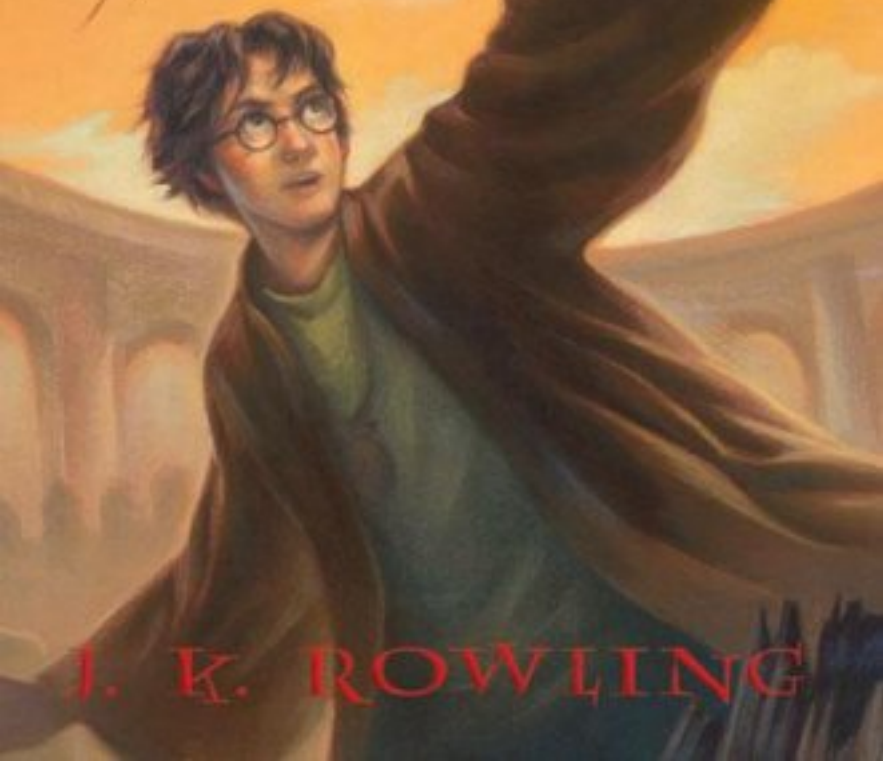


Harry Potter

AND THE

DEATHLY
HALLOWS



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Chapter One

Secrets Unraveled

Harry slowly raised his head and stared morosely at the familiar visage of number four, Privet Drive. What had already been a horrible day was rapidly getting worse. Not only did he have to appear unannounced on the Dursleys' doorstep (something he knew they'd have no problem expressing their displeasure over), but he'd also have to tell them that two other freaks would be joining him this afternoon. The corner of Harry's mouth twitched humorlessly as he envisioned how they'd take the news.

He'd left Ron and Hermione at King's Cross station a little over an hour ago. They were each going to make quick stops at their respective homes before Apparating to Privet Drive. Harry smiled fondly, remembering their show of solidarity. He hadn't been expecting it; he'd thought he'd be going on alone. Although he was desperately worried about them and the remainder of their quest, he had to admit that the thought of some support while facing his relatives was quite nice indeed.

Harry had thought it would be better - or at least less embarrassing - if he arrived at Privet Drive first and prepared his relatives for their arrival. He'd wanted to get away from the Hogwarts Express and the other students as quickly as possible...before he ran into Ginny.

Ginny.

Harry quickly shook his head - he couldn't afford to think about Ginny. He still didn't think his resolve was strong enough to hold.

Since he wasn't yet of age, he'd quickly slipped away without speaking to any of the crowd at King's Cross and taken the train to Privet Drive. The long, hot journey had left him irritable. It didn't bode well for the coming reunion. He'd considered just Apparating back from Hogsmeade to avoid the Hogwarts Express altogether. So what if the Ministry chucked him out of Hogwarts now? He wasn't going back, anyway.

Hermione, always the voice of reason, reminded him that there was no need to give the Ministry an excuse to break his wand, and Harry had to admit that she had a point.

Rufus Scrimgeour wanted Harry under his control, and Harry wouldn't put it past the man to make life difficult in an effort to force Harry to comply. Harry had no patience for the man or his politicking. Still, recklessly using underage magic for the sake of mere convenience was a risk not worth taking.

He hated when Hermione was right.

So, he'd sat in a compartment with Ron and Hermione and tried to ignore the hole in his heart that Ginny's absence created. He hadn't seen her the entire journey home and wondered which compartment she'd sat on the train. Neither Ron nor Hermione had asked him where she was, but he'd caught Hermione staring at him speculatively on several occasions.

Harry had been steadfast in avoiding her gaze. He'd stared out the window miserably, his thoughts focused on happier days...

Ginny.

Stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jeans and squaring his shoulders, Harry trudged across the street towards the immaculately pruned garden of number four, Privet Drive. He'd promised Dumbledore that he'd return one more time before his birthday, and he intended to keep that pledge. Harry's chest tightened as he thought of his headmaster, but he blinked the moisture from his eyes and continued forward. This was what Dumbledore had wanted, and this was what he was going to do.

Still, knowing what he had to do didn't make doing it any easier. He wasn't in the mood to deal with the Dursleys' nonsense. He had no patience for their petty bigotry...he had bigger challenges to face. The days when Vernon Dursley's purple face could make him cower were long past. He wondered what he could expect when they opened the door to find him standing there after his eventful departure last summer.

All in all, he supposed it could be worse. He'd rather face the Dursleys' ire than Molly Weasley's fury when Ron informed her of his plans to ditch the Burrow this summer and head straight into the war that she'd been so adamantly attempting to shield him from.

Oh, no, Harry mused, he got off far easier in only having to face the Dursleys.

He wondered if Ron would have dropped his little bombshell while still at King's Cross, or if he would have waited until arriving at the Burrow. Harry could picture Ron in the kitchen trying to reason with his mum, and Ginny would be there...

Ginny.

Harry's heart constricted at the mere thought of her, and he pressed his eyelids together as if to squeeze her from his thoughts. Everything had seemed so simple and straightforward in his mind when he'd made his decision. He couldn't put Ginny in danger. He'd never survive if he lost her, too.

But he had something he had to do, and he couldn't afford any distractions while he was searching for the Horcruxes. Breaking it off had been the right thing to do. There was no reason that she should have to put her life on hold just because he did. It could take years to find them all.

At the time, it had seemed the perfectly logical thing to do. But now, away from Hogwarts and facing the unknown...now, nothing was clear. He didn't know how he'd be able to function with this pain tearing such a hole in his heart. He felt as if he were bleeding continually from an invisible wound.

One thing he did know for certain: she could distract him with a simple smile, and he couldn't afford to be distracted. He had too much that he had to do.

As for what did come next...that's where Harry faltered. He knew what it was he had to do, he just wasn't certain about how to do it. How could he find the remaining four Horcruxes? Where did he start? And how did he keep himself - or worse, Ron and Hermione - from suffering the same fate Dumbledore did when he'd located the last two Horcruxes? Or what he'd thought was a Horcrux, anyway...

R.A.B. How was he to find R.A.B.? Where did he begin?

The locket, the cup, the snake, and something of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw...

It seemed hopeless and overwhelming as a whole, so he'd have to start in pieces and work from there. He fingered the cold, hard metal of the fake Horcrux that he still kept in his pocket. Harry had found himself using it as some sort of talisman, holding onto it whenever the stress started to build. There had to be a way, and he was going to find it.

The first step would be Godric's Hollow. He wasn't certain what he expected to find there, it just seemed important that he go.

Scratch that. The first step would be getting through his last confinement with the Dursleys, and the sooner he started enduring that, the sooner he could move forward.

While he'd been lost in thought, Harry's feet had carried him to the front door. Taking a deep breath, he tapped the knocker three times.

Here we go.

It took only a few moments before he heard footsteps approaching the door. It opened slightly, and Aunt Petunia's horsy face peered through the crack. He watched as her eyes widened in surprise before the door swung open wide, and she yanked him inside by the collar of his shirt.

"What are you doing here?" Aunt Petunia demanded, her long neck craning from side to side to ensure none of the neighbors were out and about and watching Harry being manhandled by his aunt. "Why are you back here so soon? Did those freaks at that school of yours finally decide they didn't want you either and throw you out? Did you think you could just show up here unannounced?"

"Hello, Aunt Petunia. It's nice to see you, too," Harry said pleasantly, pulling back from her grip and readjusting his collar. He spared a quick glance at the parlor, noting that nothing had really changed, although there were some crumpled sweet wrappers on an end table, which was unusual for Aunt Petunia.

"Don't you 'hello' me," his aunt snapped, dragging his attention back to her aggravated face. "I asked you what you are doing here? Term still has several weeks remaining."

Harry shrugged and dropped his gaze to the floor. "We were released early this year," he said vaguely, not wanting to discuss Dumbledore's death with her quite so soon. He wasn't ready.

Before she could reply, the kitchen door swung open, and Harry's cousin Dudley lumbered into the room. He was even larger than Harry remembered, and his face looked tired and drawn. His eyes opened wide with shock upon seeing Harry, and he began gaping like a fish.

"What's he doing here?" Dudley demanded, pointing a porky finger at Harry. Harry was pleased to notice the slight tremor in Dudley's hand. After years of being the victim of Dudley's bullying behavior, it was nice to have the shoe on the other foot, so to speak.

"Hey, Duds," Harry said, grinning widely. "You're home from school early, too. Did they chuck you out?" Harry asked, throwing Aunt Petunia's taunt back at his cousin.

Harry was surprised when Dudley ignored Harry completely and turned his panic-stricken eyes upon his mother. "Thought you'd get him to look me over, did you? Trying to compare and see if he's infected me? It's all his fault, anyway. You know that. Him and that freak of an old man who took him the last time - they did this to me. You know they did something. He threatened you, I heard him."

"Now, now, Popkin," Aunt Petunia said soothingly, but Harry couldn't help but notice the tremor in her voice. "Don't get yourself upset. You know what happens when you get too fussed."

Dudley's eyes nearly bulged out of the sockets, and he grasped his mother's forearms with enough force to leave red marks. "Mummy! Don't let it happen again," he whimpered.

Aunt Petunia pulled her arm away and began patting Dudley on the back and cooing softly as she led him into the parlor. Once she sat him on the couch and calmed him down, she turned back towards Harry. Her eyes were filled with such intense loathing that Harry found himself taking a step back involuntarily. What was going on here?

"Sit down and don't dirty the sofa. I'm going to get Duddy a glass of lemonade," she hissed, scurrying from the room. "Don't upset him."

Harry looked over at Dudley and furrowed his eyebrows. "What's got your knickers in such a twist, Dud?"

"What are you doing here? Did they ask you to come look at me? I won't have you or any of your freak friends pawing at me. Don't think I can't get that ruddy thing away from you, and when I do..." Dudley's face matched the purple color that Harry usually associated with Uncle Vernon.

"Take it easy, Dud. You're going to burst something. Why don't you tell me what's going on here? What is this all about?" Harry asked.

His mind was racing, trying to remember all the details from his last trip to Privet Drive. It seemed like another lifetime ago. Professor Dumbledore had been pleasant, even though it was obvious to Harry that he had been upset by the way that the Dursleys had treated Harry. Still, he didn't think that was something the Dursleys would have picked up. Harry's comfort and well-being had never been one of their considerations.

Dudley appeared to be under the impression that Professor Dumbledore had threatened them, however. How would Dudley's mind have formed that idea? Of course, being the bully he was, Dudley probably assumed everyone was threatening him, since he spent most of his time threatening others. Still, Harry tried to recall the conversation from the previous year to work out what had wound up his relatives so much.

Staring at Dudley sitting crouched into himself on the couch brought Dumbledore's words back into Harry's mind. He had said something about leaving a note for the Dursleys when he'd dropped Harry on their doorstep all those years ago.

"You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. The best that can be said is that he has at least escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between you."

Was that what Dudley thought was a threat? How could it be, though? Another memory arose in Harry's mind of a Howler sent to Aunt Petunia after the Dementor attack on Harry and Dudley in the alley before his fifth year.

"Remember my last."

The last must have been this same letter. Harry was burning with curiosity to know exactly what the letter had said. He held little hope that Aunt Petunia would tell him, however. Why is she so worried about Dudley being upset, anyway? Not that she ever likes to see her little popkin upset, Harry thought with a grimace.

Only one thing to do for it, then.

"So what's this about Professor Dumbledore doing something to you last time, Duds? Are you sprouting a tail again? I didn't even see him do it. Of course, he has no problem with non-verbal spells, so you never know what he could have been up to," Harry said casually, forcing down the painful lump that lodged itself in his throat when speaking as if Professor Dumbledore were still alive.

Dudley cowered away from Harry and scrambled off the couch faster than his bulk should have allowed. His hands instinctively searching his massive behind for, Harry assumed, the return of a pig's tail. "Stay away from me! I mean it...you stay away!"

