

## The Bargain: Side Effects Looking Beyond the Mark

### Looking Beyond the Mark

The trip from Surrey to St. Mungo's was excruciating for James. His leg was throbbing worse than ever, and he was starting to see spots just as a mediwitch swooped in to examine him.

"Got another one, Georgina," the woman said as she conjured a stretcher for James to lay on. "Is exam room twelve cleared yet?"

James was forced back onto the stretcher so he didn't see the source of the voice that spoke next; he presumed it to be Georgina.

"Only just. Levitate him in there and I'll assist as soon as I'm finished with my Splinching."

"Stop fidgeting," the mediwitch hovering over James said, and pointed her wand at the stretcher.

"And a pleasant hello to you," James retorted, catching her name on the tag hanging from her ample bosom. "A bit busy are you...Elizabeth?"

The witch rolled her pretty hazel eyes. "You're a bright one, aren't you?" She floated him to the exam room and the door clicked shut behind them. "Strip," she commanded and James did a double-take.

"Excuse me?"

Without looking up from where she was donning a white robe over her uniform, she explained, "I need you to take off your clothes, or I can't give you a proper diagnosis."

James complied, but hit a snag when he got to his leg. The trousers were ripped, but every time he tried to push them down past the break, a great well of pain shot through him.

"Need a hand?" Elizabeth asked with a smirk. "If you do it quickly, the pain won't last as long."

"Er," he croaked. "Can't you just...sever the trouser leg or something?"

There was a definite twinkle in her eye as she did exactly that and removed his trousers completely. James was *not* going to take off his underwear for this exam.

"Right," she said, assuming a business attitude once more. "Let's look at that leg."

A beam of purple light shone from her wand and she ran it up and down the area around the break. "Pretty nasty, but I've seen worse. What spell was it?"

James did a double take. "I'm sorry? I didn't say it was a spell."

Elizabeth's lips thinned as she surveyed him. "I'm not stupid, you know? I'm not going to buy a lame story about a Quidditch accident. I get about twelve cases like you every day. There's a war going on, and we're the ones that have to pick up the mess. Now...which spell was it?"

Shaking his head in defeat, James shrugged and answered, "I dunno. Things were moving pretty fast, so I'd be guessing at best." When her icy gaze continued to freeze the room, he added, "All right... I remember being hit with something hard, so he probably just Banished something at me and hit my leg?"

"Well," she said finally, "at least I won't have to worry about latent curses." She popped on a pair of glasses whose lenses resembled two large, glass donuts. "Lie down," she commanded. "This is going to hurt."

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When James arrived home later that evening after a debriefing at Order Headquarters, his leg was stiff, his back was sore, and his ego bruised. He had come to find out that Elizabeth the mediwitch, was none other than Elizabeth Jones, a Slytherin in the year ahead of him who had been the butt of one too many of the Marauders' pranks. Although he was healed, it hadn't been without a good dose of payback for the years of fun they'd had at her expense.

He opened the front door and walked inside, only to be smothered by his wife's embrace.

"Oh, James," she cooed, hugging all the air out of his lungs. "I was so *worried*."

Holding her just as fiercely, James kissed her hair and inhaled her scent. It had always been a source of comfort for him. "I'm sorry, love. Things got a bit dicey there, at the end."

Lily led him to the sofa and he was pleasantly surprised to see a serving of tea set out for them. He sat next to her and gratefully took a proffered mug.

"Tell me everything," she prompted, taking a sip of her own tea.

James recounted everything, almost exactly as he had for Dumbledore, except with a little more embellishment when it came to the part where he and Arthur had dueled the Death Eaters. He was about to finish up when Lily interrupted.

"You're a wonderfully brave man, James. And even though my love for you sometimes distorts my view of who you are, I can tell you're holding something back."

Looking at her smirk at him like she often did, he realized that she knew something about his adventure that he hadn't told her, and he would likely be in trouble for it. "You...uh, can?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "That, and I've got it on good authority that your partner managed to walk away from the night's...events in better shape than you." James shifted on the sofa. "Oh...and someone from St. Mungo's popped in by Floo asking about you. A real looker, too. Elizabeth Jones ring a bell?"

