# Chapter 8: Ronald Weasley and the Longbottom Chamber

A/N: Apparently, the Hogwarts train station isn’t in Hogsmeade, it’s on the opposite side of the castle from the village. Chapter 5 has been corrected to reflect this.

“-. 31 October 1994 .-“

Third year had been weird without Harry, but Ron consoled himself with the knowledge that Neville had it worse. After he started hanging out with him and Hermione on the train ride, everyone went from ‘look at that squib’ to ‘look at that squib thinking he can replace the Boy-Who-Lived.’ It was stupid, who said they needed a replacement? Or, what, did they think Ron wasn’t able to have other friends?

No really, who started it? They never found out, even though Ron suspected Fred and George had at least some idea.

Adding to the weird, their new Defense Teacher Remus Lupin was the best Hogwarts had in decades *and* he didn’t see a dubious end like the ones before. Ron didn’t want to trust a hope too fast, they’d already thought the curse on the Defense position broken. The tosser Lockhart had *looked* like he’d end second year safe, only to end up wiped of all his memories *and* with every major bone broken after he tried to pull something with one of Dumbeldore’s weird American guests.

Fourth year was even weirder. It started out great with the Quidditch World Cup, Ron got to see Viktor Krum in person, Ireland beat Bulgaria in the finals but Krum still caught the snitch, and they all had a great after-party. Harry even came over to stay at the Burrow for a whole week leading up to it, they all got to go as a family! Even Hermione showed up in time for the portkey.

But then the party was turned into a stinker. A bunch of Death Eaters (or wannabes?) went on a tent-burning, torture-happy amble just when the night was winding down, masks and everything. They even created the Dark Mark in the sky! Dad said that was a big deal, that it was something they’d not seen since the war, when the Death Eaters went killing under orders by You-Know-Who. Or even without them, sometimes.

There was also a whole kerfuffle where Barty Crouch Sr.’s house-elf was found with the wand that cast the mark – they’d stolen it off Ginny! When was his sister gonna get a break?

Then, because the school year just needed to be *completely* ruined this time – from the very beginning too! – Dumbledore cancelled quidditch! It was ridiculous! ‘For international cooperation’ he said, it was so dumb!

How did they expect to have international cooperation without Quidditch? The World Cup had just given them more international cooperation than they knew what to do with, how was Ron the only one to see it?

And then this nonsense about not being allowed to sign up for the tournament unless you were of age, honestly! They made him sound like Hermione!

Unfortunately, it didn’t matter what Ron thought. Quidditch was cancelled, the Tri-Wizard Tournament was happening instead, and Dumbledore’s Age Line had beaten even the twins. It was over.

Or that’s what he *would* say, if the name draw wasn’t being done on Halloween. Or fake Halloween, according to Hermione who’d researched the stuff like mental since Harry Hunt Day. Either way, if the night passed without something stupid happening, Ron would hug a ghoul.

With how things were going, he might have to do it anyway!

Ron was hard-pressed not to groan when the golden plates returned to their original spotless state, he wasn’t done eating yet! How was he supposed to fret for four people if he couldn’t eat properly? Fretting took a lot of energy you know, and neither Hermione nor Neville were doing their part in the last two years since Harry left.

The noise in the Great Hall bubbled up, then cut right off as Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Which didn’t really make any sense to Ron, it wasn’t like they were going to miss out on having a Champion for the Triwizard Tournament or anything.

Ludo Bagman made a bit more sense, even if he looked mental the way he beamed and winked at the students, at least until Mr. Crouch glared at him to put a lid on it. Which Mr. Bagman seemed happy to ignore, up until he met the eyes of the twins and suddenly turned disinterested, almost bored.

Bloody welcher.

“The goblet is almost ready to make its decision,” said Dumbledore. “I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions’ names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber.” He indicated the door behind the staff table “There, they will receive their first instructions.”

The Headmaster took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it. All the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were suddenly extinguished, plunging the Great Hall into a state of dramatic darkness. The bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames in the Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall. Everyone watched, waiting. And waiting. And waiting…

Ron checked Hermione’s watch.

“Any second,” Neville whispered from next to Ron.

“How whiny do you think the Slytherin table will be when it’s none of theirs?” Hermione murmured from Ron’s right, which Ron could only turn his nose at in disgust. “What? It’s a fair question.”

“She has a point,” Neville said. “They've been scraping the bottom of the barrel.”

Ron snorted. “The barrel wasn’t that full to begin with.” With how annoying the Slytherins got after Harry ‘abandoned’ Hogwarts, you’d think they didn’t think anyone else in the school was worth anything. Which just went to show they were all nutters. What, did they think being loud would make the rest of the school forget how they basically cowered in the dungeons the entire last term of second year?

You’d think Malfoy, at least, would shut his trap ever since his mum got disowned and the Black inheritance went bye-bye.

“Maybe they *should* get the Champion,” Ron said. “Then they’d get kittens trying to root for them and Krum at the same time, and Dumbledore would finally have no choice but to expel the lot.” And commit them to the mental ward at Saint Mungo’s, but you didn’t tempt fate by voicing your greatest dreams out in the open, that would be crazy.