Harry stood up and began walking towards Dudley with a determined stride. "What's wrong, Dud? Why are you so skittish all of a sudden? Lost your nerve, have you? Is this what's got you acting like such a little girl?" Harry asked, drawing his wand from his sleeve.

"Put it away," Dudley screeched, backing into a corner. Harry would have laughed if it weren't so pathetic. This was the great git of a bully who had regularly made Harry's life a living hell when he was small?

"I mean it, Potter, put that thing away," Dudley growled.

"Or what, Dud? What are you going to do?" Harry couldn't help his morbid fascination, wondering how far he could push before Dudley would strike back.

Before Dudley could answer him, however, the vase on the table next to him started shaking violently. It rattled on the table as it moved closer to the edge. Harry stared at it in surprise. He really wasn't that upset, not about this, anyway. Why was his magic reacting so strongly?

"Oh, no," Dudley moaned before the vase flew from the table and went careening towards Harry's head.

Harry was so shocked that he never had time to move. The heavy ceramic vase slammed into the side of his face with enough force to knock him from his feet. The vase and Harry both landed on the floor with a heavy thud, the vase shattering in several large chunks.

Alerted by the noise, Aunt Petunia hurried back into the room and screeched at the destruction. "What have you done?" she spat, stepping over Harry to retrieve the broken pieces of her vase.

"It happened again, Mummy," Dudley wailed. "He did it! I know he did."

Aunt Petunia leapt to her feet and hurried over to Dudley. "There, there, now, sweetums. Mummy's here. Everything will be all right. Come into the kitchen, and I'll make you a nice snack. I'll take care of everything."

As she ushered Dudley from the room, she turned back towards Harry, who was still struggling to rise from the floor. "Stay here. I'll be right back. I warned you not to upset him," she hissed, her eyes nearly glowing with a burning intensity.

Harry groaned as he sat up and put a hand to his throbbing cheekbone. What is going on here? He pulled himself to his feet unsteadily and shook his head in an attempt to clear it.

Bad idea.

The entire room swam before his eyes, and he had to grasp the arm of the couch to remain upright. He tentatively moved his jaw from side to side, testing how much damage had been done to his face. He didn't think anything was broken, but the pain was enough to make him wish for one of Madam Pomfrey's potions.

This would be no ordinary stay at Privet Drive.

He'd done accidental magic before, but not in a long time. He didn't remember ever hurting himself with it before, either. Something wasn't right. He glanced out the window apprehensively, wondering if he'd be receiving a reprimand from the Ministry.

Great. That's all I need.

Still, he'd never got them when it had happened when he was younger, so maybe he'd get by this time, as well. Nothing to do for it; he'd have to wait and see.

The more pressing matter was what was going on with Dudley. He'd acted almost as if he'd known what was going to happen. Almost as if...

Aunt Petunia strode back into the room at that moment and sat down stiffly, glaring at Harry all the while. Harry wasn't certain what she expected of him, but followed her lead and sat down at the other end of the couch, waiting. After a few moments spent in silence, Harry couldn't take it anymore.

"What's happening here, Aunt Petunia?" he asked quietly. "I don't think I did that. I think Dudley did. How is that possible?"

"Of course my Dudley didn't do it. You're the freak here, not him," she snapped, before her face crumpled, and she put her head in her hands.

Harry was thunderstruck and at a loss for what to do. In all the years that Harry had spent with the Dursleys, she'd never once offered him a bit of comfort over anything, and he found it strange that he wanted to comfort her now.

Tentatively, he raised his hand and gradually moved it towards her before quickly pulling it back again. Twice more he struggled with the urge to lay his hand on her back in an attempt to calm her. She'd never taken kindly to his touch before, and he was afraid that anything he might do would stop her from talking. He wanted answers more than he wanted to comfort her, so he clenched his fists and fought to remain in his spot.

Aunt Petunia finally raised her head, and, although her lower lip trembled, she began to speak. "After you and your headmaster left here last year, odd things started to happen. These incidents grew more and more frequent until Dudley was finally asked to leave school. They suggested he needed counseling. As if we'd ever be able to talk about any of this. They thought he was acting out and being destructive on purpose. The nerve of some people."

Harry's head was swimming with questions, but he was afraid she'd clam up if he interrupted, so he just let her continue to ramble.

"What did your headmaster do?" she asked, her eyes narrowing. "He removed the protection, didn't he? He said we didn't live up to our end of the bargain by not caring for you. We gave you food and shelter for all these years out of the goodness of our hearts. What more did he expect?"

"He wanted us to love you like our own. You're not our own! You're just a reminder of the sister I wished I'd never had. We gave you shelter, and that has supposedly kept you alive and safe all this time. That should have counted for something. We could have just chucked you in an orphanage like Vernon wanted to do. Sometimes, I think we all would have been better off if we had."

Harry had long ago stopped caring about or looking for the Dursleys' approval, yet the coldness of the words stung.

"What do you mean by remove the protection?" he asked stoically, refusing to give her the satisfaction of knowing her words had hurt him. "The blood protection from my mother remains as long as I can call this house my home...at least until my birthday. He told you I'd be returning one more time."

"Not the blood protection for you," Aunt Petunia snapped. "This isn't about you. I don't care what happens to you or any of your freak world. As far as I'm concerned, we'd all be better off if you all just killed each other off. I want to know about the protections on Dudley. Dumbledore withdrew his part of the agreement, didn't he?"

Harry blinked, nonplussed. "What are you on about?" he asked coldly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, you never were very bright, were you? The spell he cast on Dudley. It's obviously not working, because he keeps making these freakish things happen."

"Dudley is a wizard?" Harry asked incredulously, the pieces all finally clicking into place. He felt as if the room was spinning, and he didn't think it had anything to do with his throbbing temple. He knew magic ran in families - the Creevey brothers proved that. They were Muggleborn, and yet both were wizards...but Dudley. How could this have happened?

"Of course he's not a wi...a.wi... He's not a freak," Aunt Petunia snapped, her voice nothing more than a high-pitched whisper. "I made a deal with your headmaster. He would block this unnaturalness from Duddydums, and I would take you in. It was all arranged. Then, after last year, whatever it was he did stopped working, because Dudley started having instances of these oddities every few days, and I can't stop them. I want you to fix it. You do whatever it was he had done before. You can fix this, and you owe us that much."

Harry's mind was racing. How could this be? Would Dumbledore really have suppressed Dudley's magic for all these years? It didn't seem like something he would ever do. It didn't make any sense.

As if from a fog, Harry's mind recalled the way Aunt Petunia had always catered to Dudley's every whim. How she'd acted as if the world revolved around keeping him calm and not letting him get upset. Harry's worst punishments always came as a direct result of Dudley getting upset. He wondered if Petunia's obsessive need to clean was only a byproduct of her anxiety over cleaning up what she considered a huge mess.

His mind continued to pick out little instances of times when Dudley had been upset. His thoughts again drifted to the night the Dementors had attacked, and Dudley had cowered in fear. Harry had wondered what Dudley could have been remembering. Could it have been some unexplained bits of magic that Dudley had fought to suppress? When Harry had found Dudley in the darkness, he'd had his hands clamped over his mouth. Harry had told him not to open his mouth, but when did Dudley ever listen to Harry? Could Dudley have actually seen the Dementors?

Harry felt as if his world had just spun completely out of his control yet again.

"Why would Dumbledore agree to hide Dudley's magic? It doesn't sound at all like Dumbledore," he said slowly, his gaze boring into his aunt's.

"He didn't want to do it. We argued for quite some time about it. I'd seen the strange things that happened from the time my Dudley was still in his cot. I knew what it meant; I remembered it from Lily. There was no way I would allow it to happen again, not after I'd worked so hard to make a normal life for my family.

"It was the only way I would allow you to stay, and he was desperate for that to happen. I told him there was no way he'd ever get his hands on Dudley, anyway. Vernon and I would never allow him to go to that freak school. We raised him with a healthy loathing of all things so unnatural. Dudley is a good boy," Aunt Petunia said, crossing her arms defiantly.

Harry rolled his eyes. It all made sense. Certainly the Dursleys wouldn't have allowed Dudley to attend Hogwarts, and Harry knew from Dudley's reaction a moment ago that he never would have wanted to go, anyway.

"So, what did Professor Dumbledore do, exactly?" Harry asked, unable to contain his curiosity. Aunt Petunia had never willingly told him anything in the past. Don't ask questions had always been her standard response.

"How am I supposed to know how all your nonsense works?" Aunt Petunia snapped. "We took you in, and he did something to take Dudley's name off of a register or some such thing. For a time, Dudley stopped making strange things happen. The only time anything abnormal happened was when Dudley would get upset, and I could easily blame that on you so Vernon never had to know."

"Uncle Vernon doesn't know his son is a wizard?" Harry asked, secretly appreciating the humor in that statement.

"Of course he doesn't know. And Dudley is NOT one of you. Your headmaster did something to control it, and I want you to do the same thing now," Aunt Petunia said, crossing her bony arms across her chest.

"I don't even know how he could have done such a thing, never mind how do it," Harry said, aghast.

"Well, if you want to stay here, you'd better think of something," she snapped.

Harry's mind clicked on a way to make this work to his advantage. "All right. I'll try and find something. I'm going to need some help with it, though," he said, rapidly changing gears.

"What do you mean help?" she asked suspiciously.

"My friends, Ron and Hermione - they're brilliant with stuff like this. I'll ask them to come and help me put it together. They'll have to stay here for a while, though - while we research the correct spells to use. I'm certain it's very complicated magic if Professor Dumbledore did it," Harry said, his mind already plotting.

Aunt Petunia frowned with disapproval. "I don't know."

"All right, well...I can't do it alone, so I suppose I'll just be going," he said, going so far as to turn around, rising and taking a step towards the door.

"No!" Aunt Petunia screeched. "All right... Your friend can bunk in with you, and the girl can stay in the guestroom. I won't have any funny business under my roof."

Harry smirked, envisioning the color Ron's ears would have turned had he heard that remark. This was turning out better than he could have hoped. "All right, then."

"You have to promise me you'll all stay out of Vernon and Dudley's way. When Vernon is home, you must stay up in your room, and I want this done as quickly as possible."

"We're agreed on that, then," Harry mumbled.

"Oh, and another thing. Your friends will have to provide their own food. I'm not feeding any extra of your freaky friends. Vernon would never have it. They can bring their own or you can share your portion, but I won't be responsible for them," Aunt Petunia said, her haughty demeanor returning.

Harry had no choice but to agree. He hadn't really thought about how they would eat. He could only hope that Hermione would be better prepared. She was certainly familiar enough with the Dursleys' penchant for withholding nourishment. They'd just have to figure something out. Maybe if Mrs. Weasley wasn't too upset with them she'd send something, or maybe Ginny would help..

Ginny.

On second thought, Harry decided that she couldn't be involved with this in any way. It wasn't fair to her, and he didn't think he could stand to have her so close and yet so far. They'd have to come up with something else.

But her presence here would certainly be a nice contrast to Aunt Petunia, his mind said, betraying him.

Stop it, he told himself firmly. Ginny would not be involved.

"I'm going to send an owl. I'm certain they'll be able to arrive shortly - they're both of age," Harry said, watching the panic fill Aunt Petunia's eyes once again.

"What does that mean? They're able to do...to...to use their things? I won't have it in this house. You said they were coming here for research," she said, a whine in her voice.

"Aunt Petunia, they're coming here to work out how to do a spell that you asked me to do. Are you telling me that they can't use magic to do it?" Harry asked, thoroughly enjoying his aunt's conundrum.

Aunt Petunia's lips thinned into a tiny sliver of a line. "One time and one time only. You owe me that much. You're to help your cousin, and then you and your friends are to get out. I want nothing more to do with you or your kind. Vernon can see nothing unusual - he's unhappy enough with you as it is."

"So what's new about that?" Harry mumbled.

"He's been muttering about the fact that you came into an inheritance and didn't bother to make us aware of that situation," Aunt Petunia said with obvious disapproval. "We've provided you with house and board for sixteen years; certainly, if you've come into a house of your own, we deserve something for our trouble."

"You won't get anything that belonged to Sirius," Harry said hotly. He might not want anything to do with Grimmauld Place either, but he certainly wasn't about to let them get their grubby paws on it. He owed Sirius that much. Taking a deep breath to control his temper, he said through gritted teeth, "It wouldn't do you any good, anyway. It's a wizarding house - Muggles can't see it. Although I suppose Dudley might be able to see it, actually..."

Aunt Petunia's eyes widened with panic. "Enough. Diddyums most certainly will not be seeing any of your unnaturalness. Go and send your letter...and tell them to bring their own food," she snapped before storming from the room.

Harry smiled grimly. Whenever it was that he'd be leaving this house to start the search for the Horcruxes couldn't be soon enough.

