolf. Hermione didn't have to ask where he kept anything. It was all scattered on the counter instead of being properly put away. As she was bringing the pot to the table, however, she was deciding that a bit of clutter was charming. If his life were as precise as his mind, he would be impossible to live with. He was charming.

Crookshanks was lying between the coffee cups thinking that a juicy morsel was just the thing to complete the scene when Hermione, noticing his expectant expression and already acting like the mistress of the place, laid down the law. "No mice on the kitchen table."

Unexpectedly, she turned to Adolf and asked, "Right, dear?"

"Hmmm," he replied.

"What do you mean 'Hmmm,'?" asked Hermione. "You can't let your pet rule the household."

Weigh your actions, professor, thought Crookshanks. *Let compassion be your scale.*

Hermione was up and straddling Adolf. "You said you would take care of me and my cat. It's one of the things you whispered to me."

"Yes," he said, reaching up and stroking her hair. "I did."

She was sitting in his lap with her forehead touching his when she whispered, "We need you."

His kiss of acceptance was loving and gentle. Her return embrace was the same and her second. Her third was a bit demanding. Then, her tongue was down his throat as her body remembered all the things he could do for her. Her breasts were pressing against him. She didn't care they weren't spectacular. They were hers, and she wanted him to have them.

Crookshanks, once again, crossed his claws as Hermione's affectionate caresses gradually turned more demanding. Adolf would take care of her, wouldn't he? Crookshanks' whiskers twitched as her affection became a grinding need: the little geek girl was humping the bulge in Adolf's trousers. Crookshanks was relieved when Adolf responded by telling Hermione she was his loving lady and guiding her hand downward. Oh, yes. She was on her knees, fumbling with the buttons of his trousers. She had him out. She was fondling him, kissing him.

Crookshanks' eyes bulged. *So that's how my mistress looks with her lips around a cock.*

She was inexperienced, clumsy. Adolf didn't care, did he? His lady was doing her best for him.

He did the right thing. He lifted her up and helped her shimmy out of her knickers. He held her hips and guided her down and told her she was beautiful. She was kissing him again the deep, loving, thank-you kisses of Hermione Granger when her wizard slid inside her.

Crookshanks was thinking that his mistress would never ever shut up as Hermione gasped out pleasure and longing and instructions, but Adolf held Hermione and accepted everything she was. Her face, usually alive with intelligence, was soft with romance. Crookshanks was fascinated by the way the plump thighs of a not-very-beautiful, frizzy-haired girl were flexing and tensing as Adolf demanded his witch give herself to him.

Damn, thought Crookshanks. *Take her.*

So he did. Hermione losing control. Hermione wildly undulating for the one who was capturing her. She was his. Her pet's fur bristled as, once again, he whiffed the tang of her orgasm. Her pet watched her become flushed and limp as she bonded.

His mistress looked mellow enough to agree to anything, and hope blossomed in the feline breast. *Don't listen to the bossy witch,* thought Crookshanks. *Fuck her brains out, and bring on the mice.*

Strangely enough, Adolf had to convince Hermione that he really wanted her to stay the night.

"You'll have to put up with me in the morning," he said. "It's your fault for seducing me."

"You brought this on yourself," she replied.

That night, as she was cuddling around him and falling asleep, she let herself relax, she let herself hope.

The universe was a messed-up place, but maybe it could get one thing right.

The editor sighed and laid the manuscript to rest.

END