The flames inside the goblet suddenly turned red, like they hadn’t been since the first night it was unveiled. The thing began shooting sparks, then it spat a big tongue of fire straight up. The entire hall gasped as a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it. Dumbledore caught it and read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue.

The Headmaster spoke in that strong, clear voice he’d taken to using more and more since Harry left. “The champion for Durmstrang will be Viktor Krum.”

“No surprises there!” yelled Ron. He let himself imagine that the storm of applause and cheering that swept the Hall were all for him, dreams were true while they lasted, that’s what Harry always said. Ron forced himself not to fawn, but he still applauded with everyone else as Viktor Krum rose from the Slytherin table and slouched up toward Dumbledore, then turned right along the staff table and disappeared through the door, just like Dumbledore said.

“Bravo, Viktor!” boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. “Knew you had it in you!”

*You and everyone else in three countries*.

The clapping and chatting died down just in time for the Goblet of Fire to turn red again, and spit a second piece of parchment.

“The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour!”

Ron felt Neville pinch him and realized he’d somehow missed the veela’s departure from the hall even though he’d stared at her for the whole thing. Crap.

“Now don’t you all cheer for your Champion at once,” Hermione sniffed over the noise, looking sideways at the remainder of the Beauxbatons party. “Honestly, who raises such crybabies?”

‘Crybabies’ was being way nice, Ron thought. Two of the girls who’d put their name in the Goblet were sobbing big, fat, ugly tears all over their makeup with their heads on their arms. Ron scowled at them, it was Hogwarts’ turn but their bawling was completely spoiling the tension.

*Had* completely spoiled the tension because that’s when the Goblet of Fire turned red for the third time.

“The Hogwarts champion,” Dumbledore called, “is Cedric Diggory!”

“No!” Ron balked, surely there was at least one upper year Gryffindor that was better than the chief duffer?

But he may as well have been screaming at turkeys, the uproar from the Hufflepuff table completely drowned him out. Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to their feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers’ table. Holy smokes, the applause for Cedric went on so long that Dumbledore couldn’t make himself heard again for ages.

“Excellent!” Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down.

“Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real-” But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was obvious why.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and from it came out another piece of parchment. A *fourth* piece.

Baffled, Dumbledore nonetheless snapped his hand out and caught the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out – “Harry Potter.”

There was a long, stunned silence.

Ron, Neville and Hermione looked at each other. Then they turned around to look around the hall.

The silence stretched.

Then everyone and their grandma that wasn’t seated at the sputtering Slytherin table palmed their faces with the easily recognizable groan of ‘*of course*.’

Hogwarts spared no time experiencing the biggest mass breakdown in diplomacy that the castle had ever seen. It was quite the sight to see.

Well, since Harry Hunt Day, anyway.

The three exchanged another meaningful glance.

“Raptor Mountain?” Hermione mouthed what they were all thinking.

“Raptor Mountain,” Ron agreed grimly, trying his best not to show that he dreaded the idea every bit as much as her.

“Perfect.” Neville, shockingly, was anything but dismayed despite having been the least enthusiastic ever since that first disastrous first trip through. “I’ve been preparing for this all year.”

Ron and Hermione looked at him like he was insane. “Mate, I swear, if it’s another one of your ‘let’s you and him get a faceful of screaming mandrake’ plans, I’m gonna hunt down Norbert just to feed you to him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Ron,” Hermione sniffed. “It’s Norberta now, she was a girl dragon all along, haven’t you been listening to Hagrid? Also, that would needlessly put all of us in danger. Better to just shove Neville into that broken vanishing cabinet, then we can breathe easy for the next two months.”

“Save me from the bravery of the Tarnished Trio,” Neville muttered over his forkful of peas. “It’s not any plants this time. You’re going to love it, trust me. I’m actually surprised it hasn’t occurred to you, Hermione, what with being muggleborn and all.”

“Occurred to me? What are you talking about?”

“Oh no, I’m not saying anything after you hurt my feelings. You’ll have to wait and experience it for yourself. Well, witness anyway. Experience would be rather terminal.”

“You know, I can tell you’re just playing on my curiosity.”

“I only do it because it works.”

“Yes,” Hermione huffed sullenly, completely uncaring of the stares that the ‘Tarnished Trio’ were getting from everyone in the hall the longer they went without exploding, honestly, what even was their reputation? “It always works, curse my starving mind, I have to feed my head more than Alice on mushrooms.”

Ron rolled his eyes, then spent the rest of Dumbledore’s very stiff closing remarks glaring at everyone who thought it was a fun idea to look at the three of them like they knew what was going on. Yes, that did include Snape and McGonagall and Dumbledore himself.

Speaking of whom, the Headmaster made sure to have the three of them summoned to the side for a chat before they had a chance to escape the Hall.

Dumbledore made a show of questioning them if Harry had warned them of any of this beforehand, was completely unsurprised when they said no, then sent them off with a sigh and a request to please let Harry know that someone was out to assassinate him again.

