

Warning--Health Hazards Ahead

by jmlane57

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Warning...Health Hazards Ahead

It was almost Halloween of 2003, and one Harry James Potter was trying to figure what kind of costume he would wear to the upcoming Halloween ball, which would mark the five-year reunion of the Hogwarts Class of 1998. It would be held at the Ministry of Magic, where they all worked in one capacity or another. Of course, that wasn't half as bothersome as trying to predict what Ginny and Hermione might decide to wear. He had inadvertently heard them giggling over a catalog which featured Halloween costumes as he approached Hermione's office while searching for Ginny, speculating on which ones would be the most provocative to their escorts...himself and Ron. Which reminded him, he had better warn Ron ASAP so he could prepare himself too ... as best he could, anyway.

"Ooh, how about this one, 'Mione? It's sure to drive Ron totally up the wall!" Ginny giggled.

"If that doesn't give Harry a heart attack, nothing will!" Hermione's laugh was positively evil as Ginny showed her something else. "Which reminds me, so would this!"

Harry really wished they'd mention which kind of costumes they were talking about; it was kind of hard to figure a defense for something if you didn't know what you were defending yourself against. Of course, he had to make sure to remain quiet or not even his Invisibility Cloak would hide him ... but it was getting harder all the time.

"Remember why we originally sent for the catalog ... to choose costumes both for the ball and for private moments," the ever-vigilant Hermione reminded her companion.

"Oh, yes, I know," Ginny returned. "In fact, I'm leaning toward this one for the private moments and this one for the ball itself!"

"Oh, Gin, you are positively *evil*! You show up in that and poor Harry won't know what hit him!"

"That's the whole idea." Ginny's laugh was pure wickedness.

"You *do* want the poor bloke to survive, don't you? Well, he can't if you wear something like that. It's totally and thoroughly dangerous! I swear, some of this stuff should have a warning label on it...such as 'Use with care. Seeing this costume may be hazardous to your escort's health' or something like that."

"You have a point there," Ginny returned reluctantly. "Kind of hard to get snogged or shagged if your escort is passed out on the floor from shock."

"Or in St. Mungo's recovering from a heart attack," Hermione put in.

Not long afterward the clock chimed. "Bugger," Ginny muttered. "Gotta get to my office. Meet you back here at teatime, 'Mione?"

"How about we discuss it over lunch?" Hermione suggested.

"We'd have to whisper," Ginny warned. "Either that or put up a *Muffliato* spell. After all, we don't want certain members of the male persuasion to hear us."

"So be it," came the reply. "See you then."

Harry echoed Ginny's sentiments, whipping off his Invisibility Cloak and hurrying to his own office, hoping he would have the chance to catch more of what the girls were discussing, if only to be able to warn Ron as to what they were up to. For the moment, he would spend the intervening time speculating...but only until and unless he could manage to get more detailed information on what they were talking about. Until that point had been reached, he told himself to keep the Cloak with him so he could eavesdrop without being detected. Provided he was fortunate enough to come upon them again often enough between now and time for the ball, that is.

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It was three days later that Harry managed to catch another related conversation between Hermione and Ginny...and this time he was rewarded with the numbers of the aforementioned costumes from the catalog. He had also decided it might be a good idea to see if any of the other blokes of his acquaintance were acquainted with the aforementioned costume catalog, glad to learn that Seamus Finnigan, a co-worker of Hermione's, also had a copy. Harry asked him to lend him his copy...supposedly to check out what there was available and try to decide what to wear, while in reality he intended to check out those numbers and find out which costumes they represented.

His eyes nearly popped out of his head upon seeing the costumes in question, particularly the slave girl, sexy Arabian Nights outfit and sexy bride outfit. Gods, if those were the ones Ginny had talked about, he wouldn't have a chance! Of course, they could just as easily have been the ones Hermione had been referring to. Either way, he had to warn Ron about them and make sure they prepared themselves as best they could while there was still time. He made copies of the pages, then returned the catalog to Seamus, thanking him for helping him decide.

He had been glad to see that there was a section in the catalog for men's costumes and decided he really liked the Jack Sparrow costume, modeled after the pirate Captain in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, beard, gold tooth, beads in the hair and all. He was definitely leaning toward that one, but in the event that one got sold out or something, he thought it best to have an alternate choice. He ended up choosing a form-fitting greaser outfit which looked as though it could have been lifted straight out of the *Grease* film of the late 1970s, but which was set in the 1950s.

He also made a mental note to have Ron ask Seamus if he could borrow the catalog so he could decide what to wear ... hopefully something to offset the almost dangerously sexy costumes the girls were likely to pick. Meanwhile, he intended to prepare both himself and Ron as best he could...for both the ball and what their dates were likely to wear.

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True to form, Ron almost literally passed out when he saw the costumes in question, but fortunately there was time between now and the time of the ball to get at least more-or-less used to them. "Which ones do you think the girls will choose, mate?" he asked apprehensively, certain that despite any precautions he might take, he would literally pass out if Hermione showed up in the slave girl outfit, much less the Arabian Nights affair.

"No idea," Harry had to confess. "All we can do is prepare ourselves as best we can for literally any of them. Have you chosen what you intend to wear yet?" He had told Ron that Seamus had the same catalog as the girls and to look in the men's section for ideas.

"Not yet," Ron revealed.

"Better do it soon, mate. After all, you don't want to be caught with your trousers down again."

"Bollocks. I won't be, I assure you."

"With all due respect, I'll believe that when I see it."

"Brilliant, mate. I thought at least *you* would support me." Ron's voice was a mixture of hurt and annoyance.

"I *do* support you," Harry insisted. "I just don't want you to wait until the last minute again. Even I've already chosen the costume I intend to wear."