The ringing of the doorbell startled Harry from his deep thoughts. He'd been up in his room, unpacking his few meager belongings from his school trunk. He reckoned that he and Ron would be quite cramped in his small bedroom, so a little organization couldn't hurt. He wanted to be done with it before Hermione arrived and saw him doing it, however. There was no sense in letting her think she'd had any influence over him, or he'd never hear the end of it.

He glanced at the clock and was relieved to note they still had a half-hour before Uncle Vernon was due home. That should be just enough time to get settled and give Aunt Petunia some space to let him know they would be here. Even if they stayed confined for the most part to Harry's room, there was no way for Uncle Vernon not to notice three extra people using the bathroom.

Hopefully, Aunt Petunia would think of something to placate him, and then Harry, Ron, and Hermione could just stay out of his way. It would be best for all of them to avoid a confrontation. Of course, having Ron

attempting to live as a Muggle ought to be a task worthy of the TriWizard tournament itself, Harry thought with a chuckle.

He was nearly gleeful with anticipation and was amused to realize that he'd never once before eagerly anticipated anything to do with the Dursleys as much as he was Ron's presence in their very ordered life. It would be worth a few good telling-offs, actually.

He shut the door to his bedroom and hurried down the stairs, quietly noting Aunt Petunia straining her neck in order to peer out from the kitchen. Dudley was nowhere in sight.

Harry swung the door open wide just as the bell rang again.

"...you know anyone heard it the first time?" Ron was asking.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Hi, Harry," she said brightly before releasing a horrified gasp. "Harry! What happened to your face?"

Harry put a hand to his cheek, wincing at the deep bruising. He'd been so lost in his musings that he hadn't even paid attention. "Long story. I've got loads to tell you."

Hermione looked dubious. "Is everything settled?"

"'Course it is," Ron said, taking Hermione by the arm and firmly ushering her inside. He obviously wasn't about to take any of the Dursleys' excuses. "Just stop talking for a minute and let him tell us what's happening...then we can decide what to do about it."

Harry stepped back, grinning, and allowed them to enter. "Everything's fine, Hermione. Come on upstairs, and we can talk privately."

Neither Ron nor Hermione made any effort to move. They both stood in the hallway, looking around the house. He saw Hermione frowning at the abundance of pictures of Dudley adorning the walls and every spare bit of surface space in the parlor. Harry was amused to notice that there was now a new picture perched on top of the table that only hours ago had sported the broken vase.

Ron grunted his displeasure, while Hermione's brows knitted as she scowled. Harry couldn't blame them; Dudley wasn't much to look at, that was for certain. Harry was keen to get them out of the parlor and away from Aunt Petunia's prying eyes before her nosiness might allow her to learn anything he didn't want her to know.

"Uncle Vernon will be home soon, so it's better if we go upstairs. I've got loads to tell you," Harry said, trying to steer his friends toward the stairway.

Hermione, however, was peering over his shoulder with interest.

"You must be Harry's Aunt Petunia," she said. "I'm Hermione Granger. You've probably heard Harry mention me. We've been friends since our first year."

Harry groaned inwardly. Too late.

"Can you do it? Can you help my Dudley?" Aunt Petunia asked, ignoring Hermione's outstretched hand and peering intently at her face.

"Help him to do what?" she asked, startled.

Aunt Petunia whirled on Harry. "I thought you said they'd know what to do," she hissed. "I allowed them to come here, because you said they could help him. They're in your year...why do they know how to do it if you can't?" She pointed her bony finger at Ron disapprovingly. "I recognize that one from that family who came to collect you and destroyed our parlor a few years back."

"I said I'd need some assistance, and they're it," Harry said trying to placate her. "Unlike me, neither is underage. I only had time to tell them I needed some help - they don't know all the details yet. Just give us a little time, and we'll get it all set to rights."

"What's going on here, Harry?" Ron asked, his eyes darting back and forth between Harry and Aunt Petunia.

"Not now, Ron," Harry said, glaring.

"How long will all this take?" Aunt Petunia demanded. "I can only appease your uncle for so long. I want this done and you out of this house as quickly as possible."

"Nothing will please me more," Harry said through clenched teeth. "Give us a fortnight, and we'll never have to see each other again."

"Mrs. Dursley..." Hermione said, her eyes wide.

"A fortnight? That long? Do you really expect me to keep you here that long?" Aunt Petunia screeched.

"I assume you want it done right without any mistakes that might affect Dudley?" Harry asked.

Aunt Petunia paled. "You better not do anything to hurt my Dudley. That would be just like you, wouldn't it? I don't know why I'm trusting the likes of you with this. You've always been jealous of Dudley, because you could never be like him."

"Now, wait a moment, Mrs. Dursley..." Hermione tried again, shocked.

Neither Harry nor his aunt paused to look at her.

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's just what I've always wanted - to be more like Diddydinkums. You're trusting it to me, because you really don't have any choice, do you? Of course, if you'd rather we just leave now..."

Aunt Petunia glared at him for several moments before her shoulders sagged in defeat. "Get upstairs and keep quiet until I can talk to your uncle. Under no circumstances are you to upset Dudley."

Before the words were even completely out of Aunt Petunia's mouth, the front door swung open, revealing the startled face of Vernon Dursley. He stopped in his tracks and looked with confusion at the faces staring back at him.

Slowly, his color turned a deeper and deeper shade of red before he started spluttering. "You! What the devil are you doing here? What is the meaning of this?" His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What have you done to my family this time, boy?"

"Hello, Uncle Vernon," Harry said dryly.

"Don't you take that tone with me. You are no longer welcome here - not that you ever were. Get out and take your damn friends with you," Vernon snarled.

Harry smirked. "I think Aunt Petunia might disagree with you."

Aunt Petunia glared at him viciously.

Uncle Vernon turned an enraged expression from Harry towards Aunt Petunia, but seemed to wither a bit under her scrutiny. "Petunia?" he whined.

"They need to stay, Vernon. They won't be here long, and when they leave, we'll be rid of him for good," she said, waving her hand in Harry's general direction.

"But...but...but," Vernon said, spluttering.

"I'm not any happier about it than you are, Vernon, but this is how it's going to be," she said firmly.

Uncle Vernon's shoulders slumped momentarily before he turned back on Harry. "I won't stand for any of your funny business, boy, and I want to talk to you about this inheritance you so neatly forgot to mention last summer. What was it? Your dead convict of a godfather leaving you a house. Thought you'd hoard that information all to yourself, did you?"

Harry's face remained impassive.

"It won't do us any good, Vernon. It's a...a...unnatural house. We wouldn't even be able to see it, and it's full of freakish things," Aunt Petunia said with a shudder. She turned on Harry. "Go upstairs and settle in for the night. You'll have to provide for yourselves, as we're going out to eat."

Harry turned towards his friends, who were staring at him in stunned silence. "Up the stairs, first door on the right," he said, jerking his head toward the stairs.

Ron and Hermione hurried up without another word.

As Harry lay in his bed that night feeling much older than his sixteen years, he wished his mind was as tired as his body. He had filled Ron and Hermione in about everything that had happened with Dudley and Aunt

Petunia's explanations for it. He had to admit, he'd enjoyed listening to Ron and Hermione's outraged indignation to the way Harry's relatives spoke to him.

Ron kept coming up with more and more names of the twins' inventions to use on them, and even Hermione had suggested a curse or two. It warmed Harry's heart to hear them, even if he would never allow them to get into trouble for doing something to the Dursleys. He enjoyed plotting it, nonetheless.

Hermione's parents hadn't wanted to let her go - they'd only seen her once during the whole year, at Christmastime - but Hermione had insisted that she was considered an adult in the Wizarding world now, and this was something she had to do.

Ron had been much less forthcoming about how his big revelation went at the Burrow. After much needling and cajoling from Harry and Hermione, Ron had finally admitted that he'd only told his mum that he was staying at Privet Drive with Harry, not that he wasn't planning on returning to school at all come September. Hermione had scowled her disapproval and uttered something that sounded distinctly like coward.

They'd talked much more about Dudley and what Dumbledore could have done to mask Dudley's magic. Harry still had trouble reconciling himself with the idea that Dudley was a wizard. It was mind-boggling. In the end, Hermione had promised to look into it while they were staying on Privet Drive. It would be something to pass the time, and if worse came to worse, she could simply cast a Cheering Charm before they left. That would keep Dudley happy for while.

It had been very late when they'd finally crawled into bed. Harry had shown Hermione to the guestroom and suggested she add a lock to her door. Ron hadn't wanted to leave her alone, but shut up quickly after Harry suggested he stay in there with her. Harry smiled in the darkness, remembering the expression on Ron's face. Hermione had transfigured Harry's desk into another bed for the night, with the promise to make some changes to Harry's room in the morning.

Harry hadn't asked Ron or Hermione about Ginny, and neither had brought her up. He couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. He knew he should just let her go, but he'd never expected how hard that was going to be. He was doing the right thing...wasn't he? He had to keep her safe at all costs. If anything happened to her because of him...Harry didn't think he'd ever be able to survive it.

When he'd been with her these past weeks, it had felt like, for one brief shining moment in his life, he'd been normal. Nothing else had mattered. Not Voldemort, not the Horcruxes, not a prophecy. He was just Harry Potter, a sixteen-year old wizard falling in love with a beautiful, red-haired witch.

Falling in love?

Wait a minute... Where had that thought come from? Harry didn't know whether he loved Ginny or not - he hadn't even considered it before now. How was he supposed to know what love was? All he knew was the way

she made him feel - so alive. She made him feel like he could do anything.

Being with Ginny had made him want more out of life.

He knew what the prophecy said, and half of him had always suspected that he was going to die, anyway. He'd just hoped he could take Voldemort with him. But she had to go and make him want more. She'd made him see the possibility of what life could be like, and, damn it, he wanted more.

Harry groaned and rolled over, viciously punching his pillow.

"Harry," Ron's voice called sleepily.

Harry froze; he'd forgotten Ron was there.

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

Ron was quiet for a moment, and Harry thought he'd gone back to sleep when Ron suddenly spoke again. "Ginny didn't seem pleased that I was coming here with you," he said, in a voice that was much too casual to be natural.

Harry felt as if all the air had been compressed from his lungs. "Oh," he replied in a choked voice.

Ron fell silent again, as if waiting for Harry to say something more. When Harry didn't respond, he said, "You broke up with her, didn't you?"

Harry took a deep shuddering breath. "Yeah," he replied, bracing himself in case Ron leaped upon him.

Ron sighed heavily. "I think you made the right choice," he said. "It would be too dangerous for her to come with us. You'll have a lot to make up to her when this is over, though."

To say he was surprised was a massive understatement. Still, he steeled himself for what he was about to say. "I didn't ask her to wait for me, Ron. We have no idea how long this is going to take, or if I'll even be around when it's finished."

"Don't talk like that, Harry," Ron said fiercely. "Of course you will. And she'll wait."

Ron fell silent again, and this time it was Harry who waited for him to say more. Finally, realizing that Ron wasn't going to add anything to that statement, Harry couldn't contain his curiosity. He wished he could control that hope that flared within his heart, but he couldn't. He didn't even know how to begin to try.

"How do you know?" he asked tentatively.

"She told me to take care of you," Ron said. "As if that isn't what I always do," he added with a snort.

Harry hastily swiped his eyes with the back of his hand. She does care.

"Thanks, Ron," he said, hating how gruff his voice sounded. He rolled back over on his side and listened to the sounds of insects flying outside the open window, his mind running over pleasant memories of the all-too-brief time he'd spent with Ginny.

Ron's voice once again broke the silence of the room.

"Of course, after this is all over, if you ever break her heart again, I'll have to beat you senseless."

Harry grinned into his pillow. "You could try."

"Don't think I won't."

"Night, Ron."

"Night, Harry."

Chapter Two

When One Door Closes...

The next morning, Harry was awakened by the sound of Ron's snoring, which was causing the entire room to shake. Combined with Dudley's snores coming from the room next door, it sounded as if a battle of the bands was taking place.

Harry sniggered.

Uncle Vernon must be loving this. Of course, he snored fairly loudly himself, so maybe he was missing it. The door to Harry's bedroom creaked open, and a disgruntled Hermione stuck her face inside.

"Does he always snore that loudly?" she asked testily.

"Pretty much," Harry replied, grinning. He pulled the covers up closely to his bare chest, suddenly becoming aware of his state of undress. "Er, what are you doing in here, Hermione?"

Hermione's cheeks turned pink, as if she just realized what she'd done. He noticed her gaze remained fixed on Ron's bare chest as he lay uncovered on his bed, his arms flung open wide.

"Hermione," Harry repeated.

She started. "Oh! I mean, erm...I just couldn't sleep with all that racket. I'm going to Apparate into Diagon Alley and pick up some books at Flourish and Blotts that might help us with our search. I'll get some breakfast while I'm out. Try and wake Sleeping Beauty there; we've got loads to do when I get back."