Unable to fight it, a flush rose on his cheeks. "She was the mediwitch who patched me up," he confessed.

"You needed to see a mediwitch? James, you've got to be more careful with yourself. This isn't playtime at Hogwarts anymore!"

James set his mug down next to hers. "Lils, I know."

She apparently wasn't done, however. "Because if something happened to you..." Her sentence trailed off and she began to blink her eyes. A tear managed to escape, anyway. "If something happened to you or...Harry, I don't know what I'd do."

His heart broke, and he took his wife in another embrace. He was grateful that she let him. "I know, love. I'm sorry for worrying you, but sometimes...sometimes there are things so evil out there – things so completely opposed to all the happiness and peace we want for our children that it's *worth* sacrificing what we have to protect it. And if we don't, we're as good as helping the likes of Voldemort to take over."

Lily sniffed and nodded her head. "You're right, of course. I just worry so..."

Pulling away from her, he stared into her eyes and said, "Don't. We can't worry about it, or it'll eat us alive. We need to be strong for each other and for Harry."

She nodded again. "We need to live our lives so that Harry can grow up in a normal home."

"Exactly," James confirmed. "Like his birthday. I've been eyeing those miniature brooms at Quality Quidditch...."

"No," Lily said adamantly, but there was a twinkle in her eye. "I'm not letting you buy one of those for him, James. He's too young."

"But Lils," he protested, "he won't be more than six inches off the ground."

There was a pause in which he thought he would lose the argument, so serious was the look on her face. "We'll think about it. Right now, I've got to put him to bed."

Lily stood, and James stood with her. "I'll come help you."

She looked a bit shocked by his offer, but smiled nonetheless. They began to walk up the stairs and James winced with every movement of his leg.

Lily turned a serious eye on James again. "Don't think I have forgotten about Miss Jones, by the way. I want to hear what she did to you at St. Mungo's – I don't trust her as far as I could Banish her."

James smirked despite himself. "Yes, love."

Harry was already asleep among a pile of toys he had been playing with. The peaceful expression on his face was so adorable that James felt a great well of joy burst within him. It was so striking that he had the glimmer of a memory float past his mind. Something about Arthur's daughter....

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Popping home to the Burrow, Arthur let out his breath in relief that he hadn't Splinched himself along the way. He was confident in his Apparition skills, just not in his constitution. The fight with James against the Death Eaters had been quite a bit more harrowing than he had expected, and as his knees wobbled on his way to the sofa, he reflected on his wisdom in choosing not to go into law enforcement like his school friends.

"Arthur?" called Molly from the kitchen. "Is that you?"

He sat heavily onto the sofa and felt the adrenaline leave his system, causing a brief surge of shaking to pass him. "I'm in here, love." Laying his head back onto a squashy pillow, he closed his eyes and willed his body to relax.

Arthur?” came Molly’s voice again, this time closer and with a very distinct note of concern. “What happened?”

He opened his eyes and watched her heavily-pregnant body waddle over to him. She placed her hand on his forehead and withdrew it suddenly. “You’ve gone all cold, and...you’re *bleeding*.” She wiped her hand on the apron that covered her dress, leaving a streak of crimson.

“Bit of a scuffle at work, dear, nothing serious.”

“Nothing serious,” she repeated, now fully appraising him with her keen eyes. “As if a gash, torn robes, a pound of dirt, and you looking like you’ve almost died was an everyday occurrence.”

Arthur winced at her succinct description of his condition. “Yeah, well...you should have seen the other guys.”

“And what have you been doing that’s put you in such a state, Arthur Weasley?” Her tone brooked no argument; Arthur would have to confess everything.

“You remember what Dumbledore wanted to see me about?” he queried.

Her eyes narrowed. “He hasn’t got you involved with this war, has he?”

Arthur felt his strength return and stood, facing his wife. “Molly... you know how desperate things are out there. They need every able witch and wizard they can find. You-Know-Who is gaining ground every day. We’ve *got* to act.”

