

The Voters Are Speaking

By

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The voters are speaking

Early November can be rather somber in central Scotland. So it was today, with low clouds, chilly temperatures, and intermittent spitting rain.

The atmosphere inside the library of the seemingly ruined castle wasn't much better that Tuesday evening.

Not for the first time, Hermione looked over in Harry and sighed. Although Harry had seemingly gotten over the loss of Sirius, thanks largely to her own intervention and the rhythms of schoolwork and practice, he still had days when he would sit around, saying and doing nothing. This had been one of those days.

"Hello, Hermione," someone said. She looked up from her vigil to see Luna walking her way. A few other eyes followed her; over the summer, Luna had gained about three inches in height and in... other places. She had to admit that Luna had become a very good-looking girl.

"I see that you're watching over Harry again," Luna noted quietly.

Hermione thought about denying it, but then changed her mind. "Yes, Luna. I can't help it. He's been through so much and he needs someone to be there, even if he doesn't know it."

"Yes. I hope he realizes it some day," Luna said sadly.

"I don't know what else I can do without making him resent me. He tells me he appreciates it, but I know he thinks I nag him too much to get out and do things," Hermione said.

"I know he does, Hermione," Luna commiserated. Suddenly, she brightened. "I was just going to head up to the Astronomy Tower. I was just going to listen to something."

"What, dare I ask?" inquired Hermione. The Astronomy Tower had a certain reputation among the students, despite the attempts at intervention from the professors.

"Nothing like that," Luna smiled. "I had heard about the Muggle Americans' election and was going to listen to the returns." With that, she held up a box with various electronic bits attached. "It's a radio I bought from Fred and George. It's supposed to work up there and get signals from America."

"I didn't know you followed Muggle politics," Hermione replied. She'd fallen away from them herself, but shortly before she went to Hogwarts, she could recite the name of every MP from Greater London.

"It's like Quidditch, following the World Cup every four years. I must say, they keep finding such interesting candidates."

"Candidates..." mused Hermione. Then she sat up straight. "THAT'S IT!" she exclaimed, earning a shush from Madame Pince.

"What's it, Hermione?" Luna inquired urgently. "Did the Sassarats bite you? I can give you something that-"

"No!" Hermione halted Luna. "That's something I should have thought of! I should look for candidates to help me cheer Harry up! I'm sure there will be plenty." She has reason for this assurance. Harry had grown another inch over the summer, and Captain Katie Bell's physical regimen for the Quidditch team had helped Harry build up his muscles. Some people said she had ulterior motives, but Hermione had ignored them. Until now.

"How do you plan to find these candidates?" Luna asked, more amused than anything else.

"Simple. We'll hold an election. We'll invite candidates from all four houses to apply, have a campaign, and have the girls vote on who suits Harry best." The wheels in Hermione's mind were moving more quickly now.

"What about us?" Luna said softly.

"We can be candidates if we can find someone to help us set everything up. And I think I know just the people."

"No, you can't be a candidate, but you can help us this way."

"Are you sure?" Colin Creevey still had some of the photos he'd taken of Harry four years ago, as well as more recent pictures, some of which she'd never seen elsewhere. Hermione thought about asking him where they'd come from, but decided not to for the sake of her sanity.

"Yes, we're sure. We'd like you to take this notice and post it outside of each house, to let everyone know about the campaign," Hermione explained.

"Don't worry, Hermione. Dennis and I would be thrilled. You say this would make Harry happy?" Colin inquired.

"I'm sure of it, Colin," she replied.

"Then we'll have them up by tomorrow morning in all the common rooms. We've got all the password from our fellow photography enthusiasts. Makes it easier to organize our club," Colin explained.

Again, Hermione thought of saying something and again she demurred. "Thank you so much."

Colin and Dennis were as good as their word. The following morning, posters had been placed on each House's bulletin board.

"Wanted: Candidates to Help Keep Harry Potter Happy.
Election to Determine the Most Suitable Girlfriends for Harry.
Limit of No More than Two per House.
Filing Deadline: Friday at 8 PM.
Election Two Weeks After Deadline."

Nominations

"Not a chance, you goddamn bitch!"

"I'll see you in Hell before I support you as a candidate!"

"If I actually wanted your vote, I'd just roll a knut on the floor and have you pick it up with your..."

"QUIET! NOW!"

The Hufflepuff Caucus could be going better. In accordance with the House's tradition of teamwork and camaraderie, the house had decided to have all interested girls attend a caucus on Thursday evening to select their two candidates through discussion and consensus. It was a nice theory, but seventh-year prefect Robin Hayes was discovering the truth of the American adage: "The difference between a caucus and a cactus is that a cactus has the pricks on the outside."

The other seventh-year girls in attendance had gotten rather heated on the subject as soon as their names had been placed into nomination. In retrospect, they'd been looking for a chance to fight for months now, Robin mused. She wasn't sure that either of them actually wanted to stand.

"Ileana, Vivian, I want you to apologize right now. Otherwise, you're both disqualified from the caucus and will be asked to leave!" Robin exclaimed.

Neither of the other girls spoke.

"Fine. You're both out. Since I didn't plan to stand, that eliminates the seventh years. Do any sixth years plan to stand?"

Susan Bones stood up. Pretty much everyone had expected her to be a candidate. She had a figure that most girls looked upon with envy- long legs, a narrow waist, and a bosom that seemed perfectly designed as a place for Harry to rest his weary head. Her red hair was bound in a braid, and her eyes shone with the thought of comforting Harry.

However, Hannah Abbott and Megan Jones both stood as well. Megan was a black-haired girl with a slender figure, while Hannah was shorter, rounder, and more voluptuous.

"I thought you were going out with Justin," remarked Megan.

"Justin doesn't want to see me any more. Something about being pissed that I got better Transfiguration grades than he did," Hannah laughed. "If he's that insecure, he's probably not worth my time."

"If you couldn't hold your last boyfriend, what makes you think you deserve a chance with Harry?" snapped fifth-year Lynn Westmoreland.

"There's no need for negative campaigning here, Lynn!" responded Hannah.

"What 'negative campaigning!'" sputtered Lynn. "This is a legitimate issue!"

"Are you girls going to stand for a personal attack like this?" hollered Hannah.

Laura Madley retorted, "I think we know what we should stand for," she said in a voice that belied her status as a third year. So did her body; she'd started puberty before ever arriving at Hogwarts.

"We stand for making sure that the Chosen One doesn't have any more problems to deal with than necessary. Otherwise, what's the point?" Laura sat down to a round of applause.

A few more minutes of discussion ensued, and in the end Hufflepuff settled on Susan and Megan as candidates, with Laura as an alternate.

Gryffindor settled on a simple primary for its system of selection, with the top two vote-getters moving on. What seemed straightforward enough when proposed became rather less so in practice, and all because of a misguided attempt at recycling.

Seventh-year prefect Mandy Landreaux was more amused by the election than anything else, as she already had a steady boyfriend (and she hoped soon, fiancé). She was happy to help organize the primary, with votes to be cast by secret ballot. To ensure that ballots were cast fairly, and to reduce the amount of parchment she used up, she created one ballot with charms to prevent its being seen by unauthorized eyes, forbid its owner from voting for herself, and standardize the handwriting so that no one could tell who cast it. Then she simply duplicated the ballot to ensure uniformity (and prevent ruining more parchment).

On Thursday morning, the ballots were left near the poster announcing the election. As expected, they were all taken. Mandy wrote a line on the poster notifying everyone that she'd collect the ballots after dinner Friday, so there'd be no point in taking more than one.

The ballots were duly collected, and Mandy took them to an unused classroom to count them, followed by several of the girls.

She poured out the bag of ballots onto a table and was just about to start when it happened. She accidentally touched a ballot with her wand... and it somehow duplicated itself.

As the other girls started yelling, Mandy tried to fix the problem by casting a spell to get rid of the duplicate ballots- and found that they'd duplicated again, leaving four ballots. She tried one more time, and the ballots redoubled to eight.

When the other girls saw this, they started rushing the table to start duplicating their ballots- or what they thought were their ballots. As previously mentioned, the ballots had been charmed to have the same handwriting, so that there was no way to tell who had cast what vote or which ballots had been doubled and redoubled. Still, by the time this was clear to everyone, the election had approximately 300 percent turnout.

Hermione won a majority of the vote, with Katie Bell edging Parvati Patil for second. While there was no way to be sure that reflected the Gryffindors' choices, Mandy and Hermione could only shrug and appoint Parvati as their alternate.

"Thirty-seven and a half, Nathan. As of this morning, anyway," replied Luna. Nathan hadn't really expected an answer to his question, but he was sure he could use the data anyway.

'This is definitely an... interesting exercise,' he thought as he walked away. Ravenclaw seventh-year prefect and Head Boy Nathan Silver had been looking for a way to practice his Arithmancy before taking a position with the Ministry's economic forecasters. When he heard about the election from his girlfriend, he thought he saw a perfect opportunity and volunteered his discreet services.

Each interested young woman was given a questionnaire to fill out. If they found some of the questions too personal, well then, that gave Nathan less to work with for his Arithmancy and thus reduced the young lady's chances.

But he found he could ask Luna anything and she'd answer. His last sarcastic question about her bust size received the same kind of cheerful, misty response as everything else he'd asked. He was already pretty sure that she'd be one of Ravenclaw's candidates.

As for the other, the early numbers pointed toward Cho Chang. Longtime seeker for Ravenclaw's Quidditch team, Chang had a gymnast's body, with lean but strong arms and legs and a small firm bosom. On the other hand, Nathan knew that her personal history with Harry was rather... fraught, and numbers weren't everything. There were plenty of other candidates out there.

Other Ravenclaws who were favored by his system included Mandy Brocklehurst, a cheerful Muggleborn with a knockout figure; Padma Patil, identical twin to Harry's housemate; and Marietta Edgecombe, whom he'd already decided to eliminate as her history with Harry was even more contentious than Cho's.

In the end, his Arithmancy settled on Luna and Mandy, with Padma as the Ravenclaw alternate. The announcement was generally met with equanimity, until Padma and Parvati got a chance to compare notes.

Slytherin House politics, for their legendary complexity, often boil down to who does the best job of backstabbing without getting spotted. This election didn't completely capture that element, however; most of the more vicious operators in the House were too steeped in the Dark to care about being girlfriend of the Light's chosen one.

Of course, it never hurts to keep in practice.

Pansy Parkinson refused to answer whether she was serious or not, or whether Draco approved of her standing. The dark-haired and darkly complexioned beauty and the other Slytherins knew they were competing for just one spot.

Daphne Greengrass had made it clear that she would be a candidate, and between her magnificent figure, determination, and previous track record, there would be no stopping her. The only other serious contenders to deal with were Daphne's sister Astoria (fourth year, too young?) and Blanche Lambert (a

quiet seventh year with a slim figure).

When Daphne said she wasn't at all clear if Astoria would be appropriate, Astoria went mad, as did most of the other girls in the competition. Including Pansy, who gave a remarkably moving speech about following your dreams and the audacity of hope and so on. She was very convincing, and when she was offered the second spot on Slytherin's ticket, she did an excellent job of being just unenthusiastic enough for just long enough to convince the other girls to let her stand. Astoria would be the House alternate.

So by Saturday morning, the candidates were determined and the race could begin in earnest.

Minor characters include the following:

Robin Hayes (a man IRL) is a Republican soon-to-be-ex-Congressman from North Carolina. He lost on November 4.

Lynn Westmoreland (also a man IRL) is another GOP Congressman, from Georgia. He won on November 4.

Nathan (or Nate) Silver runs the site fivethirtyeight.com, which made political projections based on mathematical analysis. He did a good job, correctly predicting 49 of the 50 states.

Mandy Landreaux refers to Mary Landrieu, a Democratic Senator from Louisiana, just re-elected on Tuesday.

Blanche Lambert is the maiden name of Democratic Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas.

Organisation

While the Houses had been selecting their candidates, the Photography Club had been making necessary arrangements for the election. There would be a ballot box in each House, under the Fidelius Charm to keep them from being found and tampered with. The areas where the election notices were posted would be updated at least once a day to let everyone know what was happening. They had also prepared a collection of Memory Balls for use by the candidates.

Memory Balls were used to send short messages. Each ball could contain a message approximately one minute long, with audio and video. All you needed to do to watch a Memory Ball was to press it to your forehead.

On the Saturday morning after the candidates were selected, they and their alternates were summoned to a meeting in a quiet classroom to go over the ground rules.