Hermione had, thankfully, thought to bring sandwiches and snacks with her when she'd arrived yesterday, and they'd feasted in Harry's room. He was grateful that she'd offered to get breakfast and relieved him of the duty of having to explain that the Dursleys wouldn't be feeding them.

"All right. Be careful," Harry said.

"Honestly, Harry. I'm only going to Diagon Alley. I'll be back before you know it. What do the Dursleys like to eat? I could pick something up for them while I'm out, too."

Harry just stared at her, mouth agape. "You...you...you want to get breakfast for the Dursleys?" he asked, unable to wrap his mind around the idea.

"Well, if I'm getting something for us, it would be the polite thing to do. I think that if we just made an effort you all could come to an understanding. You're her nephew, after all, and she's raised you since you were a baby. She came to you for help, and I think you have the chance to really build a relationship here, Harry."

Harry's mouth opened and closed wordlessly. Had his friend finally gone mad? He knew exactly what would happen if Hermione brought back food to the Dursleys - they'd sooner let it knock into their heads than touch it. They did as much last year with the wine Professor Dumbledore had offered them. He also knew Hermione well enough to understand that nothing he could say would dissuade her from her campaign.

"Why don't you just get a variety of pastries," he said. He was amused with the idea that Hermione's latest crusade appeared to be to enlighten the Dursleys. Harry knew she stood a better chance with the house-elves. In fact, he'd spent most of his life being treated like a house-elf by the Dursleys. Between Ron trying to live like a Muggle and Hermione trying to civilize the Dursleys, this would be the most entertainment he'd had on Privet Drive in his entire life.

After Hermione had left, Harry took a shower - a very long shower once he got distracted with thoughts of Ginny again - and then went to awaken Ron. He tried calling his friend's name several times, and when that didn't work, he lobbed a pillow at his head.

"What the... Bloody hell, Harry. What'd you do that for?" Ron asked grumpily, throwing the offending pillow back at Harry and pulling the covers over his head.

"Come on and get up. Hermione told me to have you up and dressed by the time she returned," Harry said, grinning at Ron for jumping to attention at the mention of Hermione's name.

"What? Returns from where? Where is she?" Ron asked.

"She went to Flourish and Blotts to get us some research material and also to pick us up some breakfast," Harry replied, tossing Ron's dressing gown at him.

"The shower gets wonky with the hot water sometimes. If it gets too hot, just jiggle the handle, and it resets itself," Harry said.

"Jiggle the handle," Ron repeated blankly.

"Yeah," Harry said absently, opening the window to let in the owl delivering the Daily Prophet. He paid for the paper and turned back to find Ron still sitting there.

"What?"

"I can't just tell the shower how hot I want it to be?" Ron asked, although it sounded more like a whine.

Harry remembered his first summer at the Burrow, when he was twelve and standing naked in Ron's shower, completely perplexed over the lack of a handle to turn the water off and on. He'd broken out in goose bumps before it had finally occurred to him simply to ask the water to begin spraying.

Taking pity on his friend, he grinned and said, "Come on. I'll show you how the common folk live."

By the time Ron had finished with his shower and returned to Harry's room (with the echo of Aunt Petunia huffing over the waste of water), Hermione had returned from her visit to Diagon Alley.

She burst into the room in a foul temper, angrily swiping the hair from her face. She dropped a heavy load of books onto Harry's rickety old desk and plopped a box full of more pastries than even Ron could eat onto the bed.

"Your relatives weren't hungry, so there's plenty to eat," she said stiffly.

Harry really tried his best not to grin. Really.

"What did they do? Throw them at you?" he asked.

"They're under the impression that I did something to the pastries. Honestly, Harry, I can't believe that you ever tried to poison them, so I don't know what all the fuss is about," she sniffed.

"They hate anything - and anyone - associated with magic. It has nothing to do with you, Hermione. It's just how they are," Harry replied, shrugging his shoulders.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Well, that's just as bigoted and narrow-minded as the Malfoys' view of Muggles."

Harry supposed she was right. "Yeah. Now that you mention it, I think Dudley and Malfoy could have actually been mates."

"There's an unpleasant thought," said Ron with a grimace. He'd already opened the box of pastries and held one in each hand. He took a bite of one, causing jam to squirt up on the side of his face. He slowly licked it off. "Mmmm, this is brilliant. I love you, Hermione."

Hermione's cheeks turned pink as she hurriedly looked away and selected her own pastry.

Harry wasn't certain what was happening between his two best friends. He'd thought that maybe they'd come to some sort of an understanding at Dumbledore's funeral, but they hadn't said anything to him. In fact, they were acting pretty much the same as they always did - except for a lot more blushing.

He didn't know how he felt about it. He wanted his friends to be happy, but the idea of sitting on the sidelines and watching them fall in love while his own heart was aching was more than he could bear.

Ginny.

Things were different for Ron and Hermione, though. They were together on this quest for the Horcruxes. They were a team and worked much better with each other than apart. Harry watched his friends out of the corner of his eye as he ate his own pastry. Ron was doing a good job on both of his, but Harry noticed him pausing every once in a while to sneak a glance at Hermione. For her part, Hermione was much more discreet, but she was also copping her fair share of peeks at Ron. Harry thought there must be some powerful feelings between them if Hermione could distract Ron from food.

It was different for Ginny and him, though, wasn't it? He had to protect her...she was better off far away from him. Still, the battle raged within his mind. For those few weeks that they'd shared together, he'd felt as if he could conquer anything. He'd felt so much stronger when she'd been by his side.

No! Stop!

He couldn't do this. He couldn't even allow his traitorous heart to think it. Ginny shouldn't be anywhere near him.

He had to be the one to do this thing. Even if Ron and Hermione were with him on the hunt for the Horcruxes, he had absolutely no intention whatsoever of letting them get anywhere near Voldemort when the final battle raged. He'd take Voldemort out, and maybe die in the process, but he'd be certain that neither of his friends was anywhere near him when that happened. He could never allow any of them to become another spare. Especially Ginny.

An image rose unbidden in his mind of Cedric's lifeless eyes staring from his crumpled body in a graveyard. Harry shuddered as his mind played a trick and warped the body into Ginny. Her warm, brown eyes - eyes that could melt an iceberg - stared blankly, almost accusingly, through him. He couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't.

He glanced up at Ron and Hermione in time to see Hermione use a napkin to wipe away the jam that still remained on the corner of Ron's mouth.

It would be wrong of Harry to begrudge them this happiness, no matter how much his heart ached to see it. Hadn't Professor McGonagall said that Professor Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think there was a little more love in the world?

He'd personally told Harry that love was his greatest strength, so why was he pushing it away?

No!

It was different for Ginny and him. Everything was always different for him, and he'd only end up getting her killed, or forcing her to watch as he died. No. It was better for her own sake to keep her away. He'd never want her to have to suffer the kind of horror and pain that he'd felt when he'd watched Sirius slip through that Veil.

Harry shook his head, steeling his resolve. This was the way it had to be.

"Okay." Hermione's voice dragged Harry out of his thoughts. "Let's start with this room. It definitely needs some improvements." She scowled as her gaze roamed around the stacks of broken toys cluttered in the corner and the rundown condition of Harry's small bed. She withdrew her wand from her sleeve.

"We can't use magic," Harry said quickly. "The Ministry can't detect who is doing the magic, only that it's being done here, and I'll get another reprimand. Dumbledore told me that's why I got the letter when Dobby levitated my aunt's pudding."

"Not to worry, mate," Ron said, his mouth still full of pastry. "My dad said he'd inform Matilda Hopkirk at the Ministry that Hermione and I were staying here this summer, and we're both of age."

"So...then...they won't do anything if I use my wand, either. Right?" Harry asked, frowning his brow.

"No, Harry," Hermione said firmly. "You're still underage, and we have to play by the rules if we want to avoid any trouble from the Ministry. They could still use a *Priori Incantatum* to see if your wand has been used. Let Ron and me handle the spells while we're here."

Harry scowled, feeling that old, familiar resentment arise within his heart. Dumbledore had always tried to shield him, and look at how well that turned out in the end. "Yeah. I'll just sit back and be a good little boy - like I always do."

"Right," Ron said, choking slightly on a piece of his pastry. "You're so good at staying out of trouble. It's not our fault you're such a young 'un."

A reluctant smile spread across Harry's face. "Shut it," he mumbled, but it was no use. It was impossible to stay in a foul mood when he had Ron and Hermione here with him on Privet Drive.

"So...what kind of changes do you have in mind?" he asked, looking back at Hermione.

"Oh, something like this," Hermione said much too casually, as if she'd been thinking of nothing else since she'd arrived. She waved her wand toward the mess of Dudley's old things in the corner and vanished them completely.

She turned towards Harry's desk, and, with a brief flick of her wand, the chipped, sagging old wood transfigured into a polished cherry and doubled in size. Shiny brass knobs appeared on the drawers, and a small bookshelf formed on the top.

Harry's jaw dropped in amazement. "Nice transfiguration, Hermione."

She wasn't finished. She turned her wand towards his bed - really, just a threadbare old mattress on top of a box spring that sagged in the middle. It immediately transformed into a replica of his beloved four-poster bed at Hogwarts, complete with a fluffy red duvet.

Harry felt as if his face would burst from smiling so wildly. "Wicked," he said.

Hermione aimed her wand at the window. The bolts that had once held bars in place disappeared, and the window adjusted itself so the panes could swing outward, letting in a nice summer breeze. Heavy curtains in a shade of red that matched his bed linens appeared, tied back with gold braids.

Harry had never had curtains in his room before, and honestly, he'd never really even noticed. He was stunned at the difference it made.

"Oh, I know what I want to do with that," Ron said, sounding disgusted.

Harry turned to see him pointing towards the cat flap on the door.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

Ron answered before Harry could change the subject. "They used to shove his food through there when they locked him up after first year."

Hermione's lips thinned into slivers. "What did you have in mind, Ron?" she asked, her voice sounding extremely shrill.

"Remember that drive-through place your parents took us to yesterday?" Ron asked, grinning.

Hermione's face lit up with a memory. "I know exactly what you have in mind," she said.

Harry frowned. He did want them together, but he wasn't certain that he liked this secret language that only they appeared to understand. "Erm?"

Hermione flicked her wand again, but the cat flap appeared unchanged.

"Did it work?" asked Ron.

"Try it," replied Hermione.

Ron lay down on his belly in front of the door.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"I'd like three cheeseburgers and some crisps, please," Ron said, speaking to the cat flap.

Before Harry even had the chance to ask Ron if he'd gone mad, the food Ron had requested slid from the flap on the door. Harry blinked in surprise.

"Have a nice day," a voice echoed from the cat flap.

Hermione grinned, and Ron looked as if he'd died and went to heaven. He unwrapped a cheeseburger and took a bite. "Mmmm."

"What do you think, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry had yet to remove his eyes from the cat flap. Slowly, a delighted grin spread across his face. "I think the smell of that food alone will drive Dudley mad."

"It's cold down here on the floor, though," Ron said, his voice muffled with burger. "Can you do something about that, Hermione?"

Hermione flicked her wand yet again, and a lush soft carpet covered the floor. "It's going to be a bit crowded in here, though," Hermione said thoughtfully before closing her eyes.

Harry's eyes widened as the walls began to shift outward, enlarging the room to nearly double its original size. Quickly, Hermione transfigured Ron's conjured camp bed into a duplicate of his bed at Hogwarts. "There," Hermione said with an air of satisfaction.

"My aunt is going to flip," Harry said with glee.

"The house won't appear any different from the outside, so it's only if they come in here that they'll notice," Hermione said.

"Oh, believe me, Aunt Petunia will be sticking her head in. I'm certain the curiosity over what we're doing up here is killing her," Harry said grimly.

Hermione bit her lip. "She won't be angry, will she?"

"Of course she will," Harry said happily. "Not only did we perform magic, but now my room is nicer than Dudley's. She'll despise it."

Hermione frowned. "That certainly can't be a reason, Harry. She doesn't like the magic, but she's coming around now because of Dudley."

"Okay," he replied. He knew Hermione was only setting herself up for disappointment. He only hoped his relatives wouldn't be too hard on her. He didn't want to see them hurt her; she was truly trying to

help. He could handle the snubs - he'd had loads of practice - but he wasn't about to let them take out their prejudice on her.

Their days at Privet Drive passed slowly, and Harry felt the stirrings of restlessness growing within him as they approached the day they would leave forever. He felt as if he were wound tight as a drum and plunged himself into the books that Hermione had brought back from Diagon Alley in an attempt at distraction.

He'd been having trouble sleeping, and dark circles had appeared beneath his eyes. Each night when he'd try to settle down to sleep, thoughts and vague memories would churn in his head, and he couldn't turn them off.

The locket, the cup, the snake, and something of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw...

At times, he felt confident and ready to rush out and begin the hunt. The forced confinement grated on his nerves, and he was certain he'd worn a layer off his teeth from grinding them. At other times, the task at hand appeared so overwhelming that he felt hopeless and full of despair. The fake Horcrux that he always kept in his pocket seemed to mock him.