“And what about your family?” she retorted hotly. “Who’s going to raise them when you’ve been killed on some fool’s errand?” Her hands moved automatically to cradle her stomach. “Who will be this one’s father when you’re dead?”

With a sigh, he reached out his hands to her shoulders and locked eyes with her. “Molly,” he said solemnly, “I promise I won’t do anything stupid, and I promise I’ll be here to see this one married and having babies of her own.” He moved his hands down to rest on her belly as well, and received a sharp kick from its inhabitant.

Molly’s face softened immediately. “Do you... really think it’ll be a girl this time?”

For some reason, a distant thought grazed the edges of his mind – something about his next child being a girl – but it left just as quickly. “I do,” Arthur answered. “And she’ll be raised by a mother *and* a father that love her.” The baby kicked again, right on the spot where his right hand laid.

They embraced then, and the baby kicked and kicked where Molly’s stomach came into contact with Arthur. They stepped apart and shared a laugh. “Well,” said Arthur, “I guess this one’s a bit keen to be born, wouldn’t you say?”

Molly kissed his cheek and tugged on his hand. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Dinner’s almost ready.”

As he let his pregnant wife lead him into the kitchen, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d forgotten something. After trying to capture the memory of whatever it was, he soon gave up and concentrated on the delectable smells of roast lamb and steamed potatoes. It was good to be home.

## The Bargain: Side Effects Old and New

### Old and New

Warm breath blew softly onto Harry's cheek. He cracked his eyes slightly and saw Ginny's blurry face, relaxed in sleep. She breathed slowly, but deeply; her mouth was ajar, and was the source Harry's wakefulness. One of her small, pale arms was draped around his middle and her legs held his hostage under the duvet. A smile crept across his face as he realised that although this was the first time he had woken up in Ginny's arms, it wouldn't be the last. He would make sure of that.

Unfortunately, the perfection of their first morning as husband and wife was interrupted by Harry's full bladder. Once that was taken care of, Harry slipped back under the covers and tried to find a comfortable way to hold Ginny but not wake her up – there would be hell to pay, he was sure, if she was awoken prematurely. As he slid his arm under her pillow, the jostling woke her up just enough so that she flipped sides and buried her head with the duvet. Harry gave a silent sigh of relief and then frowned, having been looking forward to replicating the wonderful feeling of being enfolded by his wife. He quickly recovered by spooning behind her.

Just as he was drifting back to sleep, she jerked her legs, kicking Harry's shin. He bit his lip in an effort to keep in the groan of pain and howl of surprise that fought to escape him. As the pain receded and Ginny's breathing deepened, he realised that sleep wouldn't be returning for him. If he lay there awake, he'd just risk waking her up. Deciding to take the safe route, he slipped slowly back out of the bed, shrugged on a t-shirt and trousers from the floor and padded into the efficient kitchen of their cottage.

The sun was high in the morning sky as he looked onto the grounds through the locked window over the sink. Harry guessed it to be close to eleven o'clock. After their crazy night, he wasn't surprised that they had had a lie-in. A small *pop* announced someone Apparating into the cottage and Harry whirled around to find Dobby staring back at him – Harry realized too late that he didn't even have his wand.

"Dobby!" Harry exclaimed. "What in the..."

"Dobby is very sorry, sir," the house-elf interrupted with a squeaky voice, promptly setting down a large serving tray heaped with food, and closed his eyes. "Master Dumbledore said I would not disturb mister and missus if I came over with breakfast... but he was wrong."

Harry watched in morbid fascination as Dobby curled his ears over his eyes and searched blindly with his hands until he found the leg of a nearby chair. Harry wasn't quick enough to realise what Dobby intended to do with the wooden chair, and the house-elf had hit himself twice before Harry could snatch it from his hands. "It's all right, Dobby. You don't need to punish yourself for bringing breakfast. And you don't have to cover your eyes; I'm fully dressed."

Dobby peaked slowly out from behind his ears and gave a sigh of relief. He looked tentatively around. "Is your missus...?"

Harry set down the chair and sat in it, just as his stomach gave a large growl. "No... she's still asleep."