First, the ballots. After hearing the story of the Gryffindor fiasco, Colin showed the assembled girls the supply of ballots that they had prepared, and fired several spells at the ballots to show that they truly were secure. The candidates would be listed in alphabetical order, thus:

Bell, Katie (Gryffindor)
Bones, Susan (Hufflepuff)
Brocklehurst, Mandy (Ravenclaw)
Granger, Hermione (Gryffindor)
Greengrass, Daphne (Slytherin)
Jones, Megan (Hufflepuff)
Lovegood, Luna (Ravenclaw)
Parkinson, Pansy (Slytherin)

Colin stated, "Now, we'll commission a poll later today, to let everyone know roughly where the candidates stand. After that, you're on your own." The candidates nodded.

Lee then addressed the alternates. "Now, if any of the candidates cannot continue their campaigns, we hope you are ready to step in. In addition, we'd like you to help out the candidates from your houses." Again, there was general agreement.

"Thirteen days to the election, ladies. May the best woman win, and let's remember what this election is all about. We're helping Harry so that he can help us to get rid of V... Voldemort. I hope that everyone keeps that in mind during this campaign. Keep it fair, and we'll see you here again on election night." With those final words from Lee, the meeting broke up.

Parvati and Padma Patil had already discussed their situation. Both were convinced that they'd lost their chances to stand unfairly, but neither knew what they could really do about it. Silver's numbers and Landreaux's incompetence didn't amount to a conspiracy, after all. And between Parvati's unfortunate date with Harry and Parvati's indifferent relations with Hermione, they probably didn't have much of a chance anyway.

But perhaps they could get someone else to stand who might... cut them in on the action. After a few minutes of thought, they settled on just the right person to be a potential candidate.

Most people don't consider Chudley a pleasant place to spend a brief November day. A small town in northwestern England, far from any major city, Chudley was suffering from a storm dumping heavy rain mixed with sleet on the its denizens.

Perfect Quidditch weather, in other words.

Practice was ending, in preparation for the next day's game, when the owl flew toward one of the team's rookie Chasers.

Angelina Johnson was thinking, not for the first time, that professional Quidditch was definitely more attractive in abstract than in reality. To be fair, she thought she had an agreement to be drafted by powerful Puddlemere United, only to find that Chudley had traded to move up in the draft and select her. Now she was sitting on the bench behind Chasers who had potent emotional connections to the fans despite minimal ability.

She had a Chaser's build, tall and broad-shouldered, with strong arms and legs to throw the Quaffle and hold the broom. Her breasts were also larger than average for an athlete; management had asked her to pose for the cover of the team's program.

When the owl landed on her shoulder, she recognized it immediately as a Hogwarts owl, and wondered why it had come. After reading the letter, she went back to her apartment to think about what she had read.

During her time as Harry's House mate and teammate, she thought that she'd become a friend of his, and she certainly wouldn't object if he wanted to be more. She was thinking that he could probably use some companionship, and would be glad to provide it. (She'd seen Harry in the shower, which increased her enthusiasm.)

And so she replied to the Patil sisters...

Three pieces of news were posted to the waiting women of Hogwarts on Sunday.

First, the poll. Hermione Granger had the support of a third of Hogwarts girls, followed by Luna and Susan with about 15 percent each, with the other candidates far behind.

Second was an announcement that Angelina Johnson would be included as a candidate with no House affiliation, and that Parvati Patil would represent her. The new Gryffindor alternate would be Lavender Brown.

Third, the Photography Club members would make themselves available to make Memory Balls for the candidates starting that afternoon.

Hermione was glad to see the poll results. She figured that all she'd need to do was to make a simple Ball to remind voters that she had experience as Harry's friend and would be best for him. Katie was thinking along similar lines based on her Quidditch time with Harry, and thus figured that she'd make a Ball similar to Hermione's. Lavender was glad to help... especially Katie, figuring that Hermione didn't need or want her advice.

The Slytherins saw their problem- convincing the members of their House that this election was worth caring about, one way or another. But how to attract Slytherins without repelling everyone else? Pansy decided she needed her own campaign manager; Astoria barely talked to her during their first meeting.

Susan decided that she needed to play on her kinship with her Aunt Amelia, to show her ability to protect Harry from the whims of officialdom that had plagued him so badly last year. Megan decided to follow along, and Laura (whose father sat on the Wizengamot) felt this strategy made sense.

Mandy decided to try to focus on matters financial; the Brocklehurst family had massive land holdings in East Anglia, which could provide security and a place to go if everything went sour.

And Luna? She kept her own counsel, and took her Ball with her onto the grounds. She wouldn't tell Padma what she was doing, which suited Padma fine.

Positive Ads

No one can go through what Hermione Granger had been through over the past five years without learning something, and Hermione's quick wit and thoughtful attitude (and occasionally good reflexes) allowed her to learn more than most. However, when it came to dealing with other people, she could still be a little naive.

Her first Memory Ball was an example of this. It simply featured a seated Hermione explaining that she'd been at Harry's side for as long as anyone, and that she'd earned the right to continue to be his best friend. She made no special attempt to dress up. After all, that would be a distraction from her simple and unassailable logic.

(This would soon be referred to, by all the campaigns, as Mistake Number One.)

Katie Bell's first Memory Ball featured a similar spiel, but with a few significant differences. She was decked out in her Quidditch kit, partly because she was about to start practice for the game on Saturday, but mostly because she figured that her audience (and Harry) would appreciate the display of tight clothes on an athletic body. Her final line, "Vote for me, and I'll make sure that Harry gets what he needs," was an inspired ad lib. Lavender smiled as she put the recorder down. 'This might be an interesting campaign after all,' she thought.

Susan Bones and Megan Jones were the only candidates to make a joint Memory Ball. Susan wasn't really worried about losing votes to Megan, while Megan believed that her best chance was probably to let Susan do most of their heavy lifting at the beginning. While Susan's commentary was mostly boilerplate about the advantage of friends in high places, her wardrobe was sending a slightly different message- a hem a couple of inches above the knee, a braid resting on the front of her blouse, a top button that she'd occasionally worry and eventually undo.

Beside her, Megan lacked the endowments of her fellow Hufflepuff, but made up for it with a shorter skirt and a deeper voice. She'd heard from Vivian that men liked a voice with a little bit of husk to it, and had rehearsed for half an hour before filming. While she wasn't sure if women would react in the same way, she figured it was worth a shot. It didn't cost anything, after all.

Mandy Brocklehurst was a "Muggle lover," the polite term for a pureblood who knew Muggle pop culture but was still happy in magical society. As a result, her Memory Ball ended with the phrase "huge tracts of land" to describe the family farm and a slight lean forward- not enough to display her goods, but hopefully enough to get Harry wondering.

Luna's Memory Ball was a stream-of-consciousness story about sitting in the Astronomy Tower and thinking of Harry as she heard the returns come in, detailing the re-election of that nice man with the hoarse voice from a state she couldn't spell. She figured that Harry needed to know that she was thinking about him; that she was doing so in one of Hogwarts' best-known love nests could only help. Other girls might not know exactly what to make of her speech, but that wasn't exactly new.

Pansy's new campaign manager was, to the surprise of many Slytherins, not Draco Malfoy but his rival Blaise Zabini. Was it a breakup? A quest for campaign cash? An elaborate ruse? Seeking advice from a woman who'd successfully 'campaigned' for seven husbands (and outlived six)? Whichever it was, Pansy gave no sign. Her Ball was quite bluntly aimed at getting Slytherins to vote and let her "give Harry the treatment he deserves." If wannabe Death Eaters and Harry-lovers wanted to interpret that in different ways, fine and dandy.

Daphne had Astoria sit with her in their uniforms during their Ball. Both talked about how much they admired Harry and why they were too "embarrassed" to join the DA, but admired Harry's initiative. They figured that Slytherin couldn't give them all the votes they needed to beat Hermione, and thus figured that Daphne would have to play beyond their House base. Astoria's presence could be interpreted as a promise of something more. That wouldn't bother either Greengrass at all... especially if they won.

Angelina owled Parvati and Patil to let her know that she would be able to stop by on Wednesday. They hated having to wait for two days, but in the absence of their candidate, they really couldn't do anything else.

Classes on Monday provided the girls with their first chances to mix during the campaign. Greetings were still civil if not completely cordial, and with no input from Harry as to whose performance he preferred, no one could get too cocky.

However, Harry spent a few minutes in quiet conversation with Katie about the practice that afternoon. As Katie had worn the tightest clothing during her Ball (even if she didn't expose any skin), this got some of the girls thinking that Harry might want them to revise their tactics and wardrobes.

Harry wondered why there were more young ladies than usual watching their practice that evening. The weather had improved from the weekend, but not by much; it was still chilly and damp, even if the rain was staying away.

Harry was just landing as practice ended with his captain came over. Katie had seemed a bit distracted today. She didn't throw the Quaffle to Harry until he was looking at her, and she seemed to be in profile to Harry more often than usual.

"Is there something on your mind, Katie?" he inquired.

"Well, it's just something that I have to resolve over the next couple of weeks, Harry. It shouldn't affect you. But don't worry about me; I just want to make sure that you're okay," With that, she embraced Harry, who somewhat awkwardly patted her on the back.

If she'd told Lavender to record the scene, and where she expected to be when she greeted Harry, then Harry didn't need to know that. And if it appeared in a Ball later, with added romantic music, he didn't need to know that either.

Over the next couple of days, the girls of Hogwarts got a chance to watch the Balls from all of the candidates and compare notes. Most of the candidates asked for a new poll, and the Club agreed to provide one for release on Wednesday morning. Club members said they'd also provide advice to the various campaign managers if requested.

As it turned out, Hermione had lost most of her lead, with Katie joining Luna and Susan in the battle for second. The other candidates (except Angelina) made gains, but were still well behind.

Later that morning, Angelina made her appearance in Gryffindor. Harry hadn't seen her since she had graduated, and was glad to meet an old friend. He hoped that she'd remember him as well.

His first hint of her reaction came when Angelina ran toward him and engulfed him in a hug he hadn't experienced since last year with Hermione at Grimmauld Place. As Angelina was more solidly built than Hermione had been, Harry couldn't quite withstand the momentum and they toppled over. She quickly recovered and stood over him.

Angelina had gotten a big signing bonus from Chudley, and clearly some of it went into her wardrobe. She was wearing a tailored, cream-colored silk suit that flattered her figure without showing off much dark chocolate skin.

By now, Harry had caught his breath again. "I'm glad to see you too," he deadpanned, but he couldn't keep his grin down for long. "How are you, Angelina? What brings you back here to visit us?"

"Oh, I got a letter from some friends of ours," Angelina replied airily. "I figured that I'd drop by to see how you were doing, Harry. I figured you could probably use another friend right now."

'Oh, this is perfect,' thought the silent figure at the back of the room.

Harry had clambered back to his feet. "Well, I'm certainly glad to see you. Did you know that the Slytherin game is in three days? Can you stay for practice tomorrow? I'm sure we could use your advice."

"Well, I suppose so. I'm sure I can find a room in Hogsmeade. But we can talk some more about Quidditch later. I'd like to see everyone again."

During the conversation that followed before lunch, Harry wondered why Angelina and Katie were looking at each other so suspiciously- they'd always been good friends as far as he knew. Come to think of it, neither Chaser seemed to want to meet Hermione's eyes or vice versa. But when he tried to ask Hermione about it as they went to the dining hall, she refused to give him a straight answer, saying it was "something that's just come up and will go away soon. Don't worry."

Harry had stopped in his tracks and put a hand on Hermione's shoulder. "The girls who've been good friends to me hardly look at each other, and I shouldn't worry? Hermione, this isn't like you. I

remember you and Ron three years ago, and you needed to talk things out- your argument almost got us killed! Please, what's going on?"

Hermione continued to hesitate in a very un-Hermione fashion. "Harry, I can tell you in ten days. I promise. Just let us handle things between now and then."

"I'm going to find out, Hermione. I just really wish you'd tell me up front," Harry said, half-pleading and half-warning.

By the evening, new Memory Balls were available showing Angelina's enthusiastic greeting and Hermione's sheepishness in the face of the Chosen One. Angelina and the Patils agreed- an Invisibility Cloak makes a really wonderful investment.

Investigations

Alfred Victor Houston Parkinson was the kind of man both Muggles and wizards would walk past without a second thought. Short and gaunt, he had deepset brown eyes and had lost most of his black hair. He looked like "his idea of a good time was a hot cup of tea and a financial statement," to quote one unkind magical soul.