Ron would have let things die down and then had them summoned to his office later, but nobody besides Hermione or Neville ever asked him for his opinion anymore, so whatever. Maybe the real point was to plant the idea of enemy action in the ears of everyone shamelessly eavesdropping?

At least they got to walk the halls after most everyone else had already left. Ron would have expected Malfoy or some other Slytherin to bother them, but all the ones who looked in their direction looked scared before beating a hasty retreat.

“Harry’s gonna be so mad,” Neville said.

“Well, I don’t know,” Ron shrugged. “Nothing seems to be able to rile him up anymore.”

“No, Neville’s right,” Hermione replied. “I’ve been wondering if Harry might ever consider anything worse than not getting to attend Hogwarts anymore, but having his return be both forced *and* tainted in yet another plot on his life might just do it.”

“Kind of impressive, innit?” Ron grunted. “Whoever managed this has to be mad or a genius.”

“Or both,” Neville agreed. “I can’t believe we didn’t expect this.”

“We fell for the false hope,” Hermione pronounced with them dreary airs that might just get to be less about schoolwork than getting killed one of these days. “Seeing Professor Lupin once again at the staff table after absolutely nothing life-endangering happened all third year gave us a false sense of security.”

The three stopped in front of the Gryffindor Common room and spent a few moments gathering their strength.

“We could go straight to the Room instead?” Hermione suggested.

“You can go ahead,” Neville said. “I can catch up after I get my stuff.”

“What stuff?” Ron asked. “What plant could you possibly have found that’s worse than the mandrake?”

“It’s not a plant, Ron, I’m branching out.”

“Ugh, I hate it how you don’t even need to plan your puns.”

“Well that’s it then, into the lion’s den we go,” Hermione huffed. “Poachers are People Too.”

And now Ron was wondering who the heck the Prefect on password duty was this week, because this one *reeked* of know-it-all disease, there was no way it was just some joke. Not that Ron would have laughed if it was. Even though it sounded like it might have been a good one. He was starting to feel the creeping horrors he’d been glad to leave behind in second year.

The lions were more like starving vultures, though they were starving vultures already neck-deep in their butterbeer. Ron was going to say something about this probably being another bad sort out to get Harry, but it turned out everyone though the same already. They just wanted a party and didn’t care about the reason, which was just – hold on, were those sausage rolls?

Unfortunately, Ron barely managed to snatch two on the way in and another two on the way out with how Hermione literally marched him along. Then they both had to find out from a random first-year that Neville had gotten bored of waiting on Ron’s appetite and went ahead on his own. He had the worst of friends, honestly, the mountain was still going to be there later, bloody hell!

And bloody Headmaster for putting them on the sport, bloody everybody, bloody Ministry just because.

If they hadn’t cancelled Quidditch, none of this would’ve happened!

## “-. .-“

Not an hour later, Ronald Billius Weasley yet again decided that yes, the gigantic meteor Hermione said hit the Earth way back did them a huge favour wiping out the dinosaurs. Charlie would smack him if he ever heard him say that, but it was the truth! Because this?

This was bloody *mental*.

“Since when do they shoot lasers?!” Hermione shrieked as they ducked behind a rock, and not a moment too soon because EXPLOSION. “This is absurd!”

“You always say that!” Ron gasped as his heart raced. Every time they came here, they had to run better and farther, and every time it was barely enough.

“Well it’s still true!” She gasped while working to untie the bag she pulled from her bigger bag. “This is not how dinosaurs work, it just can’t be!”

“Too small, too big, too many feathers, too few, too naked, not naked enough,” Ron rattled, risking a peek and only barely pulling back when the rock exploded way too close again, ugh, dust in his eyes! “Give it a rest already, something stupid always happens here!”

“Not raptors with eye lasers!” Hermione pulled out a rune-etched marble and tossed it blindly over and out. It exploded. She tossed three more before Ron managed to peek out without almost getting his face blown off again. He carefully pointed his crossbow and shot a bolt into the face of the only raptor that still saw them.

“Dust cloud’s good, next cover a hundred paces that way, go, go, go!”

They dashed as fast as they could to the next cover, but the laseraptors spotted them anyway with explosive results. The two of them loudly cursed ‘Ed’ to the ninth generation for making magic impossible in this place. If Hermione hadn’t found out that enchantments done in the real world didn’t *immediately* wear off in here, they wouldn’t have any way to scare those things off, never mind kill them!

It’s not like Ron was a crack shot or anything, the only reason he landed that hit was because of the accuracy enchantment Hermione spent every other study period imbuing into the crossbow since the year started. And the arrows too!

“The things – I do – for friends,” Hermione wheezed once they were behind the next ridge.

“The things I’ll do *to* friends!” Ron panted, grabbing her bag of marbles since she was useless now and lobbing some around the corner himself, boom, boom, boom. “What’re –“ toss, BOOM “-the odds –“ toss, BLAST “-we’re just summoning –“ boom – CLUCK-CAW “Even bigger ones?”