It was at these times that he'd retreat into himself, growing distant and increasingly quiet. He could see the concerned glances shared between Ron and Hermione when they thought he wasn't looking, but he pretended not to notice and continued with his research.

Hermione had set him the task of writing down everything he could remember from the Pensieve memories that Professor Dumbledore had shown him, in addition to any comments that the headmaster might have made about Tom Riddle. They hoped for some clues that could help them narrow their search. He'd placed a charm on his notes similar to the Marauders map so that no one else would be able to read back what he'd written. The phrase he'd chosen as his password: I solemnly swear I'm up to some kick-arse good.

Actually, the kick-arse part had been Ron's idea, and the two boys had chuckled over it for so long that Hermione had left the room in a huff. Ron's task had been to scour old Hogwarts lists in an attempt to locate the mysterious RAB, but he claimed it was hopeless.

Hermione spent her time looking for references of Horcruxes, which thus far had proved futile. It seemed no one in the wizarding world wanted to discuss them. Harry had started referring to them as The-Items-That-Can't-Be-Named, causing Ron to snort his fizzy soda. He'd been nicking it from Dudley's stash since he'd arrived on Privet Drive. Harry had begun to wonder if maybe the library at Grimmauld Place would be a good place to find something on Horcruxes - it had been full of dark magic items - but he wasn't certain if it had been completely cleaned out or not. He still didn't have the heart to go there, so he pushed that thought to the back of his mind for the moment.

Ron's complete and utter cluelessness about normal Muggle life was comical, and Harry enjoyed having the shoe on the other foot. He remembered all too well the blunders he'd made when he'd first entered

the wizarding world, and how Ron had enjoyed taking the mickey out of him for most of his mistakes. Payback was sweet.

For several days, their paths and Dudley's hadn't crossed, but on a sunny afternoon when the trio had abandoned Harry's room to sit in the back garden that all changed.

"What's this?" Ron asked, holding up a statue of a funny little man with a scrunched up face.

"It's a garden gnome," Harry answered absently as he scribbled in his notebook.

"No. It isn't," Ron said with disgust. "Don't be stupid."

"It's what Muggles call gnomes, Ron," Hermione answered patiently, giving his book a gentle shove back in his direction. Ron had grown increasingly bored with all their revising and constantly looked for diversions.

"Hey, Harry, think fast," Ron said, tossing the ugly gnome towards Harry, who managed to catch it before it splattered dirt all over his notes.

Harry tossed it back without comment, and it sailed over Ron's head, just missing his reach. "I can see you're out of practice. Good thing we're not going back to school, or I'd probably have to throw you off the team," Harry said, managing to keep a straight face. He, too, was feeling restless, and winding Ron up seemed like as good idea as any.

"Throw me off the team, is it now?" Ron asked, drawing himself up to his full height. "Then who exactly would warn you about all those Bludgers that seem to follow you around all the time, Chosen Boy?"

With that, Ron launched himself at Harry and pinned him to the ground. The two boys rolled on the ground, wrestling with each other for a few moments and ignoring Hermione's huffs until Ron finally had Harry pinned with his forearm across Harry's throat.

"Yeah, you've got it right. The little runt never could stand to have anyone's hands on his neck," Dudley's voice sounded from the corner of the garden. None of the three had noticed him standing there watching them

Harry froze at the sound of Dudley's voice, his mouth forming a slight "O". Dudley had avoided them as if his life depended on it since their arrival, and he hadn't so much as spoken to Harry since the incident with the vase.

"What are you on about?" Ron asked, a hard edge to his voice.

"That's what he always used to hate the most when me and my mates used to chase him, too," Dudley said, nodding his approval.

Ron rolled off of Harry and stood up quickly, his ears growing redder by the minute. Harry raised himself up on his elbows, curious to see

how Dudley and Ron interacted, yet ready to pounce if things got out of control.

"I always wondered why you red-haired lot put up with him and had him come to stay at your house for summers. I can see now that he's your target practice. I always used him for that, too. He always gives a good chase, but you can get him if you use your mates," Dudley said with a self-satisfied smirk.

"We don't all gang up on Harry," Ron said indignantly. He reached down and pulled Harry to his feet, as if trying to prove there were no hard feelings. "He's our friend."

"Friend," Dudley said, scoffing. "Who'd want to be friends with him?"

"I do," Ron said vehemently. "Just like my brothers, my sister, and anyone else who knows him. He's the best friend anyone could ask for, and we'd all do anything for him. Could you say the same for your mates, Dudley?"

Dudley appeared taken aback by Ron's fierce loyalty. He stared back and forth between Ron and Harry several times, as if unable to wrap his small mind around the fact that someone would actually like Harry. "He...he knows how to do stuff with his stick-thing...but without that, he's nothing but a pathetic little runt who messes up everything. He doesn't have any real mates. My mates stick with me, because they know I'm the strongest."

"Dudley," Hermione said gently, "Ron and Harry were just playing around. Certainly at some point while you were growing up you and Harry must have gotten on...once in a while."

"I'd never do anything with that freak," Dudley said.

"Freak," Ron said in disgust. "You don't even know him, do you?"

"He is a lot like Malfoy, isn't he? I've never noticed it before now, but Ron's right. He never did much on his own, either - always had to have his little gang behind him. You should have come to Hogwarts when I went, Duds. Maybe you could have been one of Malfoy's goons, too. I'm certain they would have placed you in Slytherin," Harry said, unable to resist taunting his cousin back any longer.

"I'm telling mum you said the name of that school of yours," Dudley said, backing towards the door, apparently very confused over the loyalty amongst the trio.

"What? Hogwarts? But Dudley, you should have gone there, too. You're a wizard, after all," Harry said.

"Harry," Hermione said, grabbing his arm, but Harry ignored her.

"I never should have gone there. I'm not a freak like you lot," Dudley said, taking a step towards them.

"He'd have never been able to handle it, anyway, Harry," Ron said. "He'd be just another Crabbe or Goyle, fumbling his way through."

"I'm not a wizard," Dudley shouted, growing ever more enraged. His piggy eyes were flashing as he clenched and unclenched his massive fists.

"I'm surprised you haven't taken full advantage of it, though," Ron mused casually, leaning back against a tree and crossing his arms over his chest. "I mean...being able to use magic and all. From what Harry tells me, your favorite pasttime is picking on little kids. I'm certain you could have really scared some little Muggle kids by using magic...or frighten your mates into doing whatever you wanted. That's the way you work, right?"

"What do you mean?" Dudley asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Ron! Ignore him, Dudley. He knows you can't use magic on Muggles without getting into trouble, and besides, you wouldn't want to intimidate any of your friends. That's not what magic is all about," Hermione said, glaring at Ron.

Dudley's eyes gleamed, as if a light switch had just been turned. "I could make them do anything I wanted, couldn't I?"

Harry shivered. Dudley's reaction had eerily reminded him of the memories he'd seen of a young Tom Riddle. "Stop it. You'll never have the chance to go to Hogwarts now, so it's a moot point. Aunt Petunia saw to that."

"I don't need your stupid school, anyway. I can make this stuff happen just by getting angry. Things always happen when I'm angry...and you can't do anything about it. She said it herself. You're not allowed to use magic against Mubbles," Dudley said, pointing at Hermione with a victorious glint in his eye.

"Just one problem with that, Duds," Harry replied. "You're not a Muggle; you're a wizard."

"Enough of this," Aunt Petunia hissed, entering the back garden in a towering rage. "You were warned not to upset him and to stay away from him. I won't have you corrupting him with your vile ways." As she spoke, Aunt Petunia stood in front of Harry, with one hand on her hip and the other flicking a dishtowel at him.

Dudley smirked as he stood behind his mother. He always enjoyed seeing Harry get told off. "He said I was one of them, Mummy...that I could do...mag-"

"Don't say it!" Aunt Petunia yelped, whipping around and slamming her hand over Dudley's mouth. "Don't even listen to them, popkin."

"But Mummy, if you'd have allowed me to go to that school, I could have got a thing, too. I would have been able to keep him in line around here," Dudley whined.

"Don't speak of such things. I won't have it. I'm not going through all that again. You are normal, Dudley. Never forget that," Aunt

Petunia said fervently. She'd grown increasingly paler as he spoke, and now appeared ready to faint away on the spot.

"But that was my decision to make, not yours," Dudley said, surprising Harry so much his jaw fell open. He'd never seen Dudley openly defy Aunt Petunia before; he usually only did it behind her back. Aunt Petunia was just as stunned, and she glared at Harry as if it were entirely his fault.

"I won't speak of it again, Dudley. You're to have nothing to do with that hellhole of a school," Aunt Petunia said, with that no-nonsense demeanor that Harry remembered so well.

A sick, nauseous feeling arose within him as he fully realized the extent of Aunt Petunia's hatred of the magical world - and everyone in it. "You really hated her, didn't you?" he asked quietly.

He hadn't expected her to answer; she never did when it pertained to his mother. He was shocked when she turned to face him, her eyes blazing. "I never hated her; I hated what she became. I thought when she was done with that devil of a school that she'd come to her senses and return to her family, but no. Your cretin of a father had her by then, and look how they ended up. Then you arrived on our doorstep, looking just like him. I had to look into her eyes and see his face.

"I won't have my Dudley meet the same end; I won't have it."

Harry was stunned. He opened and closed his mouth several times but couldn't form the words.

"But, mum...I could be powerful," Dudley said.

Harry couldn't contain his disbelief any longer. "Powerful? You've already had them jumping through hoops since you were born. What more did you want?" Harry's mind was racing. Had magic played a part in the dominance that Dudley had always appeared to hold over his parents? Had he somehow influenced their decisions? Had he unintentionally been prodding them along to buy just one more gift all this time?

As usual, the Dursleys ignored Harry's outburst.

"Popkin," Aunt Petunia said, putting a hand to Dudley's face. "Of course you don't want anything to do with all his foul nonsense. You're better than that. He's just trying to bring you down to his level."

Dudley shuddered. "You're right. I don't want any of this touching me. I'm normal." Dudley stormed over to Harry and poked his porky finger at Harry's chest repeatedly. "I'm normal. You hear that, Potter? I'm normal."

"Could have fooled me," Harry replied, finally recovering the use of his voice.

Ron moved next to Harry and shoved Dudley's hand away. "Keep your grubby, normal hands off him."

"I warned you to stay away from him," Aunt Petunia hissed at Harry.

"We were out here working on the project that you asked us to do. He was the one who came out here with us," Harry replied.

"Well, stay in your room, then," Aunt Petunia snapped. "Heavens, if the neighbors have heard any of this you'll be in for it. Do you hear me? Get inside and stay away from Dudley."

After Dudley and Aunt Petunia stormed inside the house, Ron turned towards Hermione. "Can you honestly think of any reason why Harry would want to continue a relationship with those people?"

"Because they're his family," Hermione said stubbornly.

"No, they're not," Harry said, shaking his head. "We share my mother's blood, that's all. You two have been my only family for a long time now." Harry quickly picked up his books and headed inside without looking back at Ron and Hermione.

Hermione's attempts at striking up a friendship with Aunt Petunia had continued, but they had - of course - been futile. Harry had kept trying to tell her, but she wouldn't listen. He'd wondered if his aunt might actually enjoy some female company for a change, but Aunt Petunia made it perfectly clear that she wanted nothing to do with Hermione. Oh, she'd let her help with chores - Aunt Petunia could never resist having someone else to boss around - but when it came to any kind of conversation, Hermione was rudely rebuffed.

At first, Aunt Petunia had merely been snippy, but as the days wore on and Hermione's persistence refused to wane, Aunt Petunia's comments had become increasingly rude and more biting. For Harry, it was basically what he'd expected to happen, but he was caught unprepared for Ron's reaction.

Ron had always been quick to stand up for Hermione; from a very early age, he'd always taken exception to anyone other than him giving her a hard time. But his fury over the Dursleys' comments to Hermione appeared extreme - even for Ron standards. He'd already threatened them several times, and once Harry had even had to step in before Ron drew his wand on Uncle Vernon. He wouldn't have much cared if Uncle Vernon got hexed, but he was afraid Ron would get in trouble for Muggle-baiting.

The night before they were due to leave, Harry found his Aunt Petunia doing her nightly wipe-down in the kitchen. They hadn't found any kind of spell that would subdue Dudley's magic, although they hadn't really had the time to look very hard. They'd decided simply to use Hermione's original idea of a Cheering Charm. Harry wished someone had thought of that idea when he and Dudley were younger; it might have made Harry's childhood a lot more pleasant.

"Aunt Petunia," Harry said quietly, hoping his uncle, who was watching the telly in the parlor, wouldn't overhear him.

"What?" snapped Aunt Petunia.

"We've found something that should help Dudley. We'll perform the spell tomorrow before we leave," he said.