That overstated things, but not by much. Alfred was the founder and CEO of Parkinson & Parkinson, the largest magical accounting and bookkeeping firm in the British Isles. He and his wife Violet kept the books balanced for everyone from Nimbus Corporation to the Daily Prophet. And if Alfred had a few clients whose ledgers he would never permit anyone else to see, most of his employees would shrug and conclude that they wouldn't trust anyone but "the old man." Only his wife knew the truth- those clients were eyes-only because they, like Alfred, were affiliated with the Death Eaters.

Alfred had always been deeply conservative in his habits, and had joined the Death Eaters back in the mid-1970s when the Ministry had become far too accommodating of Muggles for his taste. But there were no Dark Revels or murders for him or Violet. They weren't his style, and he considered them unproductive to boot. He had long ago figured that the violent would burn themselves out after a while, allowing him and other saner souls to run Magical Britain in the way she deserved. As for Violet, she'd never wanted to join, and after seeing some of the Death Eaters' opinions of witches, he never pressed her.

When Pansy wrote Violet about the election, Violet spoke to him. A far lesser man than Alfred would have seen the opportunity that Pansy had been presented, and he was glad to see that his only daughter was taking such initiative. The possibility of a quick end to the war was well worth the thousand or so Galleons that Pansy requested, and he was thrilled to hear that she and Violet were owling each other every day. (He didn't want too many details. Anything you know is something that can be beaten or ensorcelled out of you. Besides, while he knew what he personally liked, he didn't know what was fashionable or what Harry wanted, and he knew that he didn't know.)

With Hermione unable or unwilling to tell him what was going on, Harry fell back on his next best sources of information, Ron and Ginny. But neither held his confidence the way that they used to.

Ginny clearly blamed him for the disaster of the Department of Mysteries, even if she didn't explicitly say so. He could hardly blame her, as he often blamed himself too. She had been in a generally bad mood ever since, aggravated by Fleur's deepening friendship with Bill. Still, Harry hoped she would help him.

When he approached Ginny on Thursday evening after practice, he heard her muttering as he came near. "I could've won if it'd been fair... he deserves me more than any of them..." Harry had just heard Angelina and Katie give their advice in locker-room speeches. They had been catty, contentious, filled with little insinuations against each other. He didn't think Ron or the other males on the team noticed, while the girls didn't seem at all surprised.

"Hello, Ginny! What's going on?" Harry called.

"Don't sneak up like that, Harry! What do you want?" Ginny snapped.

"I want to know what's going on with Hermione and the other girls on the team. She told me about something that's supposed to happen at the end of next week, but won't give me any details," Harry explained.

"Well, yeah, Harry. We're trying to help you," Ginny retorted.

"Help with what? By doing what?" Harry asked, more confused than before.

"I can't tell you, but you'll find out at the end of next week," Ginny replied, and started to walk away.

"Ginny? Can't you tell me what you'll be doing?" Harry tried one more tack. That was apparently a bad idea.

"Nothing, Harry. Nothing at all," she snarled and ran away.

The next morning, Harry spoke to Ron at breakfast. Ron was making a slow, hesitant recovery from the "brain" incident at the Department of Mysteries. He was given to sudden mood swings and odd lapses in judgment. Still, Harry believed he was worth a try.

Unfortunately, when he asked Ron to "ask around and find out what the girls are doing that's supposed to end next week," he did not intend for Ron to ask during the middle of Snape's double DADA class with the Slytherins... in front of Snape himself. Naturally, this produced no results (except for 20 points lost from Gryffindor).

After class, Harry was lost in his own thoughts when he ran into someone on his way out the door.

"Twenty more points from Gryffindor. I will not have students assaulting members of my House. Is that clear?" Snape demanded, his black eyes locked on Harry. Harry knew from long, painful experience that there was no point in arguing, so he simply nodded and was let go.

As soon as Snape released him, Harry resumed his trudge out of the classroom, only to find a crumpled piece of parchment on the floor with his name on it. When he uncrumpled it, it read:

'I know the answers that you're looking for. Meet me at the visitors' locker room at 8pm tonight. Come alone.'

No signature, of course. Short of actually saying "This is a trap," this couldn't be a more obvious ploy. But what else could he do?

Fortunately, he had one good friend left to approach.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Harry?" Neville asked in a muffled voice as they slowly walked toward the locker room.

"No, Neville, I'm not," Harry sighed. "But if you have another idea on how to find out what the girls are doing, I'd love to hear it. If you don't want to take the risk, then go. I don't blame you a bit. You've had enough problems following me," Harry concluded bitterly.

Harry felt Neville pat him on the shoulder. He couldn't see Neville, since he was under Harry's invisibility cloak, but he could visualize the expression on Neville's face. Before he could reflect on matters any further, they'd arrived at the locker room door. Harry used his key to enter.

The hallway branched off into the boys' and girls' locker rooms, and there was the sound of a shower running from the latter.

"I see that you've disobeyed my instructions, Harry. I said to come alone. I won't say anything more until your friend leaves." The voice was amplified and somehow masked; Harry couldn't tell who said it or where it had come from.

He heard a whisper from beside him; Neville had a plan. "I like it," replied Harry. Moments later, footsteps headed toward the door. It opened for a few seconds to let someone out, then closed again.

"Very cute, Harry. But it didn't fool me. Tell your buddy to get lost." Neville's footsteps spell and Harry's magically opening the door hadn't worked at all.

"I'll have the cloak ready when you come back," Neville whispered. With that, he really did leave the locker room, and Harry was now alone to meet his fate.

"Thank you, Harry. Please enter the girls' locker room." Harry did so.

The locker room was apparently empty, save for a single wand on a dressing bench. Harry swept his eyes back and forth. No one seemed to be hiding in a corner. He tried a summoning spell for invisibility cloaks, but that did nothing.

"Can't blame you for being suspicious, Harry," the voice said, sounding... amused? "I will be out in a minute. Please don't touch my wand."

'There's one good sign, I hope,' Harry thought. 'Whoever this is doesn't have a wand... unless this one is a decoy, in which case I'm still screwed.'

A few seconds later, the speaker emerged from the shower.. and Harry lost the ability to think of anything else.

The young woman in front of him was quite small- barely five feet tall and maybe a hundred pounds dripping wet, which she was. She wore only a towel wrapped around her torso, leaving her arms free and her legs exposed below mid-thigh. Her skin was clear and darkly complexioned, and her face was disconcertingly innocent except for hard grey eyes.

"Pansy? Why did you call me here?" Harry asked when his voice started working again. His wand was pointed directly at her.

Pansy did not reply, slowly walking over to Harry with her hands up to show that they were empty. He noticed that the top of her towel covered larger breasts than he thought he remembered. And from the

points under the towel, it was much cooler where Pansy was standing than where Harry was, three or four feet away. She picked up her wand, pointed it at her throat, whispered something, and set it down again.

"There. Now we can talk normally. Oh wait, let me cast Colloportus and Muffliato," Pansy said calmly. Harry let her do so.

"What is going on, Pansy?" Harry said, barely keeping himself from shouting.

"Simple, Harry. We, the girls of Hogwarts, are having an election," Pansy replied.

"An election? For what?" Harry's voice rose.

Pansy continued, quite composedly, "Hermione started it. This is an election in which the winner gets something very precious... you."

"Me?" Harry asked, dumbfounded. His wand had started to drop.

Pansy took full advantage, pushing Harry down onto the bench as his wand clattered away. She then straddled Harry's legs.

"Hermione wants someone to keep you happy, Harry, even if she can't do it herself. That's why she decided to give other girls a chance to prove that they could suit you better than she could. Very moving, if you think about it," Pansy concluded with something halfway between a smile and a smirk on her red lips...

"And you thought you'd betray me to the Death Eaters some night when I'm asleep?" Harry yelled, tossing Pansy off of him and onto the ground as he scrambled for his wand. "I ought to..."

"NO!"

Harry had heard- and done- some inspired screaming in his life, but Pansy's pained call wasn't because of pain or fear. At least not fear for herself, if he was any judge.

"Harry, please listen to me!" Pansy's words were impassioned and he found himself compelled to face her. Her eyes had softened, and tears were starting to flow. "That's what my father thinks. But Violet, I mean Mum, she's with me. We don't want you killed or hurt, and we don't want the Death Eaters to win. I can help protect you. I know who the Death Eaters' kids are, and who supports them. I won't let them get you," she finished in a rush.

"But what about all the times you used to insult Hermione and me? And what about Draco?" Harry asked with less heat.

"Tell me you never said something silly because of House rivalry, Harry," Pansy replied sadly. "But there's something more important now. You've got more friends in Slytherin than you think. Draco? He's so easy to manipulate that it's not funny. I've got wrapped around my finger. I could get him to do anything if I say you'd hate it. Don't worry about him," she finished, almost chuckling.

"Name one of these 'friends,' " Harry challenged.

"Our House's other candidate, Daphne Greengrass," Pansy answered.

"Other candidate? How many candidates are there?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Nine, Harry, and many more girls wanted to run..."

By the time that he and Pansy had finished talking, it was almost 10:00, and they'd have to hustle to beat curfew. He'd never spoken with Pansy or any other Slytherin for so long at a stretch, and was fascinated by the accounts of the quiet 'underground' supporters of his. Mostly female- "It doesn't hurt that you've grown into such a hot-looking guy," Pansy said, which made him wonder if there were rampant undiagnosed eye problems in Slytherin- they had been the source of some of quiet suggestions to others about spells for the DA, even if they were under too much pressure to actually join. Professor Slughorn was one of them, too, as he considered Voldemort an affront to the ambition that Slytherin was intended to promote.

" 'Slytherin House is intended to make its members strive to be all that they can be,' " Pansy quoted, " 'Not to train them to beg some Dark Lord for favors.' He's right. Dumbledore actually made a good appointment for a change."

He was also fascinated by this election Hermione and Luna had helped to organize. "How did they get all of these girls to run? And how did they keep it a secret?"

"There are a lot of spells whose effects work for one gender, so having women keep secrets from men, or vice versa, is surprisingly easy. And you really do need to look at yourself in a mirror sometime. Six feet tall, nice muscles, cute smile- oh, we wish you'd smile more often- that tousled hair. And this evening I learned one more reason to hope that I win," she finished with a friendlier smirk than before.

"What do we do now?" Harry asked when Pansy had finally run out of steam.

"Well, I get dressed." Harry had almost forgotten that Pansy was still only wearing the towel. "Then we go back to our Houses. I really hope you listen to what I said. If I win, I can help protect you. I think I can be good for you in other ways, too," she purred. "I've done... things... to keep Draco with me, to keep him from suspecting me. I'm not proud of them, but I think you'd be a lot more deserving."

"I'll have to talk to Hermione in the morning. Then some of these other candidates. Now that I'm over the shock, this actually sounds interesting," Harry smiled for the first time that evening.

Adjustment

On his way back to his room, Harry remembered something that he should have done before the evening's meeting, and he hoped that Neville would still be awake when he returned. Fortunately, when he reached the room, Neville was sitting up in his bed, clearly waiting for Harry.

"Thank you for coming with me, Neville. I really appreciate it," Harry said after climbing onto Neville's four-poster, closing the curtain, and casting Muffliato. "Before I get any further, I want to apologize."

"For what?" Neville asked blankly.

"For putting you at risk this evening. I should have gotten the Marauders' Map to have a better chance of knowing who or what was waiting for us in the locker room tonight. I'm sorry that I keep doing things like this..." Harry started to tail off, only to have Neville put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Harry, are we alright now?" Neville inquired.

"Yes, we are. There is no risk to us, although I couldn't have known that-" Neville cut off his explanation.

"Harry, I trust you and I accept your apology- if you tell me what's happening." Neville looked as determined as he ever had in Dumbledore's Army.

Harry began to outline the election and list the candidates when Neville interrupted him again.

"Wait, is that Mandy Brocklehurst from Ravenclaw? The sixth year with the big green eyes?" Neville demanded.

"Yes, it is, Neville," Harry answered.

"Do- do you think she's going to win?" Neville sounded much less sure of himself now.

"I don't know. Pansy told me there had been polls, but I don't know what they said," Harry replied.

"I just thought I'd ask, Harry," Neville said hesitantly. "Mandy's very good at Herbology, you know? We've worked together on some projects over the last year. I was wondering if, if maybe..." he tailed off.

"Have you talked to her about going out?" Harry asked gently.

"Well, not exactly. I think she knows how I feel, and I want to tell her, but I get tongue-tied every time I try," Neville said slowly.