“I – don’t care – to learn,” Hermione Granger blasphemed. “Let’s hurry.”

‘Ed’ had put the other entrance on the other side of the mountain, but the bloke was so mental he decided you shouldn’t be able to just walk around, it was all huge impassable ravines! That meant they needed to climb all the way up to the glacier lake on top and then back down. While running for their lives! With no magic!

Sneaking still worked, thankfully. Sometimes.

After another dead giant bird-lizard thing and a few more of Hermione’s bombs scaring the rest of the pack off, they finally lost their trail while going up a narrow pass. After half an hour of that, they reached a forest, where it was easier to skulk around than on the prairie. Their woodcraft had grown *fast* the last two years, that was for sure, the Forbidden Forest had been reduced to practice!

“Hey there.”

“AAH!” Hermione screamed in fright. “What-who-NEVILLE!”

Ron pretended he hadn’t also screamed like a girl. “Neville?!” *Now* he shows up?! “This is where you show up?! You –“

“Quiet,” he hissed. “Are you stupid? They’ll hear you!”

Wait, is this what Neville meant before? This was ‘later’?

ROAR

“Now you’ve done it,” said the patchwork of camo and mud and leaves that was Neville Longbottom. “Might want to run.”

“You bastard, this is your fault!” Ron hollered as they took off in the opposite direction from where the massive stomps now came, along with a multitude of pitter patters-. “If you hadn’t scared us – YIKES!”

BLAST went the red beam against the branch near his head.

“Longbottom, I’ll get you for this!”

“I was *going* to lead you to a safe spot,” Neville rolled his eyes, not tight-breathed in the least as he ran alongside them. “You’re the one that tromboned like a stag in heat, what was that anyway?! So much for tactical mastermind-”

“Everyone’s got a plan until they have a giant turkey in their face!”

“Oh so now you agree with me – no, no that way, sweet *Merlin* Hermione, it’s like you’ve never been in the woods before, just follow me, both of you.”

“I thought you went back!” Ron wheezed as Neville led them down a trail that really shouldn’t be so easy to miss. “Or at least they took you out-“

“Gee, Ron, good to know my friends think I’m a loser *or* a coward now.”

“Be glad it’s not both!” Hermione panted. “How did you find us? How are you here? And what is this getup, don’t tell me you’ve been watching Predator, films aren’t a good example for real life!”

“Quiet, they’ll-“

ROAR-SHRIEK-STOMP.

“-hear us, run!”

They ran faster.

“Faster, run, run for it!”

“Run for *what*?”

“You’ll know it when you – what am I saying, you’re Ron Weasley, this way!”

“Hey!”

Ron followed, stumbled, followed better, followed worse, he consoled himself that Hermione was doing worse the whole way to-

He almost ran over it, the hole in the ground was almost perfectly concealed under detritus, Neville had to tackle his legs from under him and pull him back and down. Ron’s face burned with effort and embarrassment, then turned white when a raptor almost bit his head off at the last moment*.*

CRUNCH.

Teeth crushed the fake lid made of moss and branches.

The downpour of dirt and wood chips preceded a waft of foul breath and grasping claws digging for prey.

“They’re coming through!” Ron hollered, scrambling to get deeper down the tunnel as fast as crawling could take him. “They found us, they’re coming through, Hermione give me – crap, I lost your marbles somewhere, where’s my-?“

“Ron,” Neville’s calm voice came from the darkness. “Get down.”

Ron got down.

BANG.

Ron looked up through ringing ears and saw a gun.

BANG

Four featherless raptors tried to break into the den. Two of them lived long enough to regret it. Neville blew a golf ball sized hole through the third, drew a pistol on the fourth, missed and nailed instead the T-rex outside. The next shot hit better, all four dead, but now the t-rex was pissed it off, so Neville pulled a rope that brought down the wall hiding the cannon mounted at the top of the stairs loaded with grape shot.

"Tally ho, lads!"

The grape shot shredded the last raptors in the blast, the sound and shrapnel sent all the smaller creatures that still had wits running, and everything else in a mile. Neville fixed his rifle with a bayonet and charged the one small terrified chicken-lizard that didn’t scamper quick enough. It bled out waiting for the t-rex to avenge it, which it never did because Neville loaded the cannon with a proper ball and pulled the rope.

CRACK-THOOM!

The king of dinosaurs was removed its head in a spray of dark blood and feathers.

It stumbled, bled, tipped over and finally crashed with a wet thud.

“I’m no rebel sympathiser, don’t misunderstand me,” Neville said in the ensuing silence, bayonet dripping blood behind him as he stood with rifle over his shoulder at the mouth of the tunnel, haloed in the light. “But them founding fathers knew their stuff.” His words sounded like ancient rumbling spells to Ron’s ringing ears.

“How can you be so blaze about this?!” Hermione asked with a shaking voice. “We – those were – we almost got eaten by a T-rex – since when do you shoot guns?! Since when do you have guns?!”

“Ey what?” Ron asked with all the dim bravery of a man who just saw his life flash before his eyes. “That’s what you’re hung up about? It’s not like we got expelled.”