Aunt Petunia froze, her hand shaking slightly as it held a sponge over the kitchen counter. "You're certain this won't hurt Dudley?"

"Yeah. He won't even be aware when it's done," Harry said.

Aunt Petunia nodded and went back to her scrubbing.

"I think we're going to go to Godric's Hollow. I want to see my parents' graves," Harry said, uncertain why he'd chosen to share this bit of information with her. There was something about knowing that he was leaving forever that felt strange. He certainly felt nothing for the Dursleys and knew they didn't want him any more than he wanted them. Still, they were all he'd known for nearly sixteen years, his only living family; he couldn't help but feel he should say something.

Aunt Petunia hesitated again, although so briefly that Harry thought he must have imagined it. "Don't leave a mess behind and take all your belongings with you - I won't be handling anything strange to forward. And be certain not to take any of Dudley's things."

Harry's shoulders sagged. "Yes, Aunt Petunia," he said softly, already regretting his efforts. As he turned around, he came face to face with a pale Hermione and a positively livid Ron standing in the entryway of the kitchen.

"Hey," Harry said uncertainly. "We're all set for tomorrow. Let's just go back upstairs and finish our packing. We'll leave in the morning."

"What is the meaning of this?" Uncle Vernon asked loudly as he stomped into the kitchen, glaring at finding Harry, Ron and Hermione there.

Before Harry could respond, Ron bit out, "I believe Harry just said that we'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Good riddance to bad rubbish is what I always say," Uncle Vernon muttered, his countenance visibly brightening.

"Aren't you even going to say goodbye and good luck to your nephew?" Ron asked, nearly snarling. "That's certainly the very least you can do."

Uncle Vernon narrowed his piggy eyes at Harry. "That doddering old fool who was with you last year said you'd come of age this year. That means this is the last time we have to put up with all your nonsense, right?"

"That's right," Harry said, smiling humorlessly. "I'll be of age in a few weeks and a fully qualified wizard. I'm no longer in need of your services." Harry enjoyed the shudder of revulsion the word wizard caused amongst all his relatives. He just wanted to be done with all of this. It was time to move onward.

"Harry," Hermione said pleadingly. Her eyes darted to and fro between Harry and his uncle. "You want to leave here on good-

"I don't bloody well believe you lot," Ron said, his ears flaming. "What is wrong with you people? Do you know that I always felt a bit embarrassed about my house after the first time I saw this place, even with the bars on Harry's window? I was stupid enough to feel ashamed of my house, thinking that Harry was coming from something better. What an idiot! I really can't believe how stupid I was. It's only now, watching your behavior, that I understand why Harry always seemed over the moon to arrive at my house. It's no wonder. You lot are pathetic."

Harry stared at Ron with wide eyes, visibly reminded of Mr. Weasley and a similar reaction when he'd come to collect Harry for the Quidditch Cup. Harry had never been so proud to have Ron for a friend.

And Ron wasn't done with Uncle Vernon. "My mum...my mum can holler with the best of them. She could probably even give a banshee a run for her money. But I know damn well that if I had been born a Squib, it would have changed nothing. She might have been disappointed, but she would have treated me the same, and expected the same from me as she did the rest of my siblings. And no matter how hard she was on me, she'd never allow anyone else to be.

"That's what families are supposed do. You pathetic wankers don't even know Harry. How could you? You don't even know the kind of person you've had here all the time and the lengths he would go for you if you asked. The sad part is that I don't think you'll realize it even after he's gone."

Harry looked up sharply in time to see a grimace cross Ron's face after he'd said the words, and Harry felt a chill run down his spine. Aunt Petunia's face had paled slightly, glancing quickly at Harry before returning her eyes to the floor.

Ron had withdrawn his wand and was waving it jerkily beneath the Dursleys' noses, causing them to cringe back against the counters. Ron didn't make any indication that he was going to curse them, and Harry was enjoying the tongue-lashing they were receiving, so he didn't make any move to stop it.

"Damn it, if the Death Eaters only knew about you lot they'd have the best recruiting tool they'd ever come across, because I've never wanted to curse a Muggle as bad as I want to curse you. You know why I don't? Because he-," Ron jammed his finger at Harry, "he won't let me. Why, I'll never know. He certainly has never done anything to deserve the likes of you as family.

"The funny thing is, those same Death Eaters who could use you wouldn't do it because of the fact that you're Muggles. And the only thing standing between you and them right now is him. So stick that in your pipe and smoke it.

"Come on, Harry; we're getting out of here," Ron said, turning to leave the room. Hermione beamed at him, her eyes glowing with pride as she watched his retreating back.

Uncle Vernon's face had gone from red to maroon and now displayed a nearly purple hue. He became much braver as soon as Ron moved his wand away. "I will not be spoken to with such disrespect in my own home by the likes of...of...of someone like you. You will all take all of your belongings and get out of my house in the morning," he raged, as if it had been his idea all along.

"No problem, Uncle Vernon. We'll be gone come morning. You can even redecorate my old room," Harry said cheerfully, slapping the door to the cupboard under the stairs on his way past.

Hermione, who was walking directly in front of him, stopped sharply, causing him to bump into her.

"Herm--"

"What did you just say?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

Harry's eyes widened, realizing his blunder. He'd never shared that particular story with Ron and Hermione. He'd always been a little embarrassed by it.

"Er, nothing. Just forget about it," Harry said, trying to hurry them along. Ron had now stopped, too, and was staring with curiosity at the series of locks and door jams along the cupboard entry.

Hermione shoved Harry's arm out of the way and forcefully opened the door, gasping at what she found inside.

Harry's eyes wandered over his old, familiar, cramped quarters. A lumpy old mattress with several springs poking out still rested on a wire camp bed. Several toy soldiers and broken chess pieces were scattered on a shelf. Spider webs had covered the slanted ceiling completely, and a heavy layer of dust covered everything inside. Harry vaguely wondered why Aunt Petunia hadn't sanitized this spot like she did everywhere else. It was almost as if all the things that frightened her were hidden inside that cupboard.

Harry recognized his childlike writing on the walls. Just scribbles, really, beside his name. He'd once confiscated some of Dudley's crayons and made a habit of nicking more whenever he'd got the chance. He could see a crude drawing of a birthday cake with candles drawn in different colors with gradual improvement in the drawing. He remembered adding to it each year on his birthday.

To say that Hermione exploded would be an understatement. She whirled toward the Dursleys, whipping Harry in the face with her hair as she spun around.

"How could you?" she screeched, baring her teeth like a wild animal.

Aunt Petunia averted her eyes to the floor, but Uncle Vernon puffed out his chest as if to defend himself. Hermione never gave him the chance.

"What?" Ron asked blankly.

"You loathsome, despicable cretins. To think I tried to tell him to be nicer to you. You actually kept him locked in a cupboard when he was just a little boy?" Hermione raged.

"They what?" Ron exploded, his head swinging wildly from Hermione to the cupboard to the Dursleys and back to Harry again.

Hermione ignored him. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," she hissed, raising her wand.

Harry grabbed her hand and pulled it away from Uncle Vernon just as she gave it an upward flick. Unfortunately, as he'd pulled it away he'd pulled it towards himself. He suddenly found himself hanging upside down by his ankle in the entry hall of Privet Drive.

Aunt Petunia shrieked and covered her eyes. Uncle Vernon shielded her with his body and pushed her back into the kitchen. The slamming of the kitchen door echoed in the silent hall for a moment.

"Er, Hermione...can you let me down?" Harry asked with amusement.

Hermione gasped and gently released Harry from the spell.

"You used Levicorpus. I can't believe you used one of the Half-Blood Prince's spells," Ron said in amazement. Harry could hear the delight in his voice.

"Never mind trying to use it on a Muggle. Are you trying to get yourself arrested, Hermione?" Harry asked, beaming at his friend.

"Ready to start living on the wild side?" Ron asked, grinning.

"Oh, shut it, you two. I was just so angry with them. I can't believe you never told us about this, Harry," Hermione said, trying to maintain her dignity in the face of her laughing friends.

Harry shrugged. "It doesn't matter now; let's get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day."

He could tell Hermione wanted to argue, but Harry didn't give her the chance. He bolted up the stairs in front of them, leaving them to follow in his wake. Still, settling down in his bed that night, it was a very long time before he finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Three

...And Another Door Opens

The next morning, Harry awoke feeling groggy and disoriented. He blinked several times, trying to clear his head, but he just couldn't manage to raise it from his pillow. He could hear raised voices coming from downstairs, and he dragged his pillow over his head in an attempt to drown out the noise. It had taken a long time for him finally to fall asleep the night before, and it felt as if he'd only dosed off a few moments ago. Vague recollections of a dream started to come back to him..

He'd been on his Firebolt, racing through some dark tunnels in search of something. He'd felt a desperate panic rising within him that took nearly all his strength to clamp down.

He'd kept hitting dead ends, no matter which way he turned.

Dudley was there, stirring a potion, and he'd locked Harry in his cupboard where Harry soon fell asleep. His hair had kept growing while he slept and eventually grew so long it crept outside the cupboard door.

Ginny had used his hair to find him and had to slay a dragon in order to reach him. He'd climbed behind Ginny on the Firebolt, and the two of them had sped off into the sunset.

"Great," Harry mumbled into his pillow. "Now I'm dreaming about fairy tales, only I'm the damn Damsel in Distress." Harry knew he would never tell another living soul about that dream as long as he lived.

His bedroom door banged open, and Ron and Hermione entered – wide-awake and already dressed. They both looked entirely too upbeat to suit his mood.

"Come on, Harry. Get up; we're leaving," Hermione said bossily.

Still feeling groggy, Harry wiped his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Time to go; Ron and I have taken care of everything. I've already shrunken our trunks and have them here in my bag. Let's go," Hermione said, trying to pull his covers back. "You've been anxious to leave forever, and we've got loads to do."

"Hermione, let me get dressed," Harry said, grabbing his bedcovers and feeling slightly panicked. He was only wearing boxers, after all. What was her hurry, anyway?

"I've left your clothes right there," Hermione said, pointing to a pair of jeans and a T-shirt already laid out for him.

"Thanks, Mum," he said, smirking.

"Don't get smart," Hermione said, frowning.

"We'll meet you downstairs, mate," Ron said, dragging a protesting Hermione from the room. He gave her a slight shove to walk in front of him and leaned back to say, "Just think; you're finally free of this place. Mum will be going spare if we don't arrive in time for her to feed you this morning. Hermione thinks there must be something going on with the Order, since she hasn't noticed them keeping watch and no one is here to escort us to the Burrow."

Harry hadn't noticed any of the Order keeping watch at Privet Drive, either, but he knew that didn't mean anything. With Ron and Hermione there to distract him, he hadn't spent all his free time looking for Order members as he had in the past.

As Harry dressed, he glanced at his nightstand and saw a folded piece of paper that he didn't remember placing there. He picked it up and read the few words printed on the inside in Aunt Petunia's small, tidy, script.

Godric's Hollow

16 Hillside Lane

Godre'r-graig, South Wales

Harry swallowed heavily and stuffed the note in his pocket. This was it: a real and tangible address of where his parents had lived — where he had lived, once upon a time. Why was Aunt Petunia giving this to him now? Was it her way of saying goodbye?

He'd have to think about it later. He stood up and took one long last look around his bedroom on Privet Drive. It felt strange, knowing he'd never see this room again. Not that he wanted to see it, but it felt strange, nonetheless. Although he hadn't felt like a child in a very long time, this somehow felt as if he were really leaving his childhood behind. He was truly an adult and on his own now.

Smiling slightly, he turned on his heel and followed his friends downstairs.

"We have to put the charm on Dudley," he said as he came down the last few steps to meet Ron and Hermione, who were standing by the front door.

"It's already done," Hermione said briskly.

"You did it already?" Harry asked, frowning his brow. How long had they been awake?

"Yes," Ron replied quickly, turning to open the door. Hermione shifted her eyes as Ron pushed Harry and her out the door ahead of him.

Harry stopped walking. "What did you do?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at the two of them.

"Nothing to worry about, mate; we took care of everything," Ron said, and something about the way he was smiling reminded Harry eerily of the twins.

Harry decided that he really didn't want to know. One task down — now it was time to face Ginny. That thought caused a slight shiver to run down his spine. Whether it was a thrill of dread or excitement, he wasn't certain. Maybe it was a little of both.

As Hermione continued to steer him towards a spot just outside the wards where they would be able to Apparate, he turned to glance back at the house one last time. For a moment, he thought he saw Aunt Petunia's face in the doorway, watching their departure. When he looked again, the doorway was empty, and he was certain he must have imagined it. If she'd been there at all, she was most likely checking to be certain they left, rather than feeling any sorrow over his departure.

They crossed the street in silence, Hermione nearly bouncing on the balls of her feet in her eagerness. "All right. Harry, hold on to my arm, and we'll be at the Burrow in no time."