Just then, Ginny's head appeared from behind their bedroom door. She gave a huge yawn and opened the door fully, tying her dressing gown as she walked into the kitchen. "I'm awake now," she said with a mock glare at Harry. "With all this yammering, I don't think anyone could even sleep in Binns' class." Her eyes spied the serving tray, immediately brightened, and she changed the subject. "What's for breakfast?"

Dobby smiled appreciatively and levitated the tray onto the table. Ginny sat across from Harry pulled the lid of the closest platter. She speared a banger before Harry could blink and demolished half of it in one bite. "A bit hungry are we?" Harry asked cheekily.

Ginny gave an exaggerated nod and continued to chew.

Dobby poured juice and magically re-filled the carafe. He bowed and Harry smiled at him while Ginny finished off the rest of her sausage. "I'll be going now, Master Harry. Professor Dumbledore said to be expecting him after noon, sir."

"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said and the house-elf *popped* out of sight.

Harry turned back to Ginny, who had finally swallowed her food. "I'll have you know," she said, absently buttering her toast, "that I haven't had a proper meal since our reception." As soon as she was finished speaking, the toast was inserted into her mouth and ripped in half before she began to pile eggs and kippers next to the uneaten portion on her plate.

Filling his own plate, he absently wondered how they would be taking care of their laundry.

They finished breakfast together, talking about their relief at being finally married, being free of the curse, and how they were now on the road of married life. When Ginny led Harry back to their bedroom, he decided that he could definitely get used to being Ginny's husband.

Professor Dumbledore arrived promptly at noon, but because they had forgotten about Dobby's announcement, Harry and Ginny had to dress themselves while the headmaster waited in the living room.

Once they were presentable, Dumbledore Portkeyed them away from the cottage and to a familiar sloping lawn.

"Harry?" Ginny asked cheekily. "Have twe been here before?"

Dumbledore spoke up before Harry could reply, however. "You must be the intruders Godric mentioned."

"Godric?" asked Ginny. "You mean he's the one that chased us out of there?"

With a chuckle and a twinkle in his eye, Dumbledore motioned for them to follow him. "He's a decent fellow, and a friend of the family. When he needed work about twenty years ago, I could hardly refuse him, and he's been here ever since."

They approached one of the looming walls that was overgrown with ivy. Dumbledore passed his hand over a part of the wall and a crack appeared, spreading up and down until it formed a doorway. He pushed on the wall and it swung open on great, groaning hinges.

"Wait a second," Ginny said, just before Dumbledore stepped inside. "*You're* the owner of this castle?"

The headmaster smiled kindly at Ginny and beckoned them to follow him. "Oh, yes. I'm afraid the Ministry felt the need to reward me for vanquishing Grindelwald and this," he said with a sweeping gesture of his hand, "is the result."

The grounds were just as spectacular as they had been when they'd been there before, but somehow, with the thrill of unlawful trespassing removed, it seemed even more magnificent.

They walked to the door that Harry had managed to open before, and Dumbledore turned to face them once more. "It has come to my attention that neither of you have plans for a residence."

Harry looked guiltily at Ginny who simply raised her brow back at him. "I thought you said you'd take care of that, Harry?"

"I did...I mean, I will," he replied hotly, giving her an impatient look. "I was a little busy right before the wedding and we haven't had a whole lot of time since then."

Ginny coloured slightly at this comment and began to examine her toes.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Yes. Be that as it may, I have arranged to transfer ownership of this property to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter for the sum of...fifty Galleons."

Harry's mouth fell open and Ginny's head shot up, her eyes as round as the moon. "You mean...." she began.

"You can't be serious," Harry blurted.

"Indeed I am," Dumbledore said with a chuckle, just as the caretaker appeared from behind a large hedge.

"I'm here, Master," the man called and settled beside the elderly wizard. "I've got the papers, just as you asked, sir."

"Well done, Godric," Dumbledore praised. "Shall we retire to the drawing room?"

Not knowing what to think, and even less capable of speaking, Harry simply nodded and followed his professor into the castle.