Harry remembered his own relationship with Cho. "I can talk to her, Neville. I can't promise anything, though."

"Thanks, Harry. I really appreciate it. Here's your cloak back. Let me know if I can help with the

election," Neville said as he started turning back the covers of the bed.

Knowing a hint when he saw one, Harry got up. "Thanks, Neville. I don't think there's anything else you can do, but I'll let you know if there is."

Mornings arrive late in Scotland in late November. When Harry got up the three hours before the game was to start, it was still nearly dark outside. Wind blew into north-facing windows, and the sky was dark, promising snow in the near future.

A few minutes after Harry started eating, Hermione came into the dining hall and sat down. She looked more disheveled than usual, with her blouse misbuttoned and hair a frizz.

It hadn't been a pleasant night for Hermione Granger. A talk with Lavender about her next tactic quickly devolved into a shouting match that lasted for half an hour, ending with Lavender's decision to "work with Katie for the next day or two." With only six days left until the election and the last of her lead gone (according to the latest poll), Hermione felt her plan to cheer Harry up spinning completely out of control.

"Hermione, can I talk to you?" Harry asked.

"Harry, I'm really not-" She got no further before Harry impatiently interrupted, leaning toward her.

"I need to talk about the election. Now." Harry's voice was very quiet but insistent. Hermione gulped and nodded.

"Sure, Harry," she said as she followed him to an unused classroom two floors above the Great Hall.

Harry paced back and forth for a few moments, collecting his thoughts. When he finally spoke, however, he had but one word to say to Hermione: "Why?"

"Because Luna and I saw you mourning a couple of weeks ago. We've seen you like that so often these last few months, beating yourself up for not knowing things you couldn't have known and for keeping all of us from getting killed! We want you to be happy, Harry. If we can't do it," she said shakily, "then you deserve someone who can. So we decided to let other girls stand and make their case. Lavender's been helping me, but we can't agree on how to campaign, and..." Hermione tailed off.

Harry looked at Hermione, who was now fighting back tears. "Hermione, I'm sorry that I haven't been pleasant to be around, but it's just that there's a lot of people who've been expecting great things of me, and I don't know if I can do them."

"I know there's a lot of pressure on you, and I want you to know that I will do anything you want me to do to help you- even if that means doing nothing," Hermione said, voice steadily dropping to a whisper.

When asked about it later, Harry couldn't say exactly where the idea had come from, but he thought he knew exactly how to deal with Hermione's crisis of confidence.

"Lavender's been helping you run your campaign, right?" Harry inquired. When Hermione nodded, Harry continued, "Could you please bring her up here? I've got a few questions for her."

Twenty minutes later, Hermione returned with Lavender in tow. Harry stated that "I need to speak to Lavender in private," and Hermione departed.

"I understand that you and Hermione have been arguing lately," Harry began. Lavender waxed indignant in her response.

"Yes, and it's driving me crazy! She doesn't let me present any ideas of my own, even though her polls keep dropping. I know what I'm doing, or at least I think I do, but she won't let me demonstrate it," Lavender complained. "She never wants to dress up, even for the Memory Balls we record. She won't let me show her how good she can look- like at the Yule Ball."

"Lavender, I remember that it took her three hours to prepare for the Ball. Who wants to spend that much time getting ready every day?" Harry replied, reasonably. "Surely there's something less drastic that you can do for her."

"But there is, Harry!" Lavender replied. "Sleekeazy's has come out with a new hair potion that will keep her hair nice and wavy for a month. It just takes three applications over three days. And I can help her with her clothes, too."

"I apologize, Lavender," Harry said lightly. "I haven't kept up with the latest developments in shampoo."

"Oh, come on. This is serious," Lavender said in a surprisingly serious tone. "It's like the Muggles say. 'If you don't look good, we don't look good.'" When that drew a blank from Harry, she continued. "There's good money in cosmetics. I interned with Sleekeazy's last year, and I hope to work there when I graduate."

"What would you do for them?" Harry asked, intrigued despite himself.

"I might work in their lab making potions, or I might be a model," she replied. Lavender had the face and body that photographers loved, whether Muggle or magical: she had a high forehead, long blonde hair that shone dimly even in the room's dim light, and a tall figure with modest but definite curves.

"Well, I'll try to convince her to let you work your wonders, Lavender," Harry said after a moment. "Maybe you can convince her that she deserves me- she really deserves better, of course. This might be just the trick she needs."

"Thank you, Harry!" Before he could react, Lavender hugged him tightly around the waist and kissed him on the cheek. "You're going to love Hermione when I'm through with her."

"Um, thanks, Lavender," Harry said, slightly abashed. Lavender was wearing a blouse and short skirt with stockings- 'she's either changing or not going outside today,' Harry thought- and he hoped that she couldn't tell what kind of effect she was having on him.

No such luck. "You know, Harry, I was in the election, too. I finished fourth here in Gryffindor, behind

Hermione, Katie, and Parvati. She went off to work with Angelina. But I hope you'll remember me when Hermione wins," she purred. "And maybe, just maybe, you'll let me be your girlfriend for a day," she finished with a little grind for emphasis.

"Ah... Maybe after the election I can talk with Hermione about that," Harry answered, breathlessly.

Lavender finally let him go and headed for the door with a little wiggle in her step. "I'll let you know how things go, Harry," Lavender promised as she left.

At ten o'clock, Harry headed down to the locker room. By then, the snow promised earlier in the morning had started to fall.

"Katie, could I have a word with you before the game?" Harry asked. Katie, who hadn't changed yet, agreed.

"I know about the election, and I just want to make sure that, whatever happens, we can at least all stay friends. Alright?" Harry asked, in a voice that provided no room for disagreement.

"Alright, Harry. Do you think I should ask Angelina to visit again?" Katie inquired.

Harry, pleasantly surprised by her initiative, said, "Yes. I was just going to ask you to do that. I think it's important that Hermione, you, and Angelina-

"Kiss and make up?" Katie asked with a grin.

"That'll do," Harry replied with a smile of his own.

Fifty minutes of changing and last-minute strategy later, the Gryffindor team headed out to confront the Slytherins and the elements.

Usually, no more than a handful of students fail to attend a Quidditch match. However, the horrid weather effectively emptied the stands; fewer than half of the students were present, bundled up to enjoy the game of wizards.

They wouldn't be bundled up for long. Less than two minutes after the balls were released, Harry saw a glint at the edge of his vision to his right. Sure enough, the Snitch was just floating there.

'Do Snitches actually get overconfident in zero visibility?' Harry asked himself. That didn't stop him from gliding over to collect the Snitch, win the game, and increase his popularity even further at the expense of Draco and his cronies.

'If only Harry could see this.' Two candidates and campaign managers were thinking this at the same time on Saturday afternoon.

The first set of such people were in Blaise Zabini's bedroom in the Slytherin dungeons. Pansy's letter of

credit from her father had arrived, and she was now ready to spend some of it at Twilfit and Tating's, to secure the clothes that she would wear in her Memory Balls for the rest of the campaign. Madame Malkin's just didn't have the kind of stylish outfits that she would need.

Of course, such clothes require careful measurement; while clothing can be transfigured, such garments wear out much more quickly and never look as good when closely examined. Hence, Pansy was very carefully measuring the parts of her body that Twilfit and Tating's needed numbers for. And of course, anything else she was wearing would just get in the way.

Blaise, as her campaign manager, was supervising the process. After all, who knew what could happen if that charmed tape measure went rogue? He wondered if Harry might be persuaded to let him watch the fireworks if Pansy won. While he appreciated the aesthetics of the sight before him, it simply didn't... move him the way that it did Draco. (Of course, Draco had been a little too easily... moved by Pansy.)

Over in the Prefects' bathroom, Lavender was making the first application of Sleekeazy's New Hair Calming Potion to Hermione's scalp. This was best done, of course, in the bath. Both girls wore swimsuits for 'modesty' in case others should stop by, but they had planned the three required applications at times when the bath was rarely used.

Both girls apologized to each other for the fight the previous evening. Katie had spoken to Hermione at lunch to issue her own apology and to let her know that she'd asked Angelina to visit again on Tuesday.

As for Harry himself, he had paid a visit to Ravenclaw Tower to talk to Luna and Mandy. He told Mandy that he wanted to discuss more private matters with her at Greenhouse Six the next day at noon, and asked Luna to verify what Hermione had told him that morning about the origin of the election. When she did, Harry let her know that he was a little cross with her but that she understood. Luna asked if she would be punished, but Harry only answered, "We'll see, Luna."

After a few words with Neville at dinner, Harry was much more confident that things would work out okay as he bedded down that night.

Combinations

Shortly before noon on Sunday, Neville proceeded down to Greenhouse Six. Harry had suggested that this would be a good time to get some work done on his Herbology assignment. While the project wasn't due until January, it was a good idea to take extra time when working with Louisiana Spitting Sumac. Neville learned this from painful experience the previous month- one pruning had been slightly off, dousing him with venom that sent him to the hospital wing for three days with terrible itching all over. The plant was much taller than he was, and its pot was set on the greenhouse floor; he had to kneel to work with it properly.

A few minutes later, Neville was carefully aligning his scalpel for the next cut when he heard the greenhouse door open.

"Harry? Are you here?" a female voice queried.

Neville set his blade down and looked around, to find a pair of legs next to him, clad in winter-weight tights. Nice legs, he thought to himself... then he looked up to find Mandy Brocklehurst's face smiling down at him.

"Mandy? What brings you here?" Neville replied in surprise.

"Harry wanted to talk to me here about... something," Mandy said while tailing off at the last minute.

"I know about the election, Mandy," Neville said gently. "Harry asked me to come here."

"But why?" Mandy inquired.

"Because... because we got to talking on Friday, Harry and me. Mandy, I've enjoyed working with you in Herbology this year. I like the way you smile, and the way you brush your hair back before you start every day's work. I catch myself looking at you every once in a while," Neville said in a rush. "I figured that, even if you're going to say no, I ought to tell you how I feel at some point. I think you'd be great for Harry, and I hope you win, but I'd have liked to get to know you better." With that, he returned to the sumac.

A few seconds later, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Neville, I have to admit that I kind of like you too. You didn't have to join the DA or go to the Ministry with Harry, or do all the other things you've done- I've heard about them from the other girls. And I've looked at you a few times, too. You're becoming a good-looking guy, even if you haven't noticed." Although Neville had inherited his father's height or lack thereof, the baby fat had melted off, and his face now looked open and friendly without seeming too round.

"Thanks, Mandy. Would you like to go out sometime? I'd like to finish working with this sumac now, but maybe we can do something this week," Neville replied hesitantly.

"I'm sure we can, Neville. Can I help?" Mandy suggested.

"Sure. Could you hold this frond for just a minute? The last time I cut it, the plant spat in my face. That

was no fun," Neville remembered.

"At least it wasn't that bubotuber they had us working with before. Sumac doesn't raise those awful boils," Mandy replied, kneeling next to Neville.

"They showed us mandrakes way back in second year, so logic and the greenhouses don't always mix," Neville answered as he lifted the scalpel.

To his surprise, Mandy started laughing. "That's a good one, Neville! I'll have to remember that. You know, you look even better when you laugh..." As she said that she placed the hand not holding the sumac leaf under Neville's jaw and looked into his deep brown eyes.

The second application of the hair potion was going even more smoothly than the first. This time, Lavender had changed into a bikini while Hermione continued to wear her old one-piece.

"When Harry and I talked yesterday, I told him that I'd help you with your wardrobe. With the work we're putting into your hair, it doesn't make sense not to look at your clothes at the same time," Lavender mused while carefully smoothing Hermione's hair.

"What's wrong with my clothes? I think they look alright," Hermione said, somewhat defensively.

"Alright isn't good enough when you're competing against eight other girls, Hermione. I know that most of your clothes are at least a year old, and they don't take your latest year of growth into account," Lavender explained. "After we're done here, I'll let you look in my trunk and see if you find something you like for our next Memory Ball. Transfiguring clothes shortens their lifespan, but it'll be fine for once or twice, I think."

"You sound like you've got something in mind," Hermione replied, shrewd as ever.

"I've got an idea, but I'm still fleshing it out. I think it'll combine your experience- what you've been emphasizing all along- with a new theme that the girls will appreciate more," Lavender said.

"Tell me more," an intrigued Hermione said.

Lavender was happy to. "Well, I call the idea '3 AM,' and it would work something like this..."