"Oh, really? What is it?"

"Sorry. I'm keeping that a secret until the night of the ball." In fact he had already owed the costume company and sent in his order; it should arrive in plenty of time. In fact, with any luck, they should be able to dress for the ball together.

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However, unknown to Harry and Ron, Seamus told the girls what they planned to do and what kind of costumes they ended up ordering. (So much for men sticking together!) Ginny had intended to go with the slave girl costume, but ended up choosing a sexy pirate wench costume to accommodate Harry's pirate costume. However, for the private outfit, she went with her original choice of the sexy bride costume.

As for Hermione, she ended up going with the sexy Arabian nights costume to be like a member of a sultan's harem (Ron had decided on a sultan's costume; Harry helped him pay for it) ... at least for the public costume. Harry was hard-pressed not to laugh at Ron's insistence that he was her master; the way he usually acted around her, he was certain it was the other way around.

Of course, he would not argue with him, but at the same time, was convinced of the fact. (Just as much as Ginny ruled over him as much as he did over her.) For the private costume, Hermione went for the sexy schoolgirl/bookworm costume. It was similar to the Hogwarts school uniform (without the robes), but very brief and very form-fitting.

The girls had also ordered their costumes and for the weeks preceding their arrival, virtually every time they saw the guys, they would either give sly smiles in their direction, giggle wickedly and wink...if not all three. If they had their way, Harry and Ron would literally be putty in their hands, would fall all over themselves to accommodate them in whatever way they wanted. Of course, the guys thought the same of the girls. Only time would tell who was right!

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It was two weeks later that the girls' costumes arrived; Harry and Ron had gotten notes saying that their costumes were on back-order but should still be received in time for the party. Meanwhile, all Harry could do was keep as sharp an eye and ear out as possible for the girls' latest doings ... and from the way they'd been acting, having their heads together and giggling wickedly, their costumes must have arrived. He cursed his luck in not having his Invisibility Cloak with him at the moment; otherwise he'd

have thrown it on and gone after them to eavesdrop.

He'd tried to get Ron to accompany him, but at the mere suggestion, his friend had looked as if he expected Harry to zap him with one of the Unforgivable Curses, so he didn't ask again. It seemed as though the Muggle saying, "If you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself," definitely had truth to it...especially in his case. However, he did still intend to keep him informed of any new developments he happened to pick up. In the meantime, all he could do was keep his eyes and ears open, not to mention stay as well concealed as possible.

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Meanwhile, the girls were oohing and ahing over the costumes. "Ooh, 'Mione, they're even nicer than in the catalog! I can hardly wait for the party! Harry's eyes are going to literally pop out of his head!"

"Well, all I can say is that I hope Madam Pomfrey will be standing by at the party to revive anyone's date who happens to pass out ... and I have a feeling at least one of ours will," she remarked, holding the filmy Arabian Nights costume up and standing in front of one of the full-length mirrors in their flat's bathroom. "The way this thing is made, I can't help believing that I'll feel positively decadent wearing it ... and that Ron will likely have a heart attack when he sees me in it!"

"You know what I can't help but think of?" Ginny put in.

"What?"

"The words to open the Marauders' Map ... 'we solemnly swear we are up to no good' or something like that. And one thing's for sure, ~~w~~*definitely* are up to no good, with the way we're planning to ambush our poor unsuspecting dates with our sexy costumes!"

Hermione looked over at her friend, who was holding up the brief pirate wench costume before her, a costume which seemed to have little more to it than Hermione's did, even though it was made of non-see-through material. The look on her face was a mixture of wickedness and lust, as if she had plans to literally attack Harry at some point during the party...and who's to say that she didn't? She could only hope that Ginny had the presence of mind to get the two of them out of sight first.

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It was another week before the guys' costumes arrived, and when they did, they tried them on to make sure they fit (all the necessary accoutrements were also included in the price of the costume, so that was one less thing for them to worry about) but even if they hadn't been, Harry would likely have had to research just what went with each costume himself since he certainly couldn't ask Hermione to do it and still keep them a secret from the girls.

They could probably have just as easily conjured them up as bought them; they were wizards, after all. (Or at least Harry could have; Ron still wasn't that hot at conjuring up things.) Now all they could do was wait for the ball, which was a week away, and see what happened...see who survived and who ended up in St. Mungo's ... at the very least!

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It was three days later that Ron decided on a "dress rehearsal," as it were. The previous trying-on had been without makeup; this time it would be with it, since the turban headdress of the costume came with a black wig and the makeup was necessary to make the wearer look as exotic as possible. Harry decided to humour his friend and allow him to dress up at least once before the party, if only to see what he looked like beforehand...and give him some idea of how the girls were likely to react. It took roughly half an hour; once they were finished, Ron and Harry could scarcely believe it was the same person.

"Hey, mate, look at me with black hair! Can you imagine how Gin and 'Mione are going to react?"

"I can imagine," Harry replied, unable to help grinning upon picturing the possible expressions on the girls' faces. For the moment, however, he needed to get used to the sight himself. Ron looked like he'd literally stepped out of the Arabian Nights!

"I still wish you'd tell me what costume you got, mate," Ron groused. "I'm your friend; you can trust me. I won't tell the girls."

"That's not the issue, mate. I just want it to be a surprise. Besides, don't you want to be able to tell Gin, should she ask, that you didn't even know what costume I was going to wear until the day of the ball? If nothing else, that will save you a lot of grief. Remember, because you didn't know any more than she did, she won't be able to get all over you about not giving her a hint of what to expect ... and isn't that what counts?"

"She'll probably still do her share of bitching about it, though," came the reply.

"No doubt. Don't worry, though. You'll see my costume in three days. Meanwhile, I don't want to hear any more about it. Okay?"