\*

September first came much too quickly for Harry's taste. His time with Ginny in the Canary Islands was nothing short of magical. The three days they had spent in their new home had been equally enjoyable. Still, it was very good to be back at Hogwarts amongst friends and family.

As Head Boy, Harry, along with the Head Girl, Hermione, was responsible for the ceremonial opening of Hogwarts castle at the beginning of the new school year. Since the students weren't all at the entrance yet, and some were mingling around the doors before the rest arrived, Harry used the time to find Ron.

Ginny found Hermione first and an excited scream followed by a spate of jubilant twittering momentarily distracted him.

"Mental, I'm telling you," Ron said as they slapped each other on the back.

"Yeah," Harry said, still looking at his wife with Hermione. "They're pretty mad."

"Not them," Ron replied. "You!"

"Me?"

"Yes! Marrying my sister," Ron said with a sad shake of his head. "As if being around me wasn't enough Weasley in your life. Now you're permanently attached to one."

"And it's a good thing, too." The slimy, taunting voice of Draco Malfoy interrupted their conversation and Harry had the urge to thwack him on

general principle.

"Shove off, Malfoy," Ron said and turned his back on him.

"If Potter hadn't married the littlest Weasley, there'd be no one with enough pity to take her in, let alone shag her."

Before anyone could blink, there was a blast of light from Harry's wand that struck Draco right in the middle. The blonde boy instinctively grabbed his stomach, but when nothing seemed to happen, he smiled and laughed at Harry.

"Is that the best you could do? I guess being Head Boy has finally made your ego too big for your brains to fit in your head."

Harry simply smirked and waited for Malfoy to posture with his bodyguards some more before he finally left.

Ron gave Harry an odd look and asked, "What'd you hit him with?"

Harry's smirk increased to a full smile. "Wait for it."

It wasn't five seconds before Draco was howling in fright and was taking off at high speed towards the lake, almost knocking McGonagall over in his haste.

"Delayed Bladder Buster," Harry explained in a low whisper as McGonagall approached. "Just like with Bill."

Ron's mouth formed a small 'O' as McGonagall began to speak.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, students. This year's Head Boy, Harry Potter, and Head Girl, Hermione Granger, will lead the students into the castle." She nodded at them and then retreated towards the lake, either to tend to Malfoy, or retrieve the first-years.

Hermione broke from Ginny and walked to the doors with Harry. He caught Ginny's eye over Hermione's shoulder and gave her a wink, before moving to grab the knob. He thought twice about it, however, and as he removed his hand, he waved over the doorknob, uttering a quiet incantation.

"You know," Harry said calmly, "you should do the honours. It's always the man that opens the door, but I think it'd be a refreshing change to let you do it."

Hermione gave him a surprised smile and then nodded. "Of course. That's quite thoughtful of you, Harry." She grabbed the handle and gave it a firm twist, before the large doors started to creak open. "I was just telling Ginny about how underrepresented women seem to be on the Wizengamot. There's only a handful of them there now and there's a long history of..."

She stopped speaking and began to yank on the doorknob, clearly unable to remove her hand.

Harry pinched his lips between his teeth in an effort to not laugh.

"Harry, help me. I seem to be stuck," she whispered.

There was a growing interest in Hermione's predicament from the surrounding students and her frantic efforts to remove her hand made Harry even more incapable of restraining his laughter.

"That's a right good Sticking Charm, that is," Seamus Finnegan announced. "Reckon you ought to try the counter charm?"

Hermione blushed and continued to struggle. "I used my wand hand," she said through gritted teeth. "I can't perform the counter-spell with my other hand."

Whispers from the younger students now mixed in with the not-as-quiet murmurings of the older students.

"Can you get on with it, Granger?" asked Terry Boot. "I'm starved."

"Just a minute," she trilled. Then more quietly, she hissed at Harry, "Will. You. Please. Help. Me?"

Tears leaked from Harry's eyes and it was everything he could do to restrain himself from looking at Ginny. He knew if he did, it would be his undoing.

Finally, a large figure loomed over them and Harry's humour evaporated.