“This isn’t a joking matter! We almost died!”

“Not like it sticks here,” Neville said breezily and wait, what? “Be right back.” He stepped through the light at the end of the tunnel and was no longer there.

Gunshots came again, in twos and threes.

“What do you think he meant?” Hermione wondered.

“Forget that, what is this place?”

“Unbelievable, Ronal Weasley I swear I’ll – oh, what’s even the use?”

“Yeah, what’s the use, Hermione? ‘Death doesn’t stick here,’ what else can it mean but what it means? Are you planning to find out for yourself? It probably hurts like a mean mother. Why are you even surprised anyway? Would Harry’s friend really give him a side way through space that would kill him? Would *he* let us use it? Honestly, it’s like you don’t trust Harry at all sometimes.”

“What I don’t trust is his common sense!”

Ron looked at her in disbelief.

“Don’t look at me that way, I mean – look at what just happened Ron!”

Ron blinked. “But that was all Neville though?”

“Ugh, I give up!”

‘This place’ turned out to be a really closey hole in the ground, big enough for a bloke to stash some essentials and still have enough room to lie down. Then again, half of those ‘essentials’ turned out to be some variety of muggle weapon, which did a fair job of bringing Ron almost all the way back to freaking out, despite the pretense he put up with Hermione.

“Neville,” Ron said cautiously when their friend finally came back. He looked disturbingly pleased with himself. “What the *hell*?”

“Just gotta know how to scare ’em, they learn what to stay away from right quick, just show ‘em you’re the biggest predator around. They’re smart chickens, but still chickens in the end.”

Who the hell cared about chickens?! “That’s not what I meant and you know it!”

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘what’?”

“What is this place?” Hermione cut in before Ron could start ranting proper, the witch! “This place has hideouts? Why didn’t anyone tell us? Did Harry know? Did he just tell you?”

“*A* hideout, yes *now*, there wasn’t anything to tell, no and no.”

Ron’s eye twitched with the effort of trying to keep up with the conversation.

“This wasn’t here?” Hermione asked in disbelief. “But then how – you can’t have built it!”

Eh?

“And why not?” Neville asked with furrowed brows. “Just because I’m bad at magic doesn’t mean I can’t do other stuff.”

But he wasn’t though? Anymore?

“But how?” Hermione, bless her, completely missed the real point. “When could you possibly have had the time?”

Neville looked at the girl in bemusement. “Hermione, no offense but you only know how to organize time for cramming, and even then your study schedules aren’t the best. Way too much revision time and not enough rest, not efficient at all.”

Hermione sputtered in complete affront. She seemed just about to start tearing into the other boy, when they both noticed that he still had his guns. Bayonet and everything. With blood still on it.

After that, Hermione seemed to have lost all words. And because she was speechless, Ron too went speechless from the shock of seeing her speechless.

They remained speechless all through the trip through a second, much longer tunnel – then cave? – they hadn’t known was there. Neville had a muggle torch. Flashlight. Two of them. And a gas lantern.

After nearly an hour of spelunking, the passage opened out into a round clearing that had clearly had a lot of work done. There was a waterfall and stream running through it, a smoking firepit with log seats and lean-tos, there was a table with stumps for chairs, a bunch of well-maintained garden beds all over the place, a small enclosure with tiny chicken-lizards even Hermione didn’t know the species of, even a cottage!

It was a bright, airy cove that somehow got plenty of light despite being surrounded and camouflaged by sheer cliffs and tall trees on three sides. The only exception was the edge to the right. The ground turned into one big rock sloped just high and obliquely enough that you weren’t able to see the place from outside.

Neville led them to the edge and showed them the view. The place overlooked the mountaintop plateau, with the glacier lake calm and picturesque in the distance, at the base of the tall peak.

Not for the first time, Ron marveled at the fact that there were people out there who could just make pocket worlds with enough space inside to fit entire mountain systems.

“To answer your question, Hermione, you spend all your free time in the library. *I* spend almost all of mine here.”

Bwuh-no! How did that make any sense? It didn’t make no sense, that’s how! That stuff – what Neville just did – guns! What, did he just add a pick and shovel and get a musket? It made no bloody sense!

“You sure they can’t track us here?” Hermione asked, because she always tried to burst your bubble if you managed to impress her. “Some of them got away, right?”

“Even if they could, they know to steer clear, if not of my scent then the smell of gunpowder,” Neville waved vaguely. “Also, the ones that got away are their former pack’s food by now. Triangular bayonet wounds are impossible to stitch up, just as the founding fathers intended.”

“You need to find yourself a girl, mate,” Ron finally couldn’t contain himself anymore. “All the time spent with them yanks that Harry’s got living in his house now, it’s rotted your brain!”

“Well, that rotted brain just saved your arse from the respawn mechanic, and Hermione’s too.” The what? “So piss off. Actually, why don’t I help you with that? Harry’s door is still a way’s off from here, but we should be able to get there without any more hassle, if you two keep a lid on it this time. How about it? I’ll even stay behind so I don’t mess up your groove when you caterwaul to Harry as if everything is still his fault. You know, like in the good old days.”