Harry smiled and averted his eyes. Taking a deep, shuddering breath (refusing to admit that he was nervous to anyone), he grasped Hermione's arm and felt the uncomfortable constriction in his chest as he was sped forward towards the Burrow...and towards Ginny.

Harry opened his eyes and was met with the sight of the ramshackle home he loved above all others. Although somewhat the worse for wear, it was still there and still offering a bit of normalcy against the rising storm. Harry didn't think he'd ever been so happy to be anywhere in his life. Despite his apprehension about seeing Ginny, being at the Burrow somehow warmed him from the inside.

Chickens ran haphazardly around the coop, and Harry could see more than a handful of garden gnomes peeking out from behind a variety of lush green bushes, all of which were in full bloom. He inhaled deeply, savoring the aroma of baking scones mixed with the heady scent of summer.

A sudden urge for treacle tart and a warm greeting from Mrs. Weasley filled Harry's mind. He had to fight to control his instinct to sprint for the front door and hurl himself inside. Gritting his teeth, he stepped in behind Ron and forced himself to walk at the slower pace. He had no idea what he'd say to Ginny when he saw her, but just the thought of seeing her filled him with such hope that nothing else mattered.

In his mind's eye, he could picture her hair all windblown from a morning fly in the meadow and a spot of flour on her otherwise flawless face from helping her mother bake the scones that Harry was now certain were awaiting their arrival.

He forced down the uncomfortable thought that she might not even want to see him and wouldn't be anywhere near him when his presence became known. He wasn't certain which would be worse - her rejection or her welcoming arms that he'd have to avoid - but he couldn't stop his own feet from hurrying to find out.

Ron pulled the door open, and they stepped into the chaos that was the Burrow. There were boxes and stacks of paper everywhere. Robes hung inside clothes bags from hooks on the ceiling, and Harry could make out a line of high-heeled shoes resting on the windowsill. Gaily wrapped packages were piled in every spare bit of space in the room, which admittedly hadn't been generous to begin with. Voices could be heard shouting from upstairs, as well as in the kitchen.

The sudden vibration from a small explosion in another room knocked Hermione into Harry's shoulder, and he barely caught the both of them before they tumbled to the floor.

"Bloody hell," Ron said, craning his neck to see if there was any damage.

Harry set Hermione back on her feet just as Mrs. Weasley began shouting at Fred.

"Welcome home," Ron said, grinning sheepishly.

A wide, delighted grin spread across Harry's face. "Can't think of any place I'd rather be," he said honestly.

"Come on," Hermione said, grabbing each of them by the hand. "Let's see what that was and if your mum needs any help cleaning it up."

Hermione pulled them into the kitchen, where they found a frazzled-looking Mrs. Weasley using her wand both to cut vegetables and stir several pots, while simultaneously berating the twins for their careless antics.

Bill sat calmly at the table, shuffling through what appeared to be a list of names, while Charlie Weasley sat across from him with a somewhat dazed expression on his face. Sitting next to Charlie was the reason for his dazed look – Fleur was instructing him on the proper pace to keep as he walked down the aisle.

Harry wasn't certain if Charlie's blank look was because of the topic or just Fleur in general. Ron still reacted the same way to the beautiful part-Veela. Hermione stiffened next to him and scowled at both Charlie and Fleur. Hermione had never warmed up to the French girl, and Harry wondered how Ginny was faring with her future sister-in-law. Ginny hadn't liked Fleur any better than Hermione did.

Harry's gaze lingered for a moment on Bill's scarred face. The wounds inflicted by Fenrir Greyback were plainly visible and still looked quite painful. On Bill, though, they somehow gave him a rugged, manly sort of look. While Harry thought his own scar just drew unwanted attention, like the star attraction in a freak show; Bill's gave the older man an aura of mystery. Bill appeared to be someone in control of the situation, and the scars added a bit of daring to his story.

Hermione had apparently been struck dumb by the lack of order in the kitchen and hung back slightly in the doorway, while Ron simply slipped into his customary seat at the table and tried to remain unnoticed. Harry wasn't quick enough to follow suit.

"'Arry!" Fleur shrieked, gracefully moving away from Charlie and towards Harry. She took him in her arms and kissed him on each cheek. "I am zo 'appy to 'ave you here."

Fleur's shout had alerted the rest of the Weasley family to their arrival, and Harry shifted uncomfortably beneath all the attention.

"Hi, Fleur. Hello, everyone," he mumbled, feeling the heat rise to his face.

"Oh! You're all here," Mrs. Weasley cried, rushing over to crush Ron in her embrace before pulling back to look him over carefully. Finding no apparent cause for concern, she turned around and treated Harry and then Hermione to the same treatment.

"We're here, and we're fine, Mum. Nothing to get so worked up about," Ron grumbled, wiping his face of his mother's kisses.

Harry pulled away slightly and stood with his back against the wall as Ron greeted the rest of his family. He scanned the room yet again, cursing his traitorous heart for its pathetic hopefulness. How was his resolve ever to hold if he'd trade the world for the mere sight of her at the first chance he got? His breath caught in his throat as Ginny came down the stairs and stopped at the bottom, her eyes taking in the happy welcome.

She looked like an angel as she floated down the stairs, and Harry thought his heart would burst from simply seeing her again. The morning sun streaming in from the kitchen window lit her hair with a fiery brilliance that Harry longed to run his fingers through. Her hair had always been so sinfully soft, and he loved to touch it.

Time lost all meaning and, for a brief moment, he was back at Hogwarts, and she was still his. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't seem to drag his eyes away. It took all the force of will he possessed not to cross the room and take her in his arms. Suddenly and for a moment that seemed to last an eternity, nothing and no one else mattered to him.

Her eyes locked on his, and while time stood still their fierce gazes raked over one another as if each were committing every detail to memory to reexamine on lonely nights apart.

Dear God, she's beautiful.

Gripping the amulet in his pocket fiercely, Harry forced himself to breathe and drag his eyes away. That was exactly why he had to stay away from Ginny. He was powerless against her charm, but there were things that had to be done, and he had to be the one to do them.

If anyone else had noticed his brief lapse of resolve, they didn't say anything, although he was certain he could feel the heat from Hermione's stare on the back of his neck.

Ginny entered the room and walked towards Ron, gently nudging him on the shoulder. "Welcome home, Ron. I'm so glad you managed to get here in time to do some of these chores. The family that works together shares in the joy together," she said in a singsong voice.

"Great," Ron grumbled, pulling an apple off the table and biting into it.

"Hi, Harry. Hi, Hermione," Ginny said brightly.

Harry's heart nearly broke in two. Leave it to Ginny to act as if nothing had changed and there wasn't this huge wall of tension between them. He was certain she sounded casual to everyone else in the room, but he could hear the strain in her voice...and he knew he was the one who had placed it there.

He tried to open his mouth and return the greeting, but he couldn't form the words. When did she become such a skilled actress?

"Hello, Ginny," Hermione said. "Thanks for sending me those books. They were just what I needed, and they really came in handy."

Harry's head shot up, his eyes flickering between the two girls. He'd had no idea Hermione had been in contact with Ginny, or that Ginny had been helping. Damn! So much for keeping her out of it.

"How did everything go with the Muggles?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "They didn't give you any trouble, did they?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Ron replied with a self-satisfied smirk, "and they'll be finding little reminders of our stay for years to come."

Fred and George grinned maniacally. "Ooh, do tell. It sounds like our ickle Ronniekins has been paying attention all along," Fred said, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye.

"It's so gratifying to see all our hard work come to its fruition," George replied, sighing heavily.

"Oh, sit down and finish making those arrangements for the international portkeys. If the guests have any trouble getting here on the big day, I'm going to hold you both fully responsible," Mrs. Weasley snapped.

"Never fear, Mother, dear. All the guests will arrive safely and promptly in time to see our dear eldest brother tie the shackle around his leg," Fred said, batting his eyelashes dramatically.

"What do you mean wiz zis shackle buziness?" Fleur asked, frowning. "You two should be zo lucky to find zomeone willing to zettle down wiz ze likes of you."

"Exactly!" Mrs. Weasley jumped right in. "That's exactly what I've been telling them for years, Fleur dear. Maybe they'll meet some nice friends of yours at the wedding."

"Ho, ho," George said, grinning. "We'll take that as our mission. To meet and talk with each one of Fleur's single friends who comes to the wedding."

"Oh, please. My friends are completely out of your league, little men," Fleur replied dismissively, causing Bill and Charlie to howl with mirth.

"Seriously though, boys. Ron, Harry...did everything go all right at Privet Drive? Harry, did you move all your belongings out?" Mrs. Weasley asked kindly.

"Yeah, we got it all," Ron answered. "Harry's seen the last of that place, and good riddance. Those Muggles are mental. He's just a homeless, orphan waif now, mum, so I suppose we'll have to take him in."

Ron grinned at Harry when he said it, but the sudden realization hit Harry like a punch to the gut.

He was homeless.

Realistically, he knew that he'd always have a spot at the Weasleys', there for the asking, but the fact remained that he was truly on his own. He really didn't belong anywhere. Not that he'd ever really belonged at the Dursleys, either, but at least it was an address. A place to hang his hat, as it were.

As if sensing his sudden unease, Ginny placed her warm hand on Harry's forearm and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, Harry," she whispered. "You'll always belong here, no matter what else has happened."

Harry raised his eyes to meet hers and was nearly lost in their depth. How did she know? She'd always been able to see through whatever it was he was feeling and get to the heart of things.

Damn, this will be harder than I'd even anticipated.

He nodded slightly and saw the brief flash of pain in her eyes before she covered it up again. Smiling brightly, she turned her attention to Hermione and began chatting about bridesmaid dresses. Her dismissal allowed Harry to breathe again, but the pit he felt in his stomach would make eating impossible. He felt nauseous and needed to regroup. He hated feeling so wrong-footed and uncertain about everything.

"Of course, I suppose you could always go to Grimmauld Place," Ron said, oblivious to the startled and aggravated looks he was receiving from the rest of his family. "You do own that now, don't you, Harry?"

Harry's insides went cold. He'd forgotten about Grimmauld Place, but it would never be home. "Yeah," he said, finally finding his voice. "I'm going to go put my trunk up in your room. I'll take yours up, too."

He grabbed all the shrunken trunks from Hermione and nearly sprinted from the room. He knew they'd all be talking about him, but he didn't care. He couldn't stay there with her so close for one minute longer. He needed to breathe. And he'd thought it was bad at the Dursleys'. Somehow, he suspected that this would be the longest week of his life.

It wasn't until he'd reached the brightness of Ron's orange room that he remembered he couldn't use magic to enlarge the trunks. He left both Ron and Hermione's miniature trunks on Ron's bed and sat down on the camp bed with his own. He'd stayed in Fred and George's old room when he was here last summer, but he suspected that with so many people staying at the Burrow for the wedding, he'd be bunking with Ron. That's what he'd done last Christmas when they'd had a crowd.

He stretched out on the camp bed and let his thoughts drift to the previous Christmas. Things had been so much simpler then. He grinned as he remembered the sweetheart necklace that Lavender had sent to Ron. He wondered what his friend had done with it. Chucked it out the window of the Gryffindor dormitory, most likely.

He relaxed and allowed his mind to wander as he drifted off to sleep. He really hadn't slept well the previous night and was feeling quite drained. He wasn't certain how long he'd dozed, but he awoke to Hermione sitting on his bed, making a "Harumff" sound.

Harry jerked and looked around wildly.

"Sorry, Harry," Hermione said. "Mrs. Weasley put Ron to work with the twins, but I couldn't stand listening to them for one more minute. They can be so insufferably condescending sometimes."

Harry shook his head and tried to clear it. "Yeah," he mumbled.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

Harry shrugged.

"Ginny looks good," Hermione ventured, letting her sentence hang in the open. Harry refused to respond.

Hermione huffed but continued prodding. "Fleur is driving her crazy with these wedding plans. Ginny says she's done nothing but attend engagements and make plans for this wedding and will be just as happy when it's over and done. She hates the dress robes she has to wear. Says they're made for a ten-year old. I'm supposed to help her with them tonight."

Harry fought the smile that threatened to crack his impassive expression. He could just imagine Ginny's tirades against wearing anything that would make her look younger than she was. She hated being treated like a child.

"Why are you telling me this, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I thought you'd want to know, since you avoided talking with her at all."

Harry frowned. "I-I- I didn't avoid talking...I just-"

"Just what?"

"I just didn't know what to say," Harry whispered.

Hermione smiled sadly. "She misses you, Harry, and I know you miss her. No matter how well you think you're hiding it."

Harry swallowed against the thickness in his throat. "It's even harder than I thought it would be."

"Harry, if Professor Dumbledore said this great power you possess is love, do you really think it's a good idea to be pushing her away?" Hermione asked, picking at a loose thread on the blanket on Harry's bed.

Harry stiffened, closing off his emotions. "It has to be this way, Hermione. I won't put her in danger."