"What on earth are you two doing up here?" asked a venomous-looking Professor Snape. He surveyed Hermione's hand and the desperate look on her face. "Thought you'd have a little fun, did you Potter?" He spat the last word out. "Your new...*companion* not enough entertainment for you, so you had to prank Miss Granger?"

The mood changed sharply then, and Harry's eyes narrowed upon his professor. "Pick on me all you like, *Professor*, but leave Ginny out of this."

Snape sucked in a breath and opened his mouth to speak when Ginny appeared next to Harry. "Oh, I think you've got enough going on, Professor Snape, without having to worry about my husband."

Whirling to face Ginny, Snape pointed his finger at her and was again preparing to fire off some acidic invective when Professor Dumbledore arrived. The Headmaster tapped Hermione's hand, which popped off the doorknob, and he pushed the doors apart. "No time for that now, Severus. We've a feast to attend."

The spluttering Potions master was clearly unhappy about not being able to dole out a detention or two, but followed Dumbledore anyway.

As the students passed between the doors, Harry felt a whisp of wind in his hair. He raised his hand to push his hair down when he caught Hermione's face. She winked at Harry and with a broad smile, walked hand in hand with Ron to the Gryffindor table.

Harry shrugged and took Ginny's hand. They walked into the Great Hall and found their customary seats in the middle of the table. It wasn't until he'd received several wolf calls from his dorm mates and Dumbledore was about to begin the sorting that he realised his hair was bright pink.

Hermione's smile was larger than the Cheshire cat's.

## The Bargain: Side Effects On Being Late

### On Being Late

September 22, 1997

"Harry?" Ginny asked from the bathroom they shared off the Gryffindor common room.

Harry put down his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and looked at the closed door. "Yes, dear?"

"I'm late."

A quick glance at the clock on the wall told him they had a good twenty minutes until their first class. "You've got plenty of time, Ginny."

"No, Harry," she said more forcefully. "*I'm late*."

The toast he was buttering slipped from his grasp as the meaning of her words sank in. "Y-you can't be late! I did my part of the Contraceptive Charm, and you took your potions. How can you be late?"

There was a pause and Harry walked over to the bathroom.

"Well, I'm late. It's been over six weeks since my last period, and the only time it's been that far off was when I first started having them. I'm as regular as your monthly detention with Snape."

Harry's head hit the door frame in exasperation. The loo flushed and Ginny started to hum as she washed her hands. When the door opened, Harry was vexed by her charming smile. "How can you be *happy* about this?"

"I know how the Contraceptive Charm works, Harry. You have to *want* to prevent the pregnancy." She sat down in Harry's chair by the window and began to eat his half-buttered toast. "It wasn't my fault this happened."

"But..."

"You start thinking of names, and I'll write up a letter to Mum."

"But..."

"I've always liked the name 'Rodney' or 'Grizelda'. Don't you think those are cute?"

Harry's jaw dropped and he was about to let loose with another scathingly simple 'but' when he remembered something. "You're pulling my leg aren't you?"

Ginny polished off his pumpkin juice and wiped her mouth with his napkin. "You're catching on, Mr. Potter. The look on your face was priceless, though." She winked at him and disappeared back into the bathroom.

It wasn't until she was in the shower before he decided on a course of action. Quietly opening the door, he tip-toed inside and closed it behind him. Then, pointing his wand at the shower-head, he muttered a freezing spell. It wasn't three seconds before she started to screech.

"HARRY POTTER, I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

The curtains parted and a very wet and naked Ginny Potter barreled onto the tile floor and slipped into his arms. The anger on her face was met with Harry's rolling laughter and even her half-hearted attempts to pummel him with her fists couldn't stop him. "You know, if this is what I have to do to get you in my arms wet and naked, I'll have to do it more often."

"You do," Ginny retorted, "and I'll be sure to make the toilet regurgitates the next time you use it."

Harry considered his options, looked at his partially-fogged watch and decided that he could be a little late for Transfiguration this morning. "Then I'll just have to take my shower with you."

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Harry's shower with Ginny took a little longer than planned, but it couldn't be helped. He sprinted down the corridor and slid to a stop in front of Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall was already lecturing.