Hermione pinched her nose. “Neville, I swear to Morgana I will turn you into a toad.”

“Not in here you won’t.”

She threw a tree frog at him.

Neville dodged and ran away when she took off chasing after him with her hair in a snit.

Ron put his face in his hands and groaned.

Why were all of his friends complete nutters?

## “-. .-“

As every time before, their return to the real world happened through a hay shed. Also like every time before, the tingle and goosebumps of Magic’s return filled Ron with an almost overpowering urge to pull out his wand and cast a spell, any spell, just to reassure himself he could do it again. Next to him, Hermione wasn’t much better.

Somehow, they managed to contain themselves until they traversed the hay meadow, walked the trail through the forest on the far side – looking around with paranoid eyes the whole way – and finally got ushered through the Pottery’s gate by the property’s outermost detection ward.

“Lumos.”

“Expecto Patronum.”

Hermione had finally managed a corporeal patronus last year, but she had trouble using it for ‘trivial’ reasons, so Ron still came out ahead of her in this one thing. “Harry,” he told the messenger patronus. “Me and Hermione are here. Something happened that we need to talk about.” The stallion reared gloriously and cantered off like a white silver blur.

“Hermione *and I*, Ron.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“Hmph!”

No one came to greet them, which meant that either Dobby the house-elf was avoiding them, or Harry had told him to leave them be after last time.

They still didn’t know what the deal with that elf was. He was the Malfoy elf up until last year, Ron knew that much. But then Harry went on his second Yearly Walk and did *something* by the end of it that turned Dobby into a free elf. Who then promptly asked to be bonded to Harry himself, much to Hermione’s outrage over slavery. Which it *was,* but good luck getting her to understand it was better than the alternative. For everyone not a house-elf anyway.

The grounds were pretty big, and still mostly fallow with just three people and an elf living here. Harry himself still lived with the Flamels, but he spent a day or two here every week, and even more around the time of All Hallow’s Eve. It took some time to reach the manor proper, and they had to let themselves in through a side door. Ron felt on and off like he was being watched, and not just when he saw Hedwig keeping an eye on them, Harry’s snowy owl.

The entry hall was tidy and dust-free, unlike when Harry showed them around the first time he shared the secret of the Fidelius. Which he apparently learned in a parallel life dream.

They crossed paths with Charles Gordon first, the younger of Harry’s two permanent houseguests, though still around his late 20s. Or he looked like it, anyway, according to Harry he was much older but hadn’t aged much because of ‘time travel shenanigans,’ whatever that meant. Even Harry didn’t seem completely clear on the details.

Charles was on his way back to his lab after a coffee refill, but he stopped long enough to point them Harry’s way.

They found him in the ground floor parlor, though his voice reached them first. His and that other man’s, the old bloke that was some kind of muggle brain doctor. Ron cautiously side-eyed Hermione, just in case she started gushing again. Bloke was supposed to have been some real hotshot in the muggle world way back, something about being able to make people smarter? Or something. Hermione almost exploded from excitement when she first learned about it, as if she wasn’t the smartest person around already.

Mental, that one.

“-if the brain really does store data through quantum mechanics instead of neurochemical networks,” Doctor Jayson Strauss was heard grousing through the open door. Had it been left open so they knew to let themselves in? “No wonder my surgery fails so catastrophically, I didn’t account for any of this.”

“It was decades after your time,” Harry tried to appease the old curmudgeon. He saw them and nodded them in, but turned his attention back to the man. “It still is decades in the future from *now*.”

Strauss grunted. “I don’t suppose you were a quantum physicist in another life?”

“Sorry, I only know it’s a thing from Hermione’s rambles, and even then it was an off-time hobby of hers at best in that timelines. I already told you all I know.”

“Without first telling *me* any of it,” Hermione mumbled under her breath. “You don’t make it easy not to feel jealous, Harry.”

“Lovely,” said the old doctor, setting aside whatever he’d been reading while either not realising or caring they were there. “Then it seems I remain useless for the foreseeable future, never mind the whole alien problem.”

Ron still had trouble wrapping his mind around that.

“Pretty sure that’s not what the Goa’uld use to enslave people,” Harry replied. “They’re 100% biological computers with DNA-based rather than quantum tubule storage, least that’s what Charlie says. There must be *some* para-physical stuff happening with them, otherwise the memory extraction spell wouldn’t have had anything to work with. They’re not just biological machines. But whatever’s going on there, it’s not self-referential or Osiris would have recovered *something* by now.”

“Still no changes?”

“None. Mindless water snake that wouldn’t even know to feed itself if we didn’t mix in nutrients directly in the water. I’m kind of sorry I got on Sirius’ case about it now.”

It had been the first and only row between Harry and Mr. Black that Ron knew about. Harry found out they’d shut the ‘goold’ thingie in the Chamber of Secrets, all alone in the dark. He got on Mr. Black’s case hard, about leaving a ‘sentient, sapient creature’ in sensory deprivation and isolation like he’d been in Azkaban.