"Okay," Ron reluctantly agreed. "But it won't be easy."

"I know, mate...but at least we know what the girls will be wearing. Even at that, it's going to take some doing to maintain our collective composure...not to mention remain conscious."

"That's for sure," Ron replied. "Well, I'd better take this thing off and put it away again. Where are you going to stash yours until the party?"

"Probably in my closet. Why?"

"Just wondering. Now help me off with this stuff."

Fortunately it took only half as long to get the costume off as it did on; once Harry realised this, he gave a wicked inward smile. Maybe he should let that fact slip to Hermione and see what she did with it ...

Once the costume was repacked in the package, the two young men decided to lock their costumes in their individual closets for safekeeping until the day of the party. Just three days to go now, but at the same time, likely to be three of the longest days of their lives until they could both show off their own costumes and feast their eyes on the *girls'* costumes.

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The three days passed far faster than any of them could have imagined possible, and almost literally the next thing they knew, it was the day of the Halloween dance. Harry and Ron had only seen their girls at breakfast and lunch today, and even then only for a few minutes...no longer than it took to smile and say hello...then sit down at their tables and order their meals. Even at that, they still put their heads together and began whispering furtively before giggling wickedly, particularly when one of them happened to glance in their dates' direction.

If they noticed said dates giving them strange looks, they never showed any indication of it, and it spooked Ron enough to say, "I don't trust their innocent looks, mate. They've got to be plotting something!"

"Oh, no doubt they are," Harry agreed. "We've just got to make sure to outsmart them."

"How?"

Frankly Harry had no idea whatsoever how they were going to do it, but had to assure his friend somehow. "I'll think of something, don't worry. Now eat up. We're going to need all the energy we can get for tonight!"

Ron didn't argue with this, but was frankly convinced that the girls would once again get the best of them even as he made himself finish his lunch in preparation for their return to their flat to shower and dress for the party, which was scheduled for six o'clock that evening ... a time now only hours, yet an eternity, away.

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Incredibly, the time came almost before they realised it. Harry looked over at his friend sitting in his favourite chair, seemingly reading his *Flying with the Cannons* book for the umpteenth time, but if his hunch was right, he hadn't turned a page for at least the last half hour...just as he hadn't turned a page in his *Quidditch Through the Ages* book for the last half hour, either. But that didn't matter now. It was time to get ready for the party and prepare themselves as best they could for what the girls were likely to look like.

"It's time to get ready, mate," he called to Ron, closing his book. "We'd best give ourselves at least an hour to get ready, if not an hour and a half, then give ourselves half an hour to get to where the girls are meeting us."

Ron did not respond, simply nodded, closed his book and set it aside, then moved to open his closet, as did Harry, and they began to remove their regular clothing and replace it with their Halloween costumes. Considering the extra accessories his costume had, Harry had decided it best to allow himself as much time as possible to get ready, unable to help picturing the look that was likely to be on Ron's face once he finally saw him in costume.

"So you're going as a pirate, mate?" he heard Ron call to him.

Harry looked up to meet his friend's eyes and nod. "But not just any pirate. You remember the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Remember the character of Jack Sparrow?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I've decided to be him tonight."

"So this is what you've been hiding from me! I can just imagine how Gin's going to react!"

"You know she loved that character when we took the girls to see the movie. I can't wait to see the look on her face when I show up looking like Jack!"

"In that case, you'd better lose those glasses, mate, at least temporarily. As far as I can recall, Jack Sparrow did not wear glasses."

"Don't worry, I bought a potion which is supposed to improve my vision enough so I won't need glasses...at least for a few hours anyway. All the same, I intend to keep them close by just in case it wears off prematurely."

"Probably a good idea. Better to be safe than sorry. Oh, could you help me with this wig and turban again, mate? Gotta make sure to get all my hair out of sight before I put on the makeup, you know."

"Sure, no problem."

Once Ron was ready, he stood at the bathroom door, waiting for Harry to finish putting on all the pirate accessories. It wasn't until 5:35 that Harry finally pronounced himself ready. It still felt a bit strange to him to actually be able to see, if only for a little while, without his glasses. Even at that, he made sure that he knew just where he could get his hands on them quickly in the event of an emergency. For the time being, though, it was best that he do all he could to relax as much as possible and prepare himself for what Gin was likely to look like...and if necessary, have the means to revive Ron (or vice versa) in the event Madam Pomfrey was busy with someone else. Both carried their wands in an unobtrusive place, but again made sure they would be able to lay their hands on them quickly if the necessity arose.

"Well, we'd better get a move on, mate. It's a quarter to six," Harry told his friend. "But not too fast. We don't want to sweat all our makeup off." With that, the pair left their flat, then Apparated to the girls' flat, telling themselves over and over that they were calm and that everything would be all right when really they were anything but and had literally less than no idea how the evening would turn out. They just hoped they wouldn't make complete and total asses of themselves before the night was over.

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Hermione and Ginny decided to change in Hermione's room at roughly the same time as Harry and Ron were getting ready. Hermione's outfit had almost as many accessories to it as Harry's...earrings, bracelets, rings, veils, things like that.

Ginny's had its share of accessories too, such as a bandana and an eye patch, even a small dagger with a rubber blade. Of course, being witches, either Hermione or Ginny were able to Transfigure the blade into metal, but chose not to do so ... at least not tonight.

Once they finished preparing themselves, the girls left the room and headed for the living room, where the boys would Apparate in. "Can you imagine what the boys are going to look like when they see us?" Hermione asked apprehensively. "You know, I still feel decadent as all hell in this. Which is why I'm wearing my robes over it, at least until we meet the boys. I'm carrying my wand, too ... if only to be prepared in the event one of them passes out from shock."

Ginny only nodded, apprehensive in spite of herself. She both wanted and didn't want to see what Harry looked like, which pirate costume he had chosen. Wouldn't it be something if he'd chosen her favourite, the Jack Sparrow one? That would be brilliant, but she couldn't count on it. All she could do was hope for the best. And she could just imagine what Ron was going to look like in that sultan's outfit ... she had to bite her lip to keep from busting out laughing at the picture in her mind. It was necessary to keep Hermione from hexing her, but no way in hell was it going to be easy to hold in. No way in bloody hell!

Upon entering the living room, the girls saw their dates waiting for them, their costumes covered by robes just like theirs were. The only difference was that they couldn't see Ron's red hair, and that usually stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. What had happened? Was he wearing a wig or something else over his hair? He must be; that was the only explanation.

Neither Ginny nor Hermione could believe their eyes, literally, when they saw their dates ... and I mean, really saw them! How could these two actually be Harry and Ron? They looked like the world's sexiest pirate and a sheik straight out of the Arabian Nights!

"Harry? Ron?" Ginny finally made herself say, which was more than Hermione was capable of, at least at the moment. She seemed totally and thoroughly dumbstruck, if not totally gobsmacked.

It was Harry who finally spoke and smiled wickedly. "Guilty as charged, luv," he crooned in his best Jack Sparrow voice. "Captain Jack Sparrow, at your service."

That's for sure, you are, Ginny thought, with an inward smile every bit as wicked as that of her date even as she exchanged glances with Hermione and they dropped their robes as well. For a long time there was no sound, not even that of breathing. It was as if time had been suspended, if not literally frozen.

"Oh ... my ... God ..." Harry finally said when he finally managed to finish looking her over, literally from head to toe. "You knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what, Harry ... or should I say Jack?" Ginny asked innocently.

"You knew ... you *knew* what kind of costume I ordered ... that *weboth* ordered. Didn't you? ... *Didn't you?*" he looked hard at her, his eyes like green ice, having to force himself not to reach out and begin shaking the truth out of her.

"Yes. We knew...but we weren't about to let either of you know that. It would have spoiled the surprise. Now are you going to tell me what you think of my outfit or not?"

"It looks ... brilliant. *You* look ... brilliant," Harry made himself say, unable to think of anything else to say to save his life. For some inexplicable reason, all thoughts of getting revenge on her had totally and thoroughly left his mind. All he saw was a beautiful, red-headed pirate wench standing before him and smiling, but most importantly, in a brief outfit which literally fit her like the paper on the wall.

"What about 'Mione? What do you both think of*her*?" Only after Ginny asked this did either dare to look at her...and just as they feared, despite all the precautions, the next thing the three left standing knew, and before anybody else could say anything, there was a dull thud of a body hitting the floor, and when they dared to look, they saw Ron lying at their feet ... out cold.

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Ron woke up sometime later, finding himself lying with his head in Hermione's lap and one of her hands holding his while the other stroked his forehead; Ginny and Harry knelt on either side of him. "Mione? What happened?"

"You passed out, Ron," she explained. "I just put the *Ennervate* spell on you to wake you up. How do you feel?"

"Bloody hell, I knew it. I just *knew* this would happen. I was just hoping it wouldn't be me," he muttered darkly, feeling himself blush as crimson as his hair. He had so wanted to be strong in front of the girl he loved, yet he had gone and fainted dead away before her! He would never live this down, that was for sure...if only in his own mind.

"It's all right. I understand. Didn't mean to shock you so badly," Hermione apologised.

"Don't apologise, 'Mione. By the way, you look ... beautiful. The most beautiful ... I've ever seen you. Isn't she, Harry?"

Harry naturally had to agree, but couldn't bring himself to say so. He simply smiled and nodded. "Are you okay now, mate? Can you stand?"

"I think so ... if you all help me up." With Harry on one side and Hermione on the other Ron was eventually brought to his feet. Both stood on each side of him for a while in order to make sure that he wasn't going to pass out again.

"Well, if Ron's feeling all right, we'd better get to the dance now. We've got to be at least an hour late by now." The girls exchanged glances with Harry, and they all nodded in agreement; Ginny took Harry's arm and Hermione took Ron's, then they Apparated to the largest Ministry ballroom where the reunion dance was being held. Upon entering the large room, all noted that it had been decorated within an inch of its life with Halloween trimmings ... complete with real ghosts!

The ghosts began flying around the room as the two couples entered, eventually deciding to leave the new arrivals to their own devices. Harry looked around, scarcely able to believe his eyes at the many and varied types of costumes. Looking in one direction, he saw Alice in Wonderland (aka Luna Lovegood) and the White Rabbit (aka Neville Longbottom). Harry made a mental note to ask just how she had gotten him to do that. If Malfoy saw him, Neville would never live it down!

Speaking of Malfoy, Harry noted the form-fitting, colourful costume he was wearing...not to mention the one Pansy Parkinson was wearing. Mr. Incredible and Wonder Woman. Just who the bloody hell did they think they were kidding? They had some nerve wearing such costumes of good people, super-heroes, when they were about as rotten as they come. Being Slytherins, they were virtually incapable of being anything else. All the same, he couldn't say he was surprised, being so full of themselves as they were.

Just the same, the last thing Harry wanted was a confrontation with Draco if he could possibly avoid it, because invariably he would find some way to disparage virtually every one of their costumes, including (especially) Ron's. In which case, he made a 90-degree turn in the direction of Michael Corner and Susan Bones, dressed as Belle and the Beast from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. He wasn't fond of running into one of Ginny's old boyfriends, but he still preferred him over Draco any day.

Even Dean and Lavender, for that matter...who were dressed as Dracula and his wife. Not to mention Ginny Donaldson, whose red hair was long now, and Seamus Finnigan, who had come as Shrek and Princess Fiona. The strangest couple of all, at least to Harry's mind, though, was that of Amanda Kingsley and Blaise Zabini. She had always professed disdain for anything or anyone having to do with Slytherin, so what was she doing dating one? Hopefully this was just a one-time thing, because as far as he knew, she fancied Seth Collins. Which reminded him ...

A flash of red at the corner of his eye attracted him, and he looked up to find Parvati Patil in a short, form-fitting version of the Red Riding Hood outfit in the very same catalog he had ordered his Jack Sparrow costume from. As for her date, though ... he was a wolf. Somehow appropriate, considering Seth's penchant for skirt-chasing.

"Hi, Harry," she trilled brightly, obviously having totally forgotten their fiasco of a Yule Ball date. "You look great! But where are your glasses? How can you see without them?"

"No worries, Parvati. I bought a potion that will improve my vision temporarily. Even at that, I have my glasses on me just in case of necessity."

Ginny frowned at the way Parvati's eyes were roaming over Harry and thought she'd better nip it in the bud while she still could. "What do you think *of* my costume, Parv?"

Parvati's head jerked in her direction, and the young Indian woman had the grace to blush. "Oh, sorry, Ginny. You look great, too."

"So do you," Ginny returned. "Has Seth been chasing you at all? I would think he would, the way that outfit fits you."

"He'd chase anything female," Parvati sniped. "But he was the only one who asked me, so I thought I might as well come." She looked at her date, then back at Ginny and Harry. "Don't worry. I've got insurance if he tries anything." She patted her right knee, lifting it and bending it even as she held on to one of Seth's arms in order to maintain her balance.

"That's good. One can always use extra ... insurance," Harry made himself say. "Hey, Gin, let's go say hello to Cho and her date." At least Lee Jordan wasn't one of Ginny's old flames ... so he was safe on that score, at least as far as Harry knew. It was Cho he still didn't feel comfortable around, nor did she around him, despite their best efforts to be polite to each other.

"Yeah, sure, Harry," Ginny reluctantly acquiesced, unable to resist the pull of Harry's hand on her arm pulling her in Cho's general direction. She wasn't all that comfortable around her, either...after all, Harry had once fancied her, and a part of her was all but convinced he would use virtually any excuse to get back with her. Which was exactly why she wasn't too keen on facing her for even a moment, especially not with Harry next to her.

Because she was afraid of the look she might see in their eyes when they looked at each other? Yes, maybe she was. But even at that, she shouldn't allow anything to make her a coward. Weasleys were not cowards. They may have been a lot of things, but they were *not* cowards. She just had to do everything she could to make the encounter as short as possible, that's all...then the first chance she got, wear that sexy bride costume. If that didn't make Harry forget Cho in a hurry, nothing would!

Which reminded her, when was Hermione going to wear that sexy schoolgirl costume for Ron? She'd have to ask her as soon as she could. For the time being, she had a tryst to plan for. At the moment, however, there was another way to divert Harry's attention. "Wait a minute, Harry ... you promised you'd kiss me if I wore the same type of

costume as you. I did, so you owe me one."

Before he had a chance to reply with something other than a wide-eyed stare, and totally disregarding the stunned looks on both Cho's and her date's faces, Ginny locked her arms around her date's neck and snogged him within an inch of his life. It was a crazy, even foolish thing to do, but it was the first thing that had come into her head. However reluctant he sometimes was, at least initially, she knew that snogging was generally effective...at least the majority of the time...just as it was now.

Her lips were unbelievably hungry, and it seemed like she could never get enough of Harry's. Incredible how delicious they were ... truly incredible. Just then, she felt his arms go around her and gradually tighten as the kiss went on and on. "Gin ... oh, my God," he moaned, finally wrenching his lips from hers by a supreme act of will even as she felt his growing arousal. "Don't *do* that! At least not when I'm not expecting it."

"But the surprise is half the fun, Harry," Ginny crooned, stroking the back of his neck even as she tried to pull him close to continue the kiss. But he was having none of it, at least not in front of Cho anyway ... and she preferred not to force the issue. It was a *lot* more fun when he was willing. "All the same, I'd really rather not force you. Let's dance, okay? The 'Monster Mash' is starting. You always liked that song." With that, she let go her grip from around his neck and simply pulled on his arm to get him onto the dance floor.

He seemed willing to do that, at least, for which she was thankful. What mattered was that she'd gotten him away from Cho. Now where were Ron and Hermione? She hadn't seen them since they had arrived. How had the other blokes reacted to her outfit, and the other girls to his? She would have to ask as soon as she saw them again. For the time being, however, she had better things to do...such as dancing with her date.

MONSTER MASH

By Bobby "Boris" Pickett

I was working in the lab late one night

When my eyes beheld an eerie sight

For my monster from his slab began to rise

And suddenly to my surprise

He did the mash

He did the monster mash

The monster mash

It was a graveyard smash

He did the mash

It caught on in a flash

He did the mash

He did the monster mash

From my laboratory in the castle east

To the master bedroom where the vampires feast

The ghouls all came from their humble abodes

To get a jolt from my electrodes

They did the mash

They did the monster mash

The monster mash

It was a graveyard smash

They did the mash

It caught on in a flash

They did the mash

They did the monster mash

The zombies were having fun

The party had just begun

The guests included Wolf Man

Dracula and his son

The scene was rockin', all were digging the sounds

Igor on chains, backed by his baying hounds

The coffin-bangers were about to arrive

With their vocal group, "The Crypt-Kicker Five"

They played the mash

They played the monster mash

The monster mash

It was a graveyard smash

They played the mash

It caught on in a flash

They played the mash

They played the monster mash

Out from his coffin, Drac's voice did ring

Seems he was troubled by just one thing

He opened the lid and shook his fist

And said, "Whatever happened to my Transylvania twist?"

It's now the mash

It's now the monster mash

The monster mash

And it's a graveyard smash

It's now the mash

It's caught on in a flash

It's now the mash

It's now the monster mash

Now everything's cool, Drac's a part of the band

And my monster mash is the hit of the land

For you, the living, this mash was meant too

When you get to my door, tell them Boris sent you

Then you can mash

Then you can monster mash

The monster mash

And do my graveyard smash

Then you can mash

You'll catch on in a flash

Then you can mash

Then you can monster mash

Harry seemed to relax in her arms as they continued to dance, which in turn helped Ginny to relax as well. "You know, that song sounds really weird," he managed to comment as they made their way around the dance floor, Harry leading far better than she had ever known him to do...but what mattered was that he was doing it.

"That's for sure. Reminds me of an old horror movie with Frankenstein's Monster."

"All the same, it's all too appropriate for Halloween," Harry remarked.

"That's for sure," Ginny had to agree even as she felt Harry rest his forehead on hers and his embrace gently tighten. "By the way, Harry ..."

"What?" His breath was warm and sweet on her face.

"I'm sorry I ... made you kiss me earlier. But I didn't want to run into Cho. Please don't be upset with me."

Harry smiled. "You don't need to force me to kiss you, Gin. However, I do have one suggestion ..."

"Yes?"

"Let me make the first move. After all, that's what a bloke's supposed to do."

"This is the 21st century, Harry. Women can make the first move nowadays if they want to."

"Call me old-fashioned, then," he replied with a cheeky smile. "But I prefer to be the one to do it."

"I'm not saying I mind, Harry." Ginny returned the smile with every bit as much cheek as her companion. "Just that it's old-fashioned."

"Then will you let me kiss you of my own free will this time?" This time his smile held not only cheek, but the heat of imminent desire, his green eyes darkening with that same desire and the tip of his pink tongue licking his lips.

Only Ginny knew just how sweet that tongue tasted ... almost as sweet as his lips. Her heart pounded at the prospect of both tasting those lips and soon after, the tongue again. "Of course, Harry," Ginny crooned, her arms once again going around her date's neck to pull his head down in order to reach him.

"Gin, what did I ever do to deserve you?" he whispered just before their lips met. The kiss was sweet and chaste at first, but as it lasted longer and longer, it got progressively more passionate and open-mouthed. He seemed unable to get enough of her lips, and his hands held her face between them as he attempted to devour them. Not long afterward, her hands were holding his face between them and soft moans began to issue from both hungry sets of lips. "Oh, God, oh, God ... Gin, dear God, how I need you ..."

"No talking, Potter," she ordered. "Just kiss me. But first, let's get out of sight." She spotted a door nearby and headed for it; Harry followed her to it with no resistance whatsoever. She pulled open the door, then pulled him inside by one sleeve and locked the door behind them with a nonverbal Locking Charm. "There, that's better," she crooned. "Now, come here, Mister, and let's get on with what we were doing."

"That's the best idea I've heard all night," Harry growled seductively as he pulled her close to ravage her throat with his hungry lips, and his hands traced her body gently, tentatively, but ever more intimately even as he moved sensuously against her. After that she lost all track of time, all sense of where she was. She had no idea what had happened to her clothes and didn't care. Nor did she care if they stayed in here all night, not even if everyone in the room ended up watching them, including Ron and Hermione!

All she knew, all she felt, was the touch and caress of Harry's lips and hands on her, then not long afterward, his body. His warm, delicious, gorgeous, gloriously naked body ... possessing hers, loving hers ... Dear God, she had hungered for this for so long, so very long that she didn't think she'd ever get enough of him. He was like a disease, a sickness in her blood...a sickness she never wanted to be cured of.

"Dear gods, Harry ... love me ... love me ..."

"Yes, Gin ... Yes ... yes ... oh, Merlin, yes ..."

After that, it took only a short time for both their dreams to be transformed into a rapturous reality. His shadow, her fire...and their chaos. Then the sum of their parts blended into a perfect whole as Harry and Ginny came together, body and soul. The stars sang ... and Heaven smiled. They had truly gone beyond the point of no return; nothing would never be the same between them again...and both were glad of it. Now all that remained was to tell the rest of the world.

* * * * *

It was fortunate that by the time the couple was ready to leave the broom closet, they didn't meet anyone...or at least not any of the various former professors and Order members in attendance, such as Dumbledore, McGonagall, Tonks, Lupin, and even Trelawney and Flitwick. Harry was especially thankful that Snape hadn't been one of them for he'd have never have let him hear the end of it.

Even at that, he couldn't help wondering just what was going on with his two friends. Had they ended up doing the same thing as him and Ginny or what? If so, Harry could only hope that they hadn't gotten caught by one of the former professors or older Order members. For the time being, though, all they could do was mingle with the rest of their former classmates and see what other costumes had been chosen.

Which they did. They didn't speak to everybody they passed, although they saw that Justin Finch-Fletchley and Maria Elena Velasquez had come as Pocahontas and John Smith, just as Colin Creevey and Hannah Abbott had come as Zorro and a Spanish senorita and Padma Patil and her date, Anthony Goldstein, had come as Egyptian royalty, Cleopatra and a Pharaoh. Harry suspected Ramses II, since that was the one they knew the most about. Or at least that *Anthony* knew the most about!

All the gazes of the girls they met seemed to linger on Harry's outfit, of course, but Ginny's glares in their direction kept them from voicing their opinion...at least at that point in time. Harry even saw Cho and her date again. She wore a blue and gold long formal dress with a phoenix and dragon design in the proud tradition of ancient China, her ancestral home, her dark hair intertwined with yellow roses and gold glittery strappy sandals on her feet. Her date, Lee Jordan, was appropriately dressed to complement her. Harry even managed to smile apologetically at her for Ginny's earlier actions, even though deep down didn't blame her for having acted as she did.

He also noted that Amanda Kingsley was now dancing cheek-to-cheek with Blaise Zabini and couldn't help wondering why she was being so chummy with him. Was it to make Seth jealous or what? As far as he could tell, though, it was just as likely that Seth was being chummy with Parvati in order to make Amanda jealous, so it was six of one and half a dozen of the other, as the old saying went.

It still burned his hide, however, that Draco and Pansy had actually come as super-heroes. If he'd been in the right frame of mind, he would definitely have confronted that smarmy git for doing such a thing. It was just that right now, he really didn't feel up to a confrontation, even though he was definitely tempted to do so. For the moment, the most he wanted to do was see if they could find Ron and Hermione.

* * * * *

They still hadn't found them by the time they reached the refreshment table, so they decided to get themselves a drink and look over the crowd, then see if they could spot them that way. However, as it turned out, the couple found them...and to Harry's dread, Ron's voice carried halfway across the room as he called out to his best friend and sister. Several heads turned in their direction, including those of Malfoy and Pansy, although thankfully they didn't turn and head for them ... at least not immediately, although Harry was sure it was only a matter of time.

"Harry, mate, where have you and Gin been, anyway, in a broom closet or something? 'Mione and I have been looking all over for you!"

When the other two reached them, Harry gave his friend a green-eyed glare icy enough to freeze him on the spot. "For Merlin's sake, Ron, why don't you just announce it to the whole bloody room already?" he all but hissed in an angry stage-whisper.

"Sorry, mate. Just wanted to make sure you heard me."

"Oh, I heard you, believe me. So did half the people in this room," Harry returned snappishly.

"I told you you shouldn't have shouted, Ron," Hermione scolded.

"Sod off, 'Mione. I don't need two lectures," Ron shot back at her. In a lower voice, he said, "Well, were you where we figured or what?" he directed at Harry.

However, Harry wouldn't speak, simply nodded and let Ron make of it what he would.

"What about you two? We couldn't find you for a long time, either." The knowing look Harry gave in Ron's direction prompted a blush and an affirmative nod back. "By the way, we're just lucky that Snape's not one of the former professors here. If he had been, he'd likely have caught one of us going at it in one of the broom cupboards, and we'd never live it down!"

"The only ones I've seen tonight are Dumbledore, McGonagall, Trelawney and Flitwick. Tonks and Lupin were *supposed* to be here, but I suspect they're off snogging or even shagging somewhere, just as we were," Hermione put in. "Remember, they just got married not too long ago."

"Which just proves you shouldn't make a newlywed couple come to a thing like this!" Ron laughed just before turning to his date. "Might be a good idea to get us some punch too; shagging can definitely give you a chronic case of dry mouth." He made sure to speak quietly this time, although being as close as they were, Harry and Ginny

caught it and exchanged wicked, knowing smiles before returning their gazes to their respective friend and brother.

Now that they'd managed to ascertain what their closest friends had done, though, they couldn't help speculating on what the others might be up to. Of course, they couldn't very well go around snooping in broom closets, so they resigned themselves to hearing it via the Ministry grapevine, which was every bit as gossipy as the *Quibbler*, not to mention having seemingly endless sources of information.

Harry looked at his watch, having been carrying it around in his trousers pocket; it was now close on to nine o'clock. The party had been in full swing for roughly three hours, and so far he had managed to evade Malfoy and his female partner in crime...but how long would his and Ginny's luck hold out? One could never be sure, especially not without having taken some Felix Felicis. Too bad he hadn't thought to do it (and have Gin do it too) before coming here. Now he could only hope to *continue* to elude Draco and Pansy ...

* * * * *

No such luck.

Just as he and Ginny were getting themselves another drink of punch, Draco and Pansy came up to them, the look on their faces the sort you'd expect to find on someone out to kill you ... and enjoy doing it too...like Voldemort.

"Well, I was wondering when we were going to run into you, Potter, Weaselette. Just what are you two supposed to be, rejects from a rummage sale or something?"

"For your information, these are pirate costumes," Ginny shot back before Harry could stop her.

"You've got to be kidding! I've seen better clothes in the rag bag!" Pansy almost snorted.

"Pirate clothing is supposed to look like that," Harry shot back, unable to remain silent any longer. "And what about you? Just who the bloody hell do you two think you're kidding, wearing super-hero costumes? You're the worst kind of..."

Only Ginny's elbowing him in the side prevented a major confrontation, Harry was convinced later on. At the moment, though, he just gave her a dirty look for doing it.

"All right, we've traded our token insults for the night, Malfoy, so let's just move on with the evening."

"Oh, I assure you, Potter, I'm just getting started," Draco shot back.

Fortunately for Harry and Ginny, two of the former professors...one of which he was glad to see was Remus, the other McGonagall, although both of the younger couple were sure that Tonks wasn't far behind...came up to them. "What's going on, Harry?" Remus directed at him, directing a glare in Malfoy and Pansy's direction which made even them quake in their boots, so to speak. You generally didn't cross a werewolf and live to tell about it.

"Malfoy and Pansy are giving us a hard time," Harry explained, his wand just inches away from his hand even now.

Malfoy gave him a killing glance and said, "Like bloody hell we are. We're just having a friendly talk."