Hello, Mr. Potter. Would you care to join your classmates?" She pointed to the empty chair between Ron and Hermione, his usual place, and waited for him to enter. "I don't need to remind you that your special living arrangements don't excuse you from arriving on time?"

"Sorry...Professor," Harry said sheepishly before he shuffled to his chair. He could feel the eyes of everyone on him. Ron was looking askance at him and Hermione was tutting under her breath. His hair was still wet and his face was pink.

"Do I want to know what you and Ginny were doing?" Hermione asked under her breath.

Ron's face went ashen. "Blimey. Would you not make it so obvious? It's hard enough for a bloke to *know* that you're...involved with his sister, let alone to know it was happening while he was eating."

Hermione clucked her tongue again at Harry's growing smile. "Ginny said she was late..."

At this pronouncement, Ron promptly fell out of his chair, eliciting a scream from Hannah Abbot next to him. Hermione was staring a hole in Harry's face while McGonagall swooped in to discover the source of the commotion.

"Is there something wrong with your chair, Mr. Weasley?" she asked, clearly upset at the second interruption in her lesson.

Ron righted his chair and shakily sat back down. "N-no, Professor. Everything's just...fine."

McGonagall's characteristically-thin lips became even thinner. "Indeed. See that you don't interrupt my lecture again, or all three of you will be serving detention." She pointed to Ron, Harry and Hermione in succession. "Don't think I'm ignorant to your involvement, Mr. Potter."

She swept off to the front of the class and resumed lecturing. Ron leaned over to Harry's ear and whispered, "We'll finish with this later, Harry."

His smile even wider, Harry nodded and began to take notes on the subtleties of cross-gender switching spells.

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The dungeon was dank, lifeless, and soul-suckingly dark – just as it always was. It was no wonder to Harry that Snape seemed to be so sour all the time. Even Dumbledore would be less-than cheerful had he been out of the sunlight for so long.

"If you have studied at all during the last two months, you will have no trouble brewing the potion I am about to put on the board." Snape's veiled threats were particularly acidic today, as he swept around the room. He always seemed to find Harry's eyes at the end of every comment, especially when it was a subtle slam on Harry's 'summer activities' as he put it. But every time he would try to bait Harry into becoming angry, Harry would simply think back to a particularly nice moment with Ginny, and it would all melt away.

"However," Snape continued, "seeing as how *some* of us weren't as fortunate as to be allowed to canoodle on our holidays, perhaps there will be a distinct lack of quality in today's potion." The greasy-haired wizard had a sour look on his face, as if the mere thought of Harry and Ginny being allowed to marry while in school had caused a cup of lemon juice to appear in his mouth. "Therefore, all substandard work will be tested on Mr. Potter." He said it with a sneer, and waved his wand at the board, revealing the potion they were to be working on.

"Contraceptus Potion," Hermione muttered beside him. "He wouldn't!"

"I assure you, Miss Granger," Snape confirmed, "that the Contraceptus Potion is N.E.W.T. level, and an approved potion for classroom instruction." He paused and cast a leering smile at Harry. "Mister Potter is the ideal candidate for testing as he is, after all, the only one in the class with someone to...test it with."

Snape turned around and stalked to his desk, but Harry had a sudden idea.

"Professor?" Harry asked, his hand dutifully raised in the air. "I'm sure your test plans are well intended, but did you really want to risk having more Potters in your class so soon?"

The sallow-skinned potions master seemed to pale in the dim light of the classroom. He narrowed his eyes and said, "Begin."

Harry shared a secret smile with Ron, who was just as pale as Snape, and began to brew the potion. For once, Harry thought he might actually have a practical use for his potions lesson.

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At dinner that evening, Harry received a note from a stern-looking McGonagall asking him and Ginny to meet in her office after their meal was finished. Harry gave his wife a shrug and a confused smile, hoping that she wouldn't be dragged into his cheek in Snape's class.

When they arrived in her office, Professor McGonagall was seated with Professor Snape, and there were two empty chairs opposite them. He and Ginny sat down without being asked. Ginny shifted nervously beside him.

"I assume you know why you are here?" their Head of House asked imperiously.