Late that afternoon, Neville and Mandy finally returned to the castle. There was dirt on the knees of Mandy's tights and a grin on each of their faces.

"I just have to take care of this, Neville. I'll be right back, I promise. Then you can finish what you started," Mandy said saucily.

"Nate!" she called when arriving in Ravenclaw Tower. "I'm going to need your help right now!"

A minute later, a big smile spread on Nate's face as Mandy spoke in their private meeting. Anything

worth doing is worth doing to win, after all, and his probability of winning had just gone way up.

"She WHAT!?"

"She dropped out, Megan. Mandy's not standing any more," Susan Bones replied, setting down the Ball.

"Does it say why?" Megan demanded.

"Nope. 'I have decided that it would be best for Harry if I did not stand. I ask my supporters to vote for someone else.' That's it," Susan summarized.

"So... that means Luna is the only Ravenclaw candidate left, right?" Megan inquired.

"That's true, Megan," Susan answered.

Megan paced back and forth. "This means that Luna's going to get most of the Ravenclaw vote. We've got to unite Hufflepuff to have a chance," Megan muttered. The conclusion was inevitable; she just didn't want to say it.

But she gathered her courage and did. "I'm going to drop out too. I've been in last place in every poll so far, and I'm still having trouble coming up with something that makes my campaign special." True enough; Megan's deep voice and nice legs didn't seem to be making an impression without, say, Susan's connections to the Ministry or cup size. "I'll make sure to endorse you, if that helps. And maybe, when Harry's nailing you to a mattress or a wall somewhere..."

"MEGAN!" Susan was simultaneously scandalized and deeply moved.

"... You'll think of me, won't you?" Megan pleaded.

"Of course I will, Megan. You've been a good friend for too long for me to forget you. And maybe I can convince Harry to 'hammer' you once or twice," Susan said, grinning.

"Oh, don't make promises you can't keep, Su," Megan said with a snuffle. "You deserve to be with Harry. I'll go and fetch Laura."

By coincidence, Hermione's hour of three AM was also the time at which Daphne and Pansy snuck down to the Slytherin common room. The Balls from Mandy and Megan had reached Slytherin House that evening, and they didn't need Astoria or Blaise to tell them that they now faced the probability of a divided house that was already likely to suffer from low turnout. They'd been checking the viewer Pansy had placed in the common room since before midnight.

"Finally! I don't know what Draco's problem is, and I don't want to know. Thank God he finally went to bed," Pansy muttered as they descended the staircase.

"Such a caring girlfriend you are," Daphne smirked.

"Oh, come on. Do you think I'm lying when I tell you that he tried to hump me like a dog in the street last week? Or that he barely lets me sit down without trying to run his hands up my legs? Or that he's hung like a boiled baby carrot?" Pansy shot back.

"Not even a little bit," Daphne responded defensively. "He was enamored with me for about a month last year, and that was quite enough, thank you very much. Ruined a perfectly good dress, too." Daphne was a head taller than her friend, with most of that difference in her strong, dancer's legs. Her bust was actually a bit bigger than Pansy's, but looked smaller because it was on a larger frame.

"Do you think she'll be there?" Pansy inquired.

"Petal and Stamen have been our house elves longer than I've been alive, and they take orders 24 hours a day," Daphne responded. "Mum will get the message as soon as she wakes up, and she'll send it on to your mum and to her. I'm sure they'll be able to meet very soon."

"Daphne, I can't be stuck with Draco forever. I can't! This is my best chance to slip away with my parents' permission, sort of. Your dad's... in with mine. The other boys they'd accept are even worse!" Even in silence and isolation, the words Death Eater would not pass her lips.

"I know," Daphne said, putting a hand on Pansy's cheek. Pansy trembled as the taller girl rubbed her face. "I'm sure there's a way for us to both get what we want." Daphne moved to the fireplace to send their message.

The observer at the noon meeting would have noted that the gazebo was surrounded by a perfectly maintained garden in the classic English style, with well-trimmed, vibrant green grass and carefully ordered rows of flowers along the walk from the manor house. He would be captivated by the scent and soothed by the sounds of the wind rustling the foliage.

Then the observer would realize that it was in fact the eighteenth of November, feel the chill of the wind, observe the falling snow, and wonder how he could have seen the garden. For that reason among others, the property's owners had placed a great deal of time and effort into repelling any such observers as well as to the spells that maintained the garden year-round.

The three women sitting in the gazebo contrasted sharply. One was a relatively short woman with black hair in a pageboy style, the second an Amazon with long black locks spilling down her back, and the third was as tall as the second but a bit slenderer, with long, straight blonde hair. All were wearing thick woolen cloaks, opened slightly as a concession to the heated gazebo.

"You requested this meeting, Chloe. What's on your mind?" the blonde asked the taller black-haired woman.

"I believe that I have told you about the election at Hogwarts in four days." Receiving nods, Chloe Greengrass continued. "Two of the other candidates have dropped out, leaving our daughters running against two candidates whose Houses may unite behind them. Early this morning, Daphne sent me a message urgently asking me for my advice. She knew that Wilbur would not be returning for some time

due to his... outside activities."

"My husband has given my daughter funding for her campaign. He will not be pleased with her or with me if she withdraws. Need I remind you what form that 'displeasure' would take?" The others shuddered at Violet Parkinson's words. "I don't mean to offend, Chloe, but has Wilbur placed any such pressure on your daughter?"

"Not directly, no," conceded Chloe.

"Then it would make sense for Daphne to withdraw and support Pansy. Otherwise, Alfred would be very cross. I have trained myself in Occlumency, but I have no illusions that I could keep him and the others from learning about the Coven for very long," Violet detailed.

"Is that a threat, Violet?" Chloe seethed, but the blonde put a hand on her arm.

"Chloe, surely you don't think that you could stand up to their torture forever," the blonde replied mildly.

"You're right, and I apologize," Chloe replied.

"Don't worry about it, Chloe. We're under great stress, and I can't really blame you for snapping every once in a while," Violet replied. "I hope that you understand my point, though."

"I do," conceded Chloe.

"Ladies," the blonde said after a few seconds, "we do have a way of relieving some of that stress we're all feeling. She rose, walking to the center of the gazebo; in her high heels, she was a truly commanding figure. "This was, after all, the other reason that we started this coven." With that, she lowered her cloak, revealing her body clad in a thin white gown. Cut in a classical style, the gown did nothing to hide her large round breasts, her hardening brown nipples, or her long, finely curved legs. Her skin was lightly tanned and smooth, with no hair below her head.

"Just out of curiosity," Narcissa Black Malfoy queried, "have either of your daughters been... close to Harry?"

"Mine was on Friday night," Violet said breathlessly. Narcissa could still be a little overawing, even after all the time that they'd known each other, especially when she put effort into it.

"And did she discover anything about his... attributes?" Narcissa sat next to Violet and pushed her cloak off her shoulders. Unlike Narcissa, Violet was wearing a sensible dress, even if it did flatter her svelte figure.

When Narcissa fixed her with a stare, Violet continued. "I believe he's about even with all of our husbands." A dismayed look from Narcissa brought a giggle from Violet. "Put together, I mean. Twenty-five centimeters was her best guess; she didn't get to actually see it, of course."

"Oh, you tease," Narcissa growled as she pulled Violet in for a deep kiss. "You don't have to be anywhere this afternoon, did you?" she asked as she pulled back.

"No," Violet gasped. "Alfred thinks I'm visiting a client."

"And so you are," Chloe said, moving forward and dropping her cloak. Her white cotton tank top and shorts weren't quite as revealing as Narcissa's gown. Of course, her sizable bosom and big hips filled them out very nicely, and her tan was deeper than Narcissa's, making for a fascinating contrast.

"If Pansy wins, should we invite them over some day?" Violet gasped as Narcissa ran her hands up Violet's legs.

"Oh, more than one day if I have anything to say about it," Narcissa growled as her head dove between Violet's thighs.

Chloe started to undo Narcissa's gown from the back, and that was the last coherent conversation from the gazebo for quite some time.

Meanwhile, for the third and final application of the hair potion, Lavender decided to dispense with her swimsuit altogether. "Nobody's coming, Hermione, and we won't stay for very long," she explained. After a minute, Hermione decided to do the same; this was as good a time as any for a proper bath.

While waiting for the potion to take its effect, they went over the final wording of the script that Hermione would use, and Lavender described the outfit that she had in mind. It would have to be let out a bit in the chest and hips, but as Lavender quipped, "If there's anywhere you want an outfit to be stretched, those are the places."

"Lavender, I haven't been properly thankful for your help, have I?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing to thank me for yet, Hermione. We still haven't had the election, and we need to talk to Katie and Angelina tomorrow just to make sure we're still running. Gryffindor can't afford to split its vote three ways," Lavender countered.

Hermione turned around suddenly as Lavender squawked. "If there's one thing being around with Harry has taught me, it's to appreciate the effort, even if not everything goes perfectly." With that, she kissed Lavender on the lips and held her tight around the waist.

"Hermione! I didn't, I mean," Lavender sputtered.

"You didn't like it?" Hermione asked with mild alarm.

"I did, but it's just that I wasn't expecting-" Lavender was cut off.

"I really do think you're pretty, Lavender. And I guess, I was trying to let you know how I feel about your help," Hermione replied, still fishing for words.

"Well, thank you too!" Lavender giggled. "Now turn back around so I can take proper care of your hair!"

"Would you like to help me after the election, with Harry?" Hermione inquired.

The resulting yelps made Hermione wonder if Lavender was doing something she shouldn't, but she felt both of Lavender's hands kneading her scalp.

Home Stretch

Hermione and Lavender had a true meeting of the minds over the '3 AM' ad, and found it easy to agree on the script and props. On Monday evening, they were ready to perform it for the Memory Ball, in the Room of Requirement.

The performance began with Hermione seated by herself. Unlike her previous balls, she was wearing a white silk robe (a raid from Lavender's wardrobe).

"This election is about a few basic questions. 'Who can keep Harry Potter happiest? What does Harry need?'"

The lights dimmed.

"Whoever wins needs to be ready on Day One."

Hermione walked toward a four-poster bed that had been out of the shot. It was clear that the robe was only mid-thigh length on Hermione (which made her wonder about Lavender, since she was a few inches taller).

"When Harry calls out at 3 AM,"

An unclear moan came from a black-haired lump in the bed (actually Lavender wearing a wig).

"Who will know better than anyone else what he needs, or what he wants?"

Hermione stripped off the robe, leaving herself in a white lacy bra and panty set. She climbed onto the bed and began stroking the lump just beneath the hairline.

"This is no time to take a chance on the inexperienced. Vote for Hermione Granger on Friday."

The Ball went dark, marking the end of the recording.

"Mmmm... Hermione, you have exactly fifty years to stop doing that," Lavender purred. "I think you performed perfectly, Hermione."

"Thanks, Lavender. You had some great ideas with the wardrobe," Hermione said.

"Oh, I figured that you'll want to show the girls what Harry's getting without being too vulgar. You've got a fine body, you just needed to show it off a little," Lavender reasoned.

"Lavender, I've been thinking," Hermione began.

"Because that's so unusual for you," Lavender jested.

Hermione actually giggled at that, then continued, "I'd like for there to be a place for you at Harry's and my side when we win."

Lavender got serious for a moment. "Remember, we haven't won anything yet, Hermione. We've still got to talk to Katie and Angelina- we can't win if Gryffindor's vote is split three ways while Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw are united. And I'm sure the Slytherins are up to something- they always are."

"You're right," sighed Hermione. "But I still want you to be with us. And I'm sure we can convince Harry."

"I'm sure we can," Lavender agreed with a kiss.

"I remember an old legend, Katie," Harry announced during practice the next day.

"What was that, Harry?" Katie asked.

"Long ago, when dinosaurs and Oliver Wood roamed the Earth, there was a big yellow ball in the sky that provided heat and light. But then it went away. Think it'll ever come back?" he deadpanned.

Katie laughed; this side of Harry had been all too rare lately. 'Of course, it won't be after Friday if I have anything to say about it,' she resolved. Out loud, she said, "Oh come on, Harry. It hasn't been that long since the sun was out."

"I was hoping that Angelina would come before the end of practice," Harry stated. "I was really hoping she'd talk to us again."

"Well- oh, there she is!" Katie yelled, grabbing Harry's hand.

Harry looked across the pitch to see Angelina walking their way. She was dressed all in black leather today- zipped-up jacket, gloves, long skirt, and boots. Harry felt Katie shiver a little, and he couldn't blame her; while the day was warmer than yesterday, that meant it was merely cold instead of frigid.