Personally, Ron thought Harry was too kind to body-snatching abominations from space, but he didn’t press after the first time Harry walked out on him for saying so.

“Anyway, I think you’re overthinking it,” Harry said when the doctor didn’t reply. “The surgery does work. Sure, it always backslides too, but we already know nerve regrowth potions heal the damage.”

“It’s not a perfect solution,” Strauss said in full curmudgeon mode. “The person isn’t as smart as the surgery made them.”

“But Charlie’s still smarter than you instead of the dumbest bloke you ever knew, and he remembers everything again, even kept all the skills. Maybe the quantum stuff doesn’t really matter.”

“You’re the one who introduced me to it.”

“And I’m starting to regret it. Nicolas always says not to base decisions purely on future visions. I didn’t listen to him about this.”

“I’m not going to ignore my own ignorance, boy.”

Harry sighed. “Fair enough, I don’t like doing that either, anymore. Oh look, the potion’s here!” Belatedly, Ron noticed that the dumbwaiter had come up from the basement. Good silencing spells there.

Harry went over and brought up a small cauldron, then set it down on the tea table for the man to see. “What do you think?”

The doctor put on a pair of glasses and peered intently. He then took a book from nearby, opened it and began looking between it and the potion. “I think the fact I still need to cross-reference fume-color combinations means I continue to not understand this half of medicinal field I never knew existed until two years ago. You’re the expert here, not me.”

Harry scratched his cheek, looking almost shy all of a sudden.

Ron couldn’t say he was being phony, it really *was* bizarre how much better Harry had gotten at potions ever since he didn’t have to deal with Snape.

“Alright you hopeless scamp,” Strauss groused. Hermione had stopped Ron from going further in, so he still hadn’t spotted them. “I can see you vibrating with impatience. Go ahead and brag, what is this foul smelling thing you made?”

Harry’s smirk would’ve been obvious even if Ron weren’t looking at him. “Nerve regrowth potion.” What? But that was a seventh year recipe! “Because if a hopeless dunderhead like me can do it, then you don’t have anything to worry about, now do you? Nicolas says I should be able to turn them out reliably after another two or three runs. Does that help?”

“Why would it help?”

“Nicolas says that seeing people who *aren’t* geniuses succeed at complicated stuff might make you less paranoid about geniuses like yourself failing?”

There was an awkward silence. When the old man spoke again, he seemed torn between offense and relief. “I really shouldn’t need peptalks at my age.”

“Is it working then?”

“Yes, you insolent boy, it is. So be a good lad considerate of your elders and let me stew in peace while you go and play with your friends.”

Oh, so he did notice them!

“Dinner’s at the usual time, Charlie’s cooking.”

“Yes, yes.”

Harry quietly motioned them out of the room and then led them down the halls back outside, to the private garden behind the manor, between it and the greenhouse further off. It still looked like a horrific jungle in there, meaning that Neville hadn’t gotten his claws into it yet. Maybe he really was telling the truth about spending all his free time camping in chickensaurus hell.

“Harry,” Hermione said primly once they were all seated around the snack table on the patio. “I’ve decided: you have no clue what a genius is.”

“Eh?”

“Harry dear,” Hermione imitated Ron’s mother, ugh. “Nerve regrowth is *the* seventh year potion. You’ve barely entered fourth.”

“Hogwarts has a very washed-down curriculum,” Harry insulted what he’d once considered his only succor on this Earth. “Also, the nerve regenerator is considered high-risk more due to the expensive ingredients, as well as the hazards associated with giving your living tissue samples to just anyone. A lot of dark voodoo can happen with that. From a technical standpoint, it’s only about as difficult as a Polyjuice and it doesn’t take even half as long.”

“Also, you don’t have to deal with Snape,” Ron said around his scone. “I wager having Nicolas Flamel teaching you helps too.”

“Yeah, Nick’s great!”

Hermione huffed, but let it go. She was clearly jealous of Harry’s good fortune no matter her claims to the contrary, but it wasn’t like Harry was keeping them out or anything.

“It’s not fair!” Hermione suddenly groaned and slumped in her chair, making Ron into a complete liar. “It’s not fair that you get to learn things so much better than Hogwarts teaches us! And now that whole scene in there Harry!” Hermione leaned over the table and took Harry’s hand in hers, a fervent glint in her eye. “Did I see that right? Was that what I think it was? Is the Great Doctor Strauss getting worn down? He can’t be, I’m – so many people are counting on him!”

Erm.

Harry pulled his hand away and rolled his eyes. “It’s hardly going to make a difference to you, Hermione.”

“Well I never! Such an insinuation, I would never have expected it from you of all people, Harry, honestly!”

“What, you *don’t* want to be smart?” Ron poked the frizzy flame.

“I’m already smart, Ronald,” she said precisely what Ron had thought just moments before. “If, however, the brain surgery makes you smarter than me, then of course I’ll take it too!”