Neither of the teens spoke, but Harry could feel the tension in the room increase. Surely this was not all for a little comment in class?

"Professor Snape has informed me that there might be a serious development between the two of you that needs to be cleared up. I assured him that neither of you would be so irresponsible, especially considering that – although we have made an exception to matriculate the two of you – despite your married status, pregnant students simply cannot be enrolled." She cast her eyes on Ginny, whose face was hidden by her hair.

Harry goggled at her. "I thought you were *joking* ! You really *are* pregnant?"

"So it's true, then?" Snape accused. "You've gone and done it now, Potter."

McGonagall silenced Snape with a look and turned back to Ginny. "What do you have to say for yourself, Mrs. Potter?"

Ginny finally looked up and clutched at her side with uproarious laughter. "NO!" she shouted between giggles. "I'm not pregnant!"

Snape's face fell, as if he'd just lost a bet with Dumbledore on who would win the House Cup that year.

"I can assure you this is no laughing matter, Miss – Mrs. Potter."

Ginny finally contained her mirth and said, "Oh, yes it is. Professor Snape had no business listening in on my *private* conversation with Rebecca." Rebecca DeMilles was the only Gryffindor female in her year.

"I had a duty to ensure that you weren't plotting something against the school," Snape retorted with a flash in his eyes.

"And you heard half the story and slunk along to tattle, didn't you?" Ginny accused, defiantly jutting her chin in his direction.

"How dare you..." Snape began before being cut off.

"Enough," McGonagall commanded. "Why don't you tell us the *whole* story, then?"

Ginny looked to Harry, who nodded, still a little slow on the uptake, but vastly curious as to what Snape heard his wife telling Rebecca.

"This morning, I played a prank on Harry, here," she said, jabbing a thumb in his direction. "I told him I was late, not exactly telling him what it was that I was late for, and he assumed I was late for Potions. When I told him it was my period that was late, and that I was probably pregnant, he almost lost his breakfast. After I let him off the hook, though, he thought it would be funny to get me back and charmed my shower to freeze." Ginny paused in her tale for a moment and a faint bit of pink appeared on her cheeks. "We...uh, were a little late to class after that."

Harry could tell that McGonagall was trying very hard not to smile, as a small tremor in her thin lips could be detected every other second. "Indeed," she managed to say without a break in her composure.

Ginny continued, "Then when I was telling Rebecca about it, *after* class had been dismissed, Professor Snape eavesdropped behind us until he heard the word 'pregnant' and retreated to his dungeon."

Snape crossed his arms and was pulling at the folds of his robes in an apparent attempt to keep calm. "How was I supposed to know what devilry you were up to? When I discovered that you might be impregnated with Potter's brood, I was duty-bound to bring this to your Head of House."

McGonagall sniffed and then blew her nose. Harry thought he might have heard a bit of a giggle, but her face was hidden, so he couldn't be sure. "Yes, yes," she said. "That will be all, I think, Severus."

Snape fairly flew from her office and when the door clicked shut, Harry had a sudden realization. "So, *that's* why he chose the Contraceptus Potion for our class."

"He what?" Ginny and McGonagall asked simultaneously.

Harry shook his head at the memory. "He had us brew Contraceptus Totalis. He was going on and on about testing the defective ones on me, and I told him he shouldn't be so keen on having more Potters to teach. The look on his face...no *wonder*!"

Ginny fell against his side and began to giggle all over again. McGonagall's eyes were a little wet on the corners, but her face never cracked. "Indeed," she said at length. "That is quite...unusual, even for Severus."

When the laughter died, Ginny wiped her eyes and asked, "So are we in trouble, then?"

"No, no," McGonagall replied, pushing her chair back and standing. "I think we've had enough of a scare for one evening. You may go."

Harry and Ginny turned to leave, but stopped at the sound of their professor's voice.

"Oh, Harry? Ginny?"

They turned to look at McGonagall once more.

"I trust there will be *no* lapse in your preventative measures?"

Harry felt Ginny giggle silently next to him and had to restrain his own smile. "No, Professor," they chorused and hurried out of her office before succumbing to their laughter once more.