"Hey, Angelina!" Harry called. "How did Chudley do last weekend?"

Angelina jogged the last few steps toward the two. "Harry, great to see you! You know, I'm really torn about the Cannons- I don't know if I want them to win or to get creamed so that they'll figure out how much they need us youngsters. So far, they're getting creamed, but it doesn't seem to be teaching the management anything," she said, slightly frustrated. She quickly grinned again. "But enough about that for now. You wanted me to give another set of strategy speeches, although if you keep catching the Snitch after two minutes, I can't really improve on that," she laughed.

Harry enjoyed hearing Angelina laugh, although he didn't know quite how to say it without sounding silly in front of Katie. He grinned himself. "Well, let's get to the locker room so you can guide us with your wisdom."

Angelina laughed again. "Follow me, O my children," she intoned, as Katie gestured for everyone else to land.

The tension that had existed between Katie and Angelina was gone today, Harry observed. He was happy to see his friends getting along again, and hoped that they'd be friendly with Hermione, too.

That evening, after dinner, Hermione did meet with them. They went to another unused classroom; Harry followed them, but was informed that this meeting was for females only.

At the meeting, Hermione showed the other two the Ball she and Lavender had made.

"Well, what did you think?" Hermione asked brightly.

"I'm impressed," admitted Katie. "Did you do this by yourself?"

"Well, Lavender helped me with the wardrobe and the script," Hermione admitted. "And I..." she stopped a couple of words too late.

"You what, Hermione?" Angelina demanded.

"Well, I kind of... told Lavender that I'd let her sleep with Harry," Hermione spat out in a rush and with a blush.

Katie and Angelina thought about that for a minute, while Hermione got more and more uncomfortable.

Then they laughed.

"So you decided to get some help, Hermione?" Katie taunted.

Hermione's blush deepened. "Katie, whatever you're insinuating, I assure you that-"

Angelina stopped her before her rant could pick up steam. "Hermione, we don't blame you. We're the ones who've been on the same team with him for five years... which means we've occasionally seen him shower."

"'Occasionally' being defined as 'anytime we've been sure we wouldn't be caught,'" Katie clarified helpfully.

"And we don't blame you a bit," Angelina assured her. "I've had a similar... discussion with the Patils- in fact, that was part of the agreement we made when I decided to run in the first place."

Hermione was taken aback. "But I thought that it was because they thought they were cheated."

"Oh, that was part of it," Angelina conceded. "But they decided that they would team up with someone who would let them be with him every once in a while. I'm a friend of his with another job far away, so..."

Just then, Lavender burst into the room. "There you are! I've been looking all over for you," she exclaimed, only to then see Katie and Angelina. "Oh, well then..."

"Lavender, you might as well tell me what's on your mind," Katie said.

"Daphne just released a new Ball. She's dropping out to join Pansy on her 'ticket,' they're calling it- they'll both be Harry's girlfriends if they win," Lavender explained. "So Gryffindor's the only house left with more than one candidate. What do we do?"

"We team up," Katie answered simply. "If everyone else is joining forces, then we'll have to do it too."

"So who's going to be in charge?" Lavender asked, looking anxious and hoping the other girls wouldn't know why. "Not that it's so important to me, but..."

"Relax, Lavender, we know about your deal with Hermione, and we approve. I've got a similar deal," answered Angelina smoothly.

"And I've have made one with you, if you'd asked," Katie added.

Lavender blushed. "Um, thanks, Katie..."

"So who's going to be in charge of this team?" Angelina repeated. "One of us needs to stay on the ballot while the others withdraw. Which of us will be the best candidate? I'll admit that my not being a student anymore takes away from my ability to draw votes."

"And I think maybe Hermione's got a point with this Ball," Katie said. "Hermione, you have known Harry better than we have. Maybe you should be our lead candidate- as long as we get our share."

"And what is 'your share'?" Hermione inquired.

"Let's say two days a week, each," Katie said. "I understand you have a deal with Lavender that you need to work out, so that leaves a couple of days for you. Surely that will be good enough to start out with..."

"But that doesn't seem like enough," Angelina complained. Katie then whispered in her ear, causing Angelina to break into a grin. "Ohhhh yes, and we do need to show Harry, don't we?"

"I told him we'd have to 'kiss and make up,'" Katie said quietly. "And Hermione, you might want to ask about borrowing Harry's cloak- yes, we know he has an invisibility cloak, we've heard the stories- for our practice tomorrow. We think you'll find it interesting."

"I'll help you all make a Ball for the announcement," Lavender said after a few moments. She didn't know for sure what Katie had said... but she had a pretty good idea.

Gryffindor's second practice of the week was the following day. The weather had stayed constant- still cold, still overcast, still no rain or snow.

Angelina was waiting for them in the locker room as Katie went over what worked and hadn't worked during the practice. However, she gave no speech and Katie treated her as if she weren't there. The other team members left. Harry was about to approach Katie when Angelina told him to stop.

"Harry," started Angelina, "do you remember what Katie told you on Saturday before your game?"

"I remember that she said you, Katie, and Hermione would get back together this week," Harry answered.

"Do you remember exactly what words she used?" Angelina prodded.

"I think she said that you would kiss and make up," Harry remembered.

Angelina walked over to Katie. "She meant what she said, Harry." With that, she bent her head toward Katie's for a brief smooch. She pulled her head back.

Katie continued, "After all, Harry, I think it's important-" kiss- "that as your captain and your friend-" longer kiss- "I should tell you exactly what I mean." That brought the longest kiss yet, with the girls' tongues now visible.

Harry stood transfixed as his teammates made out in front of him.

"Never thought you'd see this, did you, Harry?" Hermione's voice inquired before she stepped out from under the invisibility cloak.

"So that's why you asked to borrow it! But..." Harry was still having trouble collecting his thoughts as he watched the two athletic beauties start to explore each other's bodies with their hands.

"Harry, we've decided that for the good of Gryffindor, and for your good, that we're going to work together. If we win, then we'll all be willing to be with you." Harry didn't respond; he was still looking at the other two girls. "That's enough, ladies!" Hermione called, and reluctantly Katie and Angelina separated.

"When did you... start?" Harry asked.

"Oh, last year- right after that bitch Umbridge kicked you off the team. Angelina was crying in frustration after practice not long after that, and I went over to comfort her, and... one thing kind of led to another," Katie replied a bit sheepishly.

"To tell the truth, Harry, if you'd still been around, I might have called for you instead of Katie," Angelina confided.

"Well, now we're all working together, just as you hoped," Hermione stated, walking over to kiss Katie and then Angelina on the lips. "We're all here for you, Harry. Whether we win or lose, we want you to know that we're all ready to help you in any way that we can."

"Girls, thank you. This means more to me than I can say," Harry said in a low, rough voice. "But I don't want to be unfair to the other girls who want to help me. You understand, don't you? I mean, I don't want the other girls to think I'm being unfair to them- that could lead to all sorts of problems if they think they've been cheated."

"Oh, we understand. We just want you to know that if Hermione wins, she'll have company. Very happy company," Katie grinned.

Nathan Silver was the latest of the long list of people that Luna Lovegood had driven to distraction. On Monday, he had told Luna that she was a strong favorite to win, and Luna's response was to... do nothing. As the candidates from other houses dropped out, Silver had advised Luna to make new Balls and she... did nothing, with that odd smile. Silver had told himself that he wouldn't get emotionally involved with the race, but here he was anyway.

"Don't you want to win? I thought the entire point of starting this election was to find the proper girlfriend for Harry! Don't you think you deserve it?" Nathan asked.

"Oh, I'm confident, Nathan. I just don't want to win by too much. Harry might not think that was fair of me," Luna replied in her usual composed manner.

"But if you don't make any new Balls, your voters will keep drifting away and you'll lose," Nathan replied. No polls had been conducted since the weekend- the constant withdrawals had made it impossible to ask for accurate preferences- but watching the other houses unite and frittering away the opportunity to win was bugging Silver no end.

"Nathan, I think that Harry deserves what is meant to be. Besides," she said with an extra glint in her eye, "I think he'll be really happy with the way I see things ending."

On that note, Nathan left; there was usually a time when you had to leave Luna to her own odd devices.

Meanwhile, Susan's chances were very quietly being torpedoed. The same housemates whose arguments had rocked the Hufflepuff caucus were arguing again.

This time, Lynn and Hannah had started vying over Ernie MacMillan. No surprise there; Ernie was a pretty good catch, after all, with his wealth and physique, even if he did sound a bit pompous. But when they saw each other on Wednesday evening, Lynn brought up Hannah's campaigning during the caucus and suggested that Hannah wasn't over Harry. Hannah responded by calling Lynn a bitch who just liked to break up relationships, and things degenerated from there.

When the two were separated from their catfight (to the dismay of onlookers, they used magic instead of hair-pulling and clothes-ripping), Lynn dared Hannah to be honest enough not to vote for Susan because she thought Susan didn't deserve Harry. In turn, Hannah dared Lynn to vote for Pansy if she really thought Harry didn't deserve Susan. Several of the girls' friends were listening, and told their friends in turn, and what had seemed to be unanimous support for Susan in the Badgers' House started to crumble.

On Thursday, the candidates toured the houses to answer questions and drum up votes- except for Slytherin. None of the other houses' candidates felt quite safe in the House of the Snake, and they figured there wouldn't be enough voters to matter anyway.

On Friday morning at 7 AM, an inconspicuous yellow light went on at the bulletin boards of each of the

Houses. The boys of the Houses had no idea what it meant, but the girls knew.

The polls were open.

Day of Decission

At the very beginning of the process, the Photography Club members approached Luna to help them design an election system, because of her interest in American politics. However, after she described the "Electrical College," or whatever the Yanks called it, they concluded that it simply wouldn't work. Four equally-sized houses would inevitably produce a tie unless some candidate could win pluralities in more than one house. Instead, the Club agreed to hold the elections on a simple first-past-the-post basis, with no runoffs or added rounds of voting. (Besides, Luna said the College and the popular vote had agreed in every election for over a hundred years. The risk of a nearly tied overall count might be greater than having the result depending on the vote of one House, but not by enough to justify the complexity.)

The ballots had been repeatedly revised as candidates had dropped out since Sunday, and now contained just four names- Susan, Hermione, Luna, and Pansy. The stacks of ballots were carefully and discreetly moved into side rooms off of the Houses' common rooms during the wee hours of Friday morning. At least one Club member would supervise each box at all times, joined by girls from each House (usually younger girls "traded" between the Houses), to prevent any form of magical or non-magical tampering.

Second-year Ravenclaw Kay Hutchison had supported Mandy Brocklehurst from the beginning. Her family lived just a couple of miles from Mandy's, and they knew each other casually. When Mandy dropped out, a disappointed Kay switched her allegiance to Luna Lovegood.

However, as Luna's campaign continued, Kay thought that Luna was getting a little... arrogant, maybe. Luna didn't bring out any new Memory Balls to explain why she was running. Kay decided to look at the other candidates' Balls to see what their arguments were.

The '3 AM' Ball from Hermione was a clincher. Kay had been born well after the War ended, but her parents had told her a little bit about it. Once or twice during the summer, she'd woken up to find her mother sitting in her room watching her sleep. Kay was no fool- you don't get into Ravenclaw if you are- and she figured that her mother was worried that something might happen to her overnight; it wasn't completely logical, but it wasn't out of the question either now that Voldemort was on the loose. She figured that Harry would need someone who knew what that felt like.

So when Kay reached the head of the line that the Ravenclaw girls had formed when the polls opened, she wasted no time in marking her ballot for Hermione Granger.

Fourth-year Hufflepuff Jo Emerson had been expecting to vote for Susan Bones from the beginning of the campaign. Hufflepuffs need to support their own, after all.

However, she also counted Hannah Abbott as a friend. Hannah was generally nice to students younger than she was, and was more willing to help them with their assignments than other sixth years. So when Jo heard about the fight between Lynn and Hannah, and she heard that Hannah had said that students should vote for Pansy instead of Susan, she was willing to believe it.

When Susan returned to Hufflepuff House after her tour on Thursday, Jo tried to ask her about the fight. Unfortunately, Susan hadn't been there and knew no more about it than Jo; when she was asked if Pansy could deserve her vote more than Susan, she simply laughed and dismissed the idea. (Like the other candidates, Susan simply hadn't taken the Slytherins' chances seriously.)