"She's already in danger, Harry. We all are. Didn't you see the hands on that clock downstairs? Ginny's hand is still pointed to Mortal Peril, whether you're with her or not. I think she could help us."

"No."

"Harry- "

"Don't push it, Hermione. I can't let her die because of me, and I don't want her to have to watch if it's me that's going to go," Harry said, refusing to look at her.

"Don't say that," Hermione hissed, grabbing him around the waist and hugging him fiercely. "Don't even think it. We can't lose you, Harry."

"Don't be stupid, Hermione," Harry said, finally looking at her directly. "We both know it's a very real possibility. Look at what happened to Dumbledore's hand while he was after these things. This isn't a game, and I'm not nearly the wizard he was. It's more than likely I'm going to die, but so help me God, I'm taking him with me when I do."

"Don't!" Hermione pleaded, her voice choked.

"Hermione," Harry said gently, hating the tears that were streaming down her cheeks. He never did well with crying girls. "Let's just take this one step at a time. It's the only way I'm able to keep going forward. Ginny is a distraction - a very pleasant distraction - that I can't afford."

"Then you at least enjoy yourself at this wedding. Dance with her, drink and be merry and have a good snog if that's what you want to do," Hermione said, crossing her arms across her chest.

"Hermione!"

"What?"

"I can't believe you, of all people, just said that," Harry replied, unable to contain his laughter.

She shrugged. "If you don't, you'll have no right to complain if someone else does."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked warily. The beast within his chest that had curled up in misery at the end of term suddenly raised its head and breathed fire.

"Well, Ginny told me that the two groomsmen are Charlie and Fleur's cousin, Jean-Luc. Fleur has been making no secret of the fact that she wants to pair Ginny up with Jean-Luc," Hermione said, her nose slightly in the air.

"What? What does Ginny think about this?" Harry asked indignantly. His monster was snarling. No prancing Frenchman was getting anywhere near his Ginny without her permission.

Unless...Harry's insides suddenly went cold. What if Ginny wanted the attention? He felt the beast whimper and curl its tail inward.

"Oh, Harry. You know Ginny. She won't be pushed into doing anything she doesn't want to do, especially by Fleur. But she's hurting, too, and...well...Ginny has been known to be spiteful on occasion," Hermione said, somewhat apologetically.

Harry's heart constricted so tightly that he thought he might asphyxiate himself. He clenched his fists, knowing there was nothing he could do. He'd brought this on himself, and if he thought a girl like Ginny wouldn't have a string of other suitors waiting in line, then he was being foolish. He felt as if all the air had been let out of his wings.

Harry shut his eyes, his head slumping forward.

"It gets worse," Hermione said, shifting as she made herself more comfortable.

He opened his eyes wearily. "How could it possibly get any worse, Hermione? Unless you're about to tell me there is some wizarding custom that all the attendants in a bridal party have to snog each other in front of witnesses, as well."

Hermione sniggered. "Actually, this concerns you. Ginny said that Fleur plans on having you entertain Gabrielle during the reception."

Harry blinked several times, nonplussed. "Huh?"

"You know, her little sister?"

"I know who she is Hermione, but isn't she around ten?" Harry asked.

"Eleven, actually. I wonder if she'll be starting at Beauxbatons in September. I read that other wizarding schools--"

"Hermione!"

"What? Oh...right, Gabrielle."

"Eleven. Do I really come off as being that desperate?" Harry asked, cringing.

Hermione giggled. "Of course not, Harry, but evidently Gabrielle has had a major crush on you since the Second Task. Fleur wants to make her dream come true by having you be her dance partner."

"Great. I don't suppose it occurred to her to ask me how I felt about this?" Harry asked, feeling nettled

"You know how it is with Fleur. How other people feel about anything has never been one of her top priorities," Hermione said, sniffing slightly.

Harry rubbed his forehead roughly. He could feel a headache beginning in his temples. "Well, she can forget it. I'm not jumping because Fleur says jump."

Hermione snorted. "Oh, ho. Now you sound just like Ginny. Besides, Harry, you can get as angry as you want. We all know you'll never hurt that little girl's feelings. So, if you really don't want to spend the evening as her escort, I suggest you get it straightened out with Fleur straightaway."

"Oh, I can see that conversation. I know it's your wedding day and all, but I really don't want to child-mind your sister, so please make other arrangements. As if I'm not already high on the list of cads to the Weasleys, anyway," Harry said, rolling his eyes dramatically.

"No one thinks you're a cad, Harry. Although Fred and George do find the idea of you being Gabrielle's date highly amusing," Hermione replied, sniggering.

"I'll just bet they do. Did Ginny have any other little bombshells to drop, or is that enough for one day?" Harry asked, in a right foul mood now.

"Other than her complete misery of being apart from you, you mean?" Hermione asked, blinking innocently.

"Hermione," Harry said, irritated.

"Okay, okay. She did say she thinks there is something dodgy going on at Grimmauld Place. Her mum has been very secretive about it, of course, but the Order seems to have come into a lot of information recently. She's heard fragments of several conversations about a guest staying there."

"A guest at Grimmauld Place? Who do you suppose it could be?" Harry asked, leaning forward with interest.

"I don't know, Harry. Why don't you ask? It is your house, after all," Hermione said, frowning slightly.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's my house. If I want to know who is staying there, they should tell me. I have every right to know," Harry said, warming to the idea

"Of course you do, but since when has that ever stopped them?"

Harry set his mouth grimly. "Well, that all changes now."

"I know you don't want to tell the Order about the Horcruxes, Harry, but don't alienate them, either. There might come a time when we need their help. You know you can trust Remus and Professor McGonagall and all the Weasleys, at least," Hermione said.

Harry knew that Hermione's first instinct was always to go to someone in a position of authority, but Harry felt that if Dumbledore hadn't told the Order about the Horcruxes then there must have been a reason. He wasn't about to second-guess that decision.

"I'll work with the Order, but I'm not telling them anything about our mission. They had no problem stringing me along for the past few years; let's see how they enjoy having the shoe on the other foot."

Hermione frowned and bit the corner of her lip but didn't argue with him for once.

"Don't worry, Hermione. If Dumbledore didn't tell them, he must have had a good reason."

This seemed to make Hermione feel better about the situation. "Let's go downstairs and see about dinner. Ron should be done with his work by now and will be wondering where we've gone."

"You go on down. I'm going to take a shower, and I'll meet you in the kitchen."

"Harry - "

"I just need a few minutes to steady myself before seeing her, all right, Hermione?" he said, looking at his feet.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," Hermione said quietly.

"I do, too. Believe me; I do, too."

When Harry came downstairs a good while later, he headed straight for the kitchen, certain he'd find a crowd of Weasleys there. What he hadn't anticipated was hearing the low murmur of voices coming from the sitting room as he walked past. The sound of his own name caught his attention, and he stopped to hear what was being said.

He had to squint against the dimness of the room, but he could just make out Ron and Hermione sitting on the couch at the far end of the room and speaking in hushed tones. Ron had his arm draped casually over the back of the couch, and Hermione was nestled in the crook. They were stuffing little gift boxes with chocolates - for the wedding, Harry assumed - but it looked as if they were eating more than they were packaging. Harry had to grin, watching them.

"So, he's upset, and she's upset. How is that different from anyone else in this bloody house? Someone is always upset." Ron said, scowling moodily.

"It's more than being upset, Ron. They're both miserable, and I don't know what to do about it," Hermione replied, gently swiping a bit of chocolate from Ron's mouth with her finger.

"Maybe it isn't up to you to do something," Ron said, his voice strained.

"I know you think he's right to keep her out of it, Ron...but what if he's wrong?" Hermione said, resting her head on the back of the couch.

"What do you mean? How is trying to keep her safe wrong?" Ron asked, perplexed.

"Because she's not safe, no matter what he does. And he might be the one who's in more danger without her. You saw how happy he was when they were together. How long has it been since you've seen Harry that way? Even his marks improved."

Ron shrugged. "Not everything is about marks, Hermione."

"I didn't say it was," she snapped, sounding a little hurt. "Ron, don't you see what's going on?"

"What?"

"Harry's had a tough life, and not many things have truly gone right for him. Ginny is just about the best thing that ever happened to him. She made him happy, and he's willing to give her and all that up in order to rid the world of Voldemort so all the rest of us can be safe."

"Ginny has loved Harry since before she even knew what love was. She stood on the sidelines and watched him struggle, even moving on herself rather than forcing her feelings on him. When they finally came together and acknowledged their feelings for each other, it was like every dream Ginny ever had coming true. Now, she's willingly giving him and all her dreams up, because she knows the rest of our lives depend on his success, and he'd never be able to live with himself if he didn't try."

"Don't you see? They are so alike it's painful. It's like that Christmas story," Hermione cried.

Ron wore a stunned expression. "What?"

"You know, that old Christmas story about the man who wanted to buy a present for his wife, and he sold the only thing of value he owned – his father's pocket watch – to buy her a hair clip for her long beautiful hair. Meanwhile, the wife cut her hair and sold it in order to earn enough money to buy a gold chain for the man's watch."

"It's beautiful and so romantic in a bittersweet sort of way," Hermione said, smiling sadly.

"You mean they both ended up with a present they couldn't use?" Ron asked, horrified.

"Oh, Ron. That's not the point," Hermione snapped. "They ended up with each other."

Harry pulled back sharply and blindly stumbled for the kitchen. He sat down on a stool, breathing heavily. Was that what he and Ginny were doing? Each one sacrificing what was most important to them for the greater good? And would both of them end up with nothing in the end?

He had never wanted to make Ginny suffer. He put his head down and ran his fingers through his hair.

I don't know.

He'd never considered it as any sort of noble act; he just wanted to keep her safe. Harry was beginning to think there was no way to do that.

"Harry?"

He looked up to find Mrs. Weasley standing in the doorway. She was looking at him with concern over finding him sitting alone in the dark.

"Are you all right, dear?" she asked kindly.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley. I'm fine."

"Well, I suppose you'd say that even if you weren't fine."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Guilty as charged."

Mrs. Weasley poured a glass of cold pumpkin juice and placed it in front of him. She sat down in the seat next to him and took his hand in her own. "The one thing in this world that always seems to be in short supply is love, yet it's the one thing that grows and multiplies the most when shared. We should never throw away a chance to have more of it in our lives. "

Harry looked up into Mrs. Weasley's eyes and found only warmth and compassion there. He felt his own eyes fill and blinked furiously in order to hold back the tears that suddenly wanted to fall. "I'm just trying to do what's right, Mrs. Weasley."

"I know you are, dear," she said gently, rising up from the table and kissing him on the head. "She knows it, too."

Harry nodded silently as Mrs. Weasley pushed a piece of warm bread into his hands. "That should hold you until dinner. We'll be eating out in the garden tonight. There will be more room out there. Be a love and go ahead and start setting the table for me, would you, dear?"

As soon as he went outside, Harry knew he'd been set up. Ginny was already there, placing napkins next to each of the plates. Harry gathered the silverware and began helping her to set the table.

"Let me guess - Mum sent you out here?" she asked without raising her eyes from the table. The low, husky quality in her voice sent a shiver up his spine.

"Yeah," he replied.

They worked in silence for a few moments, working in tandem to set each place setting. Finally, Harry couldn't take the strained silence anymore. "It's good to see you, Ginny."

"Is it?" Ginny asked dully.

Harry swallowed. "You have no idea."

"Why did you allow Ron and Hermione to go with you? They're going with you again, aren't they? When you go off to do the thing you're going to do," Ginny said, turning to face him and placing her hands on her hips.

"What?"

"You said you had things to do alone now. Ron and Hermione being with you isn't actually alone."

"No. They never listen to me."

"Maybe I shouldn't have listened, either," Ginny said, her eyes glistening brightly.

"Ginny- "

"No. I shouldn't have said that. I know you're only doing what you have to do, and I know it isn't any easier on you. That doesn't always help," she said, her shoulders slumping.

"I know," he replied, his heart aching. She was absolutely right, but he had no idea what he could say to make it better for her, aside from the one thing she wanted to hear. And that was the one thing he couldn't - shouldn't - do.

"So, what happens now? With us, I mean. Do we just go on and pretend nothing has ever changed?" Ginny asked.

"I dunno. Can you do that? 'Cause I really don't think I can," Harry said honestly.

Ginny shrugged her shoulders. "I'll do what I have to do."

"You always do," he said, trying to smile.

"Yeah. That doesn't mean it doesn't suck."

Harry snorted. "No. It does that."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the rest of the Weasley clan, along with Fleur, Hermione, and Ekaterina, Charlie's Romanian girlfriend. She had long, straight dark hair that hung well below her waist and dark eyes that appeared to study them all intently. She was as opposite to Fleur in coloring as she could be, yet equally beautiful.

"You are Harry Potter," she said in a thick accent, reaching out to shake his hand.

"Yes, I am," Harry said, lowering his eyes.

"I am honored to meet you. I have heard stories of you since I was a little girl," she said.

Harry felt his face burn