“Why don’t you two tell me why you’re here?” Harry cut in before Ron could properly rally for a counterattack, the traitor. “You don’t brave Raptor Mountain for just anything.”

Unlike Neville, Ron thought sullenly.

They told him what happened at the name drawing ceremony.

Harry slouched in his chair, looking bizarrely excited at the prospect of yet another attempted murder. “Did I ever tell you how I freed Dobby?”

“No,” Ron replied when Hermione turned her nose at the topic of house-elves. “We just assumed it was more Prophet nonsense.”

Hermione side-eyed him. “*You* did, Ron. I, at least, try not to immediately jump to conclusions ahead of evidence.”

On the topic of house-elves? Really? “So how did you do it, Harry?”

“I… kinda sorta fell asleep part-way through the walk last year and sleepwalked the whole Hogwarts bit,” Harry admitted sheepishly. “It turned out great though! I dreamed what would’ve – what *did* happen in second year if I never contacted Mister Flamel. Ginny was still fine, but it took the whole year to figure the mess out, and by the end of it Malfoy’s dad managed to get Dumbledore kicked out!”

Eh?

“It was a whole thing. Anyway, when everything got sorted out and Dumbledore came back, Malfoy Sr. came over to throw a snit just when Dumbledore and I were talking over the horcrux.”

The what? Whore crocs? What did that have to do with anything? What kind of whore wears crocs anyway, or did they all – should he ask his dad-?

“Stuff happened and I gave Mr. Malfoy Tom’s diary with my sock in it. When he handed it to Dobby, it was like giving him clothes, and that freed him!”

“Huh,” Ron said, glad not to have to ask any embarrassing questions. “Sounds like it would’ve been a really full year.”

“But that’s not all,” Hermione guessed. “If it was just a dream, it wouldn’t mean anything. What did you do?”

Harry looked shifty. “Somehow, I kind of understand how but don’t know how to explain… I managed to make the dream count as reality in *this* reality because the dream *was* reality that go around.”

Ron gaped at him. So did Hermione.

“It really wasn’t much! Just a moment really, but it was the moment when Dobby was offered clothes. So when he was given the sock back *then*, he was able to accept in *here*. Dammit, I’m not explaining this well.”

Ron continued to stare at Harry.

Hermione also stared at Harry, but she wasn’t quite as speechless as Ron. “You can warp reality?”

“Not really?” Harry hedged. “It was just the once, and it’s not like it’s that weird! Magic warps reality all the time, that’s literally what it’s for.”

Hermione put her face in her hands with a groan. “What am I going to do with you, Harry Potter?”

“Not like you can do anything,” Ron wrinkled his nose and drank some pumpkin juice. “Least not before you marry him or something, you can’t just tell a bloke what to do just because, that’s just not how it is.”

Hermione gaped at Ron this time, face scarlet red.

What? What did he say? “It was just a joke,” Ron huffed, though he couldn’t stop mumbling one last bit. “Not like you could do much better, to hear Ginny talk.”

Hermione covered her furiously blushing face with both hands. “You know what, I’m just going pretend you didn’t say that.”

Ron did his best to hide his relief. “Probably a good call.”

“And don’t think I don’t see you smirking too, Harry. Enjoying your best friends’ discomfort, what will the Flamels say?”

“That’s really not it, Hermione.”

“Oh? What is it then? Go on, I’m dying to hear it.”

“… I guess I’m just really happy.”

Oh.

Well… shucks.

“Also, I didn’t feel a thing today,” Harry quickly tacked on, because he still wasn’t that good at being happy in the open yet, it was a real shame. “And believe me, at this point I would’ve. Being forced into a magical contract against my will? Honestly, I probably would’ve felt it even two years ago. But nothing like that happened.”

Huh.

“I’m not feeling like I missed any huge thing either, and I’m getting where I can do that all the time now. Feeling when I’m about to do something really ignorant or really dumb, I mean, it’s how I’ve been able to catch up with potions actually.”

Hermione hummed thoughtfully. “What are you saying?”

Oh good, it wasn’t just Ron who was clueless.

“I’m saying that something happened or *will* happen that nipped this in the bud for me. Or someone. You said that Dumbledore was as shocked as anyone, and I know it wasn’t the Flamels or anyone here. Definitely not Sirius, contrary to what some people might accuse him of, he’s not so daft that he’d sign me up for a deadly competition as a prank. He’s liable to curse the culprit into a permanent stay at Saint Mungo’s.”

Ron bobbed his head. “That’s what we got out of the situation too, yeah.”

“That only leaves me, then. And since I only find out about this now, the only option left is that I *will* do something. Or get someone to do something. In the future.”

“What does that mean, Harry? Wait – you’re not saying you have a time turner!”

Harry was surprised, then thoughtful. “No, but you might not be not completely cold either.”

“What *do* you mean then?”

“It means that I haven’t been on the Walk this year yet, because real Halloween is still two days away.” Harry sat back in his chair and smiled mildly. The glint in his green eyes almost made him seem mad. “It means, Hermione, that in two days I begin learning how to mess with time.”