After watching Pansy's joint Balls with Daphne and then sleeping on the matter, Jo made her decision. Pansy seemed sincere about Harry's welfare, and it just wasn't very... Hufflepuff to ridicule someone who was sincere. So after a final moment of dithering at the ballot box, before breakfast Jo voted for Pansy Parkinson.

Third-year Gryffindor Emilia Thicknesse was the niece of Pius Thicknesse, newly appointed head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Influenced by Pius and other relatives, she believed that it was important for Harry to have a girlfriend who was connected with the Ministry, especially its law enforcement arm. As such, Susan Bones was the perfect candidate for her, and nothing said by any other candidate shook her beliefs at all. She happily marked her ballot for Susan before going to lunch.

Her roommate Stephanie Sanders, on the other hand, believed that Harry needed someone who wasn't quite so serious about everything. The lack of humor displayed by most of the candidates simply depressed her, and she was glad to hear a little whimsy and wit from Luna Lovegood when describing the things she enjoyed and wanted to share with Harry. So she voted for Luna early that afternoon.

And in similar fashion did some two hundred other girls make their decisions before marking their ballots. By noon, the Hufflepuffs had all voted, and their ballot box was then moved to the big open room on the eighth floor where the Photography Club members had established their operation. Shortly after classes ended, the last of the Ravenclaws did so as well.

Many Slytherins simply weren't going to vote because their interest in Harry Potter extended no further than how painfully he could be put to death. (Some with similar beliefs voted for Pansy anyway.)

Sixty-eight Gryffindors had voted as of five minutes of seven...

"Who's left again?" Tiny Barbara Michaels asked the almost equally small Dennis Creevey as they waited in the side passage outside of Gryffindor.

"Ginny Weasley and..." Creevey's response to the first-year Slytherin was cut off by the panting student who had just thrown the door open.

Fifth-year Caroline Kennedy had been so involved with her OWL studies that she had managed to forget that it was Election Day. When she remembered, she had to run from the library in a dead sprint to try to cast her vote before the polls closed. "Am I in time?" she wheezed.

"Just barely! And you are..." Dennis inquired.

"Caroline," she replied. Dennis quickly verified that she was the other nonvoting Gryffindor, and Caroline grabbed a ballot and marked it for Hermione, then slid it into the box.

A minute later, the lights went out on the bulletin boards, to be replaced with equally small red lights. The polls had closed, and the count would soon begin. The two dozen or so nonvoting Slytherins and Ginny had had their shot, as the ballot boxes locked up tight and were carried away.

The boys of the Houses were slightly puzzled to see the girls stop their conversations over the next few minutes and start moving toward the staircases leading to their rooms. Of course, most of them didn't understand girls anyway, knew that they didn't understand them, and thus didn't give the matter another thought. The few who were privy to the secret saw no need to explain anything and stayed inconspicuous so that they wouldn't have to.

Announcement

A week before the election, Weasley Wizard Wheezes received a rather unusual order from the Photography Club at Hogwarts. Colin Creevey explained that he was looking for four terminals that could receive sound from a central transmitter. He said that they were for a project that would directly benefit Harry Potter, and thus hoped that he could get a modest discount on their usual rates, whatever they were.

The resulting letter from the twins asked if a 100% discount would be acceptable, since they still owed Harry for providing so much of their equity.

Putting together what Muggles called a closed-circuit radio system was easy, and they had discovered a part of the spectrum unused by Muggles and unblocked by magical energy while at work on another project. As a result, the system was ready on Tuesday and smuggled through the Gryffindor fireplace in the small hours of Wednesday morning. Club members arranged to have the seventh year girl prefect from each House take custody of one receiver, and these receivers were placed in the respective seventh year dormitories.

Thus, when the girls left the common rooms shortly after 7 PM on Friday, they went to the seventh year girls' dorms. They weren't as tight a squeeze as might be imagined; Hogwarts' founders arranged for seventh years to have the most room, and understood that it might be required for the girls and boys to meet en masse separately.

At 7:15, the Gryffindor and Slytherin ballot boxes arrived, and Lee Jordan was on the air once more, welcoming the girls of Hogwarts to the Special Election Broadcast.

"Joining us in the studio tonight are the lovely Luna Lovegood, the smashing Susan Bones, the handsome Hermione Granger, and the pulchritudinous Pansy Parkinson!"

"Pulchritudinous?" inquired Rodney Alexander, the Hufflepuff cooperating with Lee on the broadcast.

"You should learn a new word every day, Rod. And also with us tonight is the man of the hour, the lucky dog who'll be doing whatever the winner wants, whenever she wants it- Harry Potter! Harry, do you have a few words before the boxes start to be counted?" Lee exclaimed.

Harry sat down next to Lee, across from the candidates. "I just want to say that I'm overwhelmed by the support that I've received from so many of you, and that I hope to be a boyfriend that the winner deserves, whoever she is. I hope I'm good enough for you. I want to thank Hermione and Luna in particular, as this election was their idea, so they tell me. But," he continued quickly, "I believe that Susan and Pansy would be excellent girlfriends as well."

The candidates sighed in unison, as did many of the listeners in their respective rooms. Some of the latter sighs sounded more like moans.

"Thank you, Harry. I don't suppose I could be your girlfriend, Harry? Hah! You should have seen the look on his face, girls. It was priceless," Lee chortled.

"And I see that we have the Hufflepuff box all counted. Let's go to Colin Creevey, who has the numbers for us," Rod interjected as a segue.

"Seventy votes were cast in Hufflepuff House, representing 100 percent of eligible voters," Colin stated, reading from a piece of paper. "Susan Bones received fifty-two votes, Pansy Parkinson eleven votes, Luna Lovegood four votes, and Hermione Granger three votes."

"Well, no surprise that Susan won most of the Badgers' vote, but I am surprised that Pansy is such a strong second and Hermione in last. That certainly wasn't the case at the start of the campaign," Lee explained.

"If I may," Rod broke in, "there was a story from Hufflepuff that some girls believed Pansy was being belittled by Susan and some of her friends. I spoke with some of the Hufflepuffs earlier today, and they seemed to confirm this."

"Excuse me," interrupted Susan, "but I said and did nothing of the sort, and I believe Pansy will back me up on this. I have attempted to run a purely positive campaign."

"Well," Pansy drawled, "I think my friend Susan goes a bit further than can be justified. She didn't sound terribly positive when she said that Luna was flighty, for instance." Pansy decided that she would do better arguing on someone else's behalf.

Luna refused to be baited. "I believe Susan ran a good campaign, and I am happy to leave it to the voters to judge."

"Hermione, any idea why you received so few votes?" asked Rod.

"I believe that I didn't always run the best campaign," Hermione admitted. "I have to say that this whole campaign was a learning experience."

"Any truth to the idea that you were hurt by the endorsements of Katie and Angelina?" Rod prodded.

Hermione reacted more testily, "Absolutely not. I was thrilled to receive their endorsement and will be glad to accept whatever help they would like to extend."

"Oh, I can imagine the kind of 'help' they have in mind," Lee leered; Hermione and Harry both turned scarlet, but neither said a word. "Let the record show that they're both blushing!" (So did quite a few girls listening and imagining themselves part of the transaction.)

Rod jumped in, saying, "Sorry to break up the party, Lee, but I think Colin's about ready to announce the Ravenclaw results."

"Seventy votes were cast in Ravenclaw House, representing 100 percent of eligible voters," Colin read. "Luna Lovegood received fifty-four votes, Pansy Parkinson received six votes, Hermione Granger received five votes, and Susan Bones received five votes."

"Again, Pansy finishing second! Any thoughts on why this happened, Pansy?" Lee inquired.

"A true Slytherin abides by two rules, Lee. First, never tell everything you know," Pansy answered.

Lee waited for Pansy to continue. When it was obvious that she wouldn't, he said, "Sage advice, I'm sure. Rod, where do we stand now?"

"So far, Luna's got the lead by one vote over Susan, with Pansy and Hermione well behind. I've got Nathan Silver here to offer his two Knuts. You were Luna's campaign manager, correct?"

"Yes, Rod, but I think I can be reasonably objective about the campaign," Nathan said, walking over from where he had been observing the tally.

"What is the reason for Luna's success, do you think?" Rod asked.

"Luna's a wonderful girl with a... unique approach to her campaign, and the voters responded well to it," Nathan responded evenly.

"I have heard rumors that you disagreed with some of her decisions," Rod commented slyly.

"I've heard them, too," Nathan replied rather stiffly, "and I won't comment on them."

"Dammit," Lee muttered. "Well, thank you for your thoughts. In case you were wondering, the other campaign managers are also looking at the ballots as they're being counted. Blaise, could you come over here for a second?" Blaise Zabini heard Lee's call and ambled over.

"Blaise, Pansy seems to be doing well in the other Houses. Can you tell us why?" Lee asked.

"Pansy Parkinson has thrived for years within Slytherin by being underestimated, and the rest of the Houses are now learning what we know about her," Blaise replied enthusiastically. "She'll make Harry an excellent girlfriend for however long they stay together."

Whoops came from the Slytherin dorm, as Blaise made another statement on which everyone could agree.

"Thank you, Blaise. I believe that Colin is now signaling that the Gryffindor count is complete," Rod said, nodding toward the elder Creevey.

Colin announced, "Sixty-nine votes were cast in Gryffindor House, representing 99 percent of eligible voters. Hermione Granger received fifty-six votes, Susan Bones received six votes, Luna Lovegood received five votes, and Pansy Parkinson received two votes."

"With the three houses most likely to vote now in the books, I have a very narrow lead for Hermione over Luna and Susan, with Pansy far behind. Slytherin still hasn't been counted yet, but an awful lot of Slytherin girls showed no interest in this election," Rod detailed.

"True, but the other candidates seemed to have little interest in Slytherin votes," noted Rod. "It's hard to see any of the other candidates doing much in the land of green and silver. Lavender, can we talk for a moment?"

"Certainly, Lee," Lavender replied as she slinked over.

"It's always a pleasure, Lavender," Lee said, more sincerely than usual. "I understand that Hermione has you to thank for her comeback."

"Well, I made a few suggestions, but that Ball was all Hermione's work. Harry," she said, turning to him, "I just want you to know that if we win, our deal is still on." She walked behind Harry's chair and rubbed his shoulders. "In fact, I'd like it to be on in any event, win or lose," she whispered in Harry's ear.

Harry gulped as he felt two hard points rubbing against his shoulder blades through layers of clothing. "Sounds wonderful, Lavender," he said weakly.

"Lavender Brown, ladies and gentlemen," Lee finished. "Now, to complete the set, I believe that Laura Madley is available. Laura?" he summoned.

Laura walked over. "Susan seems to have kept kind of a lower profile than most of her opponents. Was that the strategy that you intended?" Lee inquired.

"Well, we believed that Susan is quite capable of speaking for herself," Laura stated. "I mean, look at her!"

"Laura, we're on the wireless," Rod cautioned.

"Susan's beauty, intelligence, and good humor speak for themselves," Laura continued, "and I believe that our campaign has done a fine job of emphasizing them."

"Well, good luck to you," Lee said by way of farewell. "I believe the Slytherin count is nearly done, am I correct, Colin?"

"Give me one minute, please," Colin pleaded, arms full of ballots. "We're double-checking our numbers. We just want to be sure about our results here."

"No problem, Colin," Rod replied. "Take your time. We know this is a very important vote for all you women out there."

"And just remember, girls- no matter who wins, we're still available!" Lee crowed.

"There's a reason for that, Lee," Pansy snarked. Everyone laughed at that, including Rod.

"Tell me you're finished, Colin, please," Lee pleaded; it was remarkable how deeply his blush could show under his dark skin.

Luckily for Lee, Colin was. "Forty-seven votes were cast in Slytherin House, representing 67 percent of eligible voters."

In all four seventh-year girls' rooms and at the announcers' table, everyone held their breaths. Even with the higher-than-expected Snake turnout, Pansy would still need almost all of these votes to win.

"Pansy Parkinson received forty-five votes..."

Pansy quickly added the numbers in her head. 'I just might win after all!' she mentally exulted.

"Susan Bones received one vote..."

Susan wasn't quite as fast as Pansy, but she grinned as she realized that she just might have a chance.

"Luna Lovegood received one vote..."

If Luna was adding the numbers or otherwise considering the result at all, she gave no sign.

"And Hermione Granger received zero votes."

Hermione's jaw was dropping as she turned to look at an equally gobsmacked Pansy.

"Please bear with us for one moment while we double-check our numbers."