Harry could scarcely keep from snorting, and it didn't look like either Remus or McGonagall was any more convinced, the elderly witch pointing her wand in their direction in a threatening manner. "Somehow I find that hard to believe, Mr. Malfoy," she shot back skeptically. "Gryffindors and Slytherins have rarely had friendly interactions. As far as that goes, if you don't stop harassing Mr. Potter and his date, Remus and I might just decide to dock Slytherin House fifty points."

Her tone told Draco and his date that she meant business, so he and Pansy reluctantly slunk away, but vowed to come back at the first opportunity.

"Thanks, Remus, Minerva. I really didn't want to fight him, but he was giving me less and less choice."

"Our pleasure, Harry." Remus smiled again, glaring after the two Slytherins even as Tonks joined him, and he slid his arm around his new wife. "After all you've been through, you deserve to have some fun without smarmy gits like those constantly after you."

McGonagall simply smiled and nodded in acknowledgment, having been ready to hex Draco and Pansy if they hadn't stopped harassing Harry and his date. If it hadn't been for her statement and Remus's disbelieving glare in their direction, there might have been a very nasty scene going on right now.

"I'm afraid that Draco sees it as his sacred mission in life to harass and insult me at every turn, and I don't think he's going to stop right away, if at all," Harry remarked even as Ginny stepped up beside him, and he slid one arm around her.

"Unfortunately, it's likely that you'll be proved right," Remus had to agree. "But we'll do all we can to help. Won't we, Minerva, Dora?"

"Of course," each assured him.

It was at this point that Ron and Hermione rejoined them, arms around each other and each carrying glasses of punch.

"What's going on, mate?" the redhead directed at his black-haired friend.

"Malfoy and Pansy were giving him a hard time, but Minerva and I ran them off," Remus explained. "She even threatened to dock Slytherin fifty points if they didn't leave Harry and Ginny alone."

"Unfortunately Draco doesn't give up easily," Harry added. "So I've got to be ready for almost anything."

"You mean *we'll* have to be ready for almost anything," Ginny put in. "We're a team, remember?"

"No, *we're* a team," Ron declared. "The four of us. Safety in numbers, remember?"

"Yeah. Safety in numbers," Harry agreed, although there had been all too many times he, Hermione and Ginny had gotten Ron and some of the others out of tough scrapes such as the one in the Department of Mysteries. He hadn't initially wanted to take Ginny and the others, but Ginny had proven herself an able fighter in the end, so he vowed never to underestimate her again...either her fighting (or loving) ability. He even liked to believe that she was a lot like his mother must have been when she was a girl after the many times Remus and Sirius had reminisced about James and Lily. Harry had mentally compared Lily and Ginny afterward, marveling at how similar they were and unable to help wondering if that hadn't been by some Higher Power's design.

For the moment, though, all he could do was enjoy spending time with the latter at the party, not to mention how hot she looked in the pirate wench costume even as she looked him over and thinking him equally hot...that not even the actual character of Jack Sparrow himself could look as good as Harry did. Of course, it was likely that she was biased because of her love for Harry, but that was a risk she had to take.

Fortunately it turned out that Remus and McGonagall, along with Tonks, kept such a sharp eye on Draco and Pansy that they didn't seem to have the nerve to approach Harry and Ginny again, for which the couple was thankful. For the rest of the night they alternately danced, sampled the refreshments and talked with yet other friends, exchanging stories as to how they'd chosen their costumes. Harry wanted to tell them how the girls had planned to ambush him and Ron, but couldn't in Ginny's hearing, not and risk having it get back to Hermione's ears. Even at that, he made a mental note to do it at the first opportunity.

Before this, he hadn't had too many chances to simply be himself and not have had to worry about finding or destroying Horcruxes or a certain Dark Lord. It was for this

reason that he intended to enjoy himself as much as he could tonight, if only to have some pleasant memories to look back on. Always helpful when it came to conjuring a Patronus, after all.

There was even a point where the girls were speaking in guarded whispers while their dates were standing together, nursing their drinks, and the latter pair could only wonder at what they were discussing.

"Probably planning some more mischief, if I know them," Ron declared. "In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if they were somehow channeling Fred and George."

"If anyone could do it, it would be them," Harry agreed with a chuckle. "But it's getting late. We'd better leave, if only to have some alone time with the girls. What do you say?"

"You need to ask, mate?" Ron gave his friend a cheeky smile as the two young men headed for their dates, then whispered in their ears. The girls gave cheeky smiles of their own as they linked their arms with those of their escorts and left the party, catching the eyes of a few of their former classmates and nodding in acknowledgment on the way. Once out of the room, the two couples headed for their own private rendezvous, Ron and Hermione one way and Harry and Ginny another...and by the end of the evening, Ginny was pleased to see that the costume she had chosen for their private moments indeed made Harry forget about other females in a hurry.

They had gone to the boys' flat, while Ron and Hermione had gone to the girls', using Locking and Silencing Charms to prevent their being disturbed. Ginny was just as pleased to hear later on that Hermione had finally worn her own private outfit for Ron, and it had nearly driven him spare before he'd gotten it off her. In fact, he had been so impatient that he had even ... This was when Ginny had held up a hand, well able to imagine what had happened next. Harry had been every bit as impatient, she was sure, but knew she would want to savour the moment since they didn't get too many moments alone together.

It wasn't easy for either of them to wait, but the joy and ecstasy they had shared simply taking it slow and loving had made it well worth the delay. Who could have imagined that what had started out as a scheme to shock the boys could end up so happily for all concerned? But what truly mattered was that it had. Fortunately everything had worked out, and they had all made it through the Final Battle sane and at least relatively unscathed. Because of this, the future would hopefully hold only the beginning of a long, happy life together for all of them ... and their children ... in a Voldemort- and Darkness-free world.