Harry wasn't quite as good with numbers as Pansy and Hermione, but he'd been writing the tallies down as each ballot box was counted, and finished adding them a minute later. "Did I make a mistake, anyone?" he said quietly, sliding his parchment around so that the girls could read it.

"Nope," Luna said with a grin.

"I don't think you did," Pansy replied evenly.

"Looks right to me," said Susan.

"Harry, I've kind of got something to tell you," Hermione sputtered.

"What is it?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"I kind of..." Hermione was saved by Colin making an announcement.

"After recounting, we confirm the following final totals. Miss Susan Bones of Hufflepuff, sixty-four votes; Miss Hermione Granger of Gryffindor, sixty-four votes; Miss Luna Lovegood of Ravenclaw, sixty-four votes; and Miss Pansy Parkinson of Slytherin, sixty-four votes."

The boys still in the common rooms were startled by the noise coming from the girls' dormitories, but no one had the guts to ask what caused it.

"Well, thanks, Colin," Lee said. "Sorry to disappoint you girls, but it looks like this election didn't settle a thing! Still, we thank you for listening to us and hope you have a wonderful evening." With that, Lee and Rod stepped away from the transmitter.

"Now what do we do?" Susan asked.

"Don't ask me. When we talked with Hermione and Luna, we said we weren't going to do a second round of voting. This project was fun, but it ate up a lot more time than we thought it would, and I'm

not sure we want to do another two or three weeks of this right away. I hope you all settle things with a minimum of injuries, and I wish you luck, Harry. You're gonna need it!" With that cheerful riposte, Rod picked up his papers and headed for the door, where the other Photography Club members were already headed.

Harry was left sitting opposite the four candidates and their campaign managers walked over. Each of them talked with his or her candidate for a minute. Nate walked off shaking his head, Laura smiling, and Lavender and Blaise trembling and biting their lips. They also left the room, leaving Harry and the candidates alone.

"So now what do we do?" Harry inquired. He got up and started to pace, and the girls also rose. "This whole election was supposed to be about making me feel better- and I appreciate it, Hermione, don't think that I don't- but now I have to disappoint three of you who earned better, and I hate to do that to you."

"So don't," Luna replied succinctly.

"But how can I keep all of you happy?" Harry asked, more worriedly.

Luna put a hand on Harry's shoulder to stop him from pacing. "Here's a good way to start," she stage-whispered, as she pressed her lips to Harry's.

Harry had only had a few kisses in his lifetime, but none had been anything like this. This wasn't Hermione's friendly peck or Cho's watery smooch. He felt Luna's tongue pressing against his lips, and when he opened his mouth to ask what she wanted, it seemed to jump in to massage his tongue. Her mouth tasted wonderful, spicy and sweet at once. Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, as his did around her back, pressing her body to him- a body with very interesting curves he'd never really noticed before. After a while, Luna let him go.

"That was very good, Harry, but you can do better. Susan, maybe you can convince him to give a better effort?" Luna stepped back to allow the Hufflepuff to step forward. Susan placed her hands on Harry's cheeks and, hazel eyes glittering, pressed her lips and body to his. Harry had definitely noticed Susan's curves before (as had every Hogwarts male who had started puberty), and was happy to have them pressed against him; he was pleasantly surprised when Susan rubbed her body against his and his body responded.

When Susan released him, Pansy took her place. Harry was a bit taken aback when she jumped into his arms- she was remarkably light, and holding her up was easy. So was kissing her; she seemed to love it when he squeezed her bum, moaning into his mouth very pleasantly.

That left only Hermione. Harry was afraid that their kiss would be awkward, but that fear was dispelled by the way that she threw herself into his arms, kissing him with a passion that he loved. He could see her eyes glittering with tears of joy as their tongues played together.

"I've been waiting to do that for... at least two years, Harry, ever since the Yule Ball. Thank you for not making me wait any longer," Hermione panted when her lips finally released his.

Unknown to the candidates, several groups of Photography Club members were engaged in quiet discussions back in their common rooms over some of the equipment. The Gryffindors quickly determined that Rod had the assignment of taking the transmitter away, the Hufflepuffs concurred that it was a Slytherin's responsibility, the Slytherins agreed that a Ravenclaw's duty, and the Ravenclaws remembered that Colin had agreed to carry it away. With the buck properly passed, the Club members started to prepare for bed.

Meanwhile, the girls were now lined up in front of Harry again. "I think we'll need something more comfortable for this next part," Susan mused, looking around at the tables and floor. She pulled out her wand and started summoning pillows. The other witches followed suit, and soon there was a large disorderly pile of pillows covering much of the floor.

Hermione unbuttoned Harry's shirt, and the girls cooed at seeing Harry's strong, sparsely haired chest. "I think we should have a rule," Luna noted quietly, turning to Harry. "Harry, you're not allowed to take your shirt off."

"Huh?" Harry eloquently replied.

"This is an important job, which one of us should always handle," Luna continued with unusual seriousness. "If one of us is not available, it should be someone we designate."

"I've got several people in mind," Hermione quietly added as she reached the last button, noting the sizable bulge in Harry's jeans so temptingly nearby.

"So do I," concurred Pansy, eyes on Harry's pants.

"I've got one girl that I promised could do it," Susan said.

"I don't," Luna added happily, "but I'm sure I could recruit someone if I absolutely had to. For your best interests, you understand." Harry could only nod in response.

"Now it's time for you to do the same for us," Hermione ordered. The girls formed a line in front of the pillows.

One by one, Harry undid the sashes on the girls' robes. Hermione was wearing the same white ensemble that she'd worn for her '3 AM' Memory Ball. Susan was wearing a low-cut basque and tiny, lacy shorts, and Pansy was wearing an expensive-looking pinstriped vest (cut low to reveal surprising cleavage) and a very short skirt. Harry could guess what Luna was wearing beneath her robe, and he was right: nothing at all.

Luna was the first to drop to her knees and undo Harry's jeans. "Oh, that looks painful," Luna cooed. "I'm sure I can make it better." With that, she lowered Harry's pants and boxers, revealing him to the girls for the first time.

There was a moment of silence, making Harry uncomfortable. When he tried to speak, Hermione placed a finger gently on his lips. "This is a historic moment, Harry," Hermione whispered.

"I underestimated you, Harry," Pansy said shakily. "Oh, the Coven will hear about this..."

"Who are the Coven?" Susan asked breathlessly.

"The people I was talking about who'll help me with Harry," Pansy answered. "Now quiet, I want to see how Luna handles this."

Luna started with a tentative series of licks, following by laps at the head of Harry's prick; it was the size of a small plum and nearly the same color. "He tastes marvelous," Luna purred. "Sweet, salty, creamy all at once." Then she opened her mouth as wide as possible to take him in. She got about halfway down his stalk before pulling back.

"Don't you want me to do this well, Harry?" Luna pleaded with her eyes big and round.

"What do you mean?" Harry whispered.

"You need to take a hold of me, so that I can take in as much of you as possible," Luna explained.

"I thought girls didn't..." Harry tailed off.

"Well, I do," Luna explained and returned to her work. This time, Harry kept a hand on the back of Luna's head while she worked on his cock; she had about eight inches of it down her throat now, and was making intriguing slurps and gurgles. She indeed seemed to benefit from Harry's assistance, and after a couple of minutes, Harry had had all that he could take. His attempts at warning Luna bothered her not at all, and he soon came down her throat.

Slowly rising from her knees, Luna sauntered toward each of the other girls, kissing them deeply in turn and sharing some of Harry's spunk with each of them. "Well? What do you think?" Luna inquired.

"Mmmm..." Susan purred. "I could get used to this. In fact, I expect to, Harry."

Pansy saw that the kisses had gone a long way toward reviving Harry. "I can't wait any longer," she said breathlessly, and shoved Harry into the pillows before straddling his body. She reached down between her legs to guide Harry between her lower lips, still hidden beneath her skirt. The loud groan she let out let the girls know when contact had been made, and every half minute or so another "Oh!" let them know that Harry was plunging a little deeper.

"I've got to see this," Susan cried, unbuttoning Pansy's vest to reveal her bare torso. She placed a hand on Pansy's flat stomach. "I think I can actually feel it!"

"Let me see," Hermione said, kneeling down to feel Pansy's tummy. "I don't feel it, Susan."

"No, he's up here," Susan replied, moving Hermione's hand.

"I still don't feel anything... but she's got awfully smooth skin, doesn't she? Pansy?" Pansy was too far gone in pleasure to keep track of the conversation, and responded with a gasp as she came.

"Very smooth. Nice tits, too," Susan confirmed, running her hand up to tweak one of Pansy's nipples, while Hermione was feeling up her other breast. Meanwhile, Harry had a firm grip on Pansy's hips to

keep her upright as she screamed in orgasm (again).

"Oh, they're nice, but yours are go much bigger," Hermione stated. "I guess I should admit that I've wanted to touch them for a while."

"Don't let me stop you," Susan smiled, lowering the straps on her basque.

Watching one girl ride him to multiple orgasms while two more beauties examined their bodies was too much for Harry, and he yelled as he came again.

Pansy was dripping with sweat now as she bent down to kiss Harry on the lips. "Thank you, Harry. That was the most wonderful experience of my life."

"My turn!" Susan hollered as she lay down on the pillows. "I've got an idea, Harry."

Harry already had his own ideas, and gladly let Susan start sucking on his cock, which reacted quickly, returning to hardness once more.

"Now, I've got something else for you to try. Straddle my body, Harry." When he did, Susan grabbed his cock and placed it between her breasts, and then started to gently undulate, moving it through her cleavage; Harry soon picked up on her rhythm.

"Susan, I've got to admit that I've wanted to do this for a long time," Harry huffed.

"You're the first person to do this with me, Harry. And you'll be the last," Susan gasped as they continued to rock. Meanwhile, Luna was diving under Pansy's skirt to try to capture any spare droplets that leaked out of her; her licking caused Pansy to moan again.

"Damn, Pansy comes easily," Hermione noted. "I envy her."

"You'll have your chance soon enough, Hermione," Pansy panted. "I know you've known Harry longer than the rest of us. Do you want us to help?" It took a while for her to say that, as Pansy could only get two or three words out at a time.

"Not that time, Pansy. I'll be happy to invite you next time," Hermione requested.

"Next time?" Harry gasped.

"Of course! What do you think that girlfriend means, Harry? We're with you as long as you want us," Hermione replied, swinging her hips as she walked over to Harry. "And we hope you want us for a long," she said, bending down to kiss Harry, "long," kissing him more deeply, "time."

With that, Harry let go again, coating Susan's face. The other girls converged on her to kiss and lick her, cleaning her very slowly and thoroughly. They even cleaned her breasts, which had only trace amounts of come; Pansy and Luna decided to be even more thorough and 'clean' Susan all the way down her body.

"Now it's my turn, Harry. I know this may take a while, but we have all the time we need," Hermione sighed as she lay down beside her longtime friend and new lover.

The following morning, the five woke up to feel sunshine coming through the windows for the first time in weeks. They were still lying on the pillows in the makeshift studio.

"We've got to go downstairs," Hermione called when she realized the problem. "Maybe we can pretend that we're just going to breakfast."

The other girls and Harry awoke more languidly. Susan laughed, "There's no hurry, Hermione. Breakfast is still being served for," she consulted her watch, "at least another hour. And I suspect we'll be excused anyway," she finished with a giggle.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked blankly.

By way of response, Susan pointed to a piece of odd-looking machinery on a table behind them. "That's the transmitter they used for last night's radio broadcast. They knew we were here."

Hermione blanched. "You mean, that when I told Harry that I always wanted to be with him and that I loved him-"

"And when he gave you that fourth orgasm? Yeah, the girls heard it all," Pansy smirked. "Live."

"I thought that was expected, myself," Luna added mistily. "Politicians give speeches when they win or lose, so why shouldn't we share the joys of victory."

"This is gonna be so embarrassing," Hermione moaned, but then a strong arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"Hermione, you have nothing to be ashamed of, and I will never be ashamed of you," Harry purred. "Let them think what they want. Besides, I'm sure that they'd have loved to be here last night- tell them that if they rag on you."

"You're right, Harry," Hermione confirmed with a kiss on the lips. "Now let's go down to breakfast and then a shower."

"Oh, one more thing," Luna interjected.

"Alright, Luna, you can take his clothes off when he showers," Hermione conceded. "Do you know where our bathrooms are?"

"Yes, Hermione. But it is possible that I could get lost and it could take a while for us to find ourselves again," Luna noted airily.

With a chorus of laughter, Harry and the girls started to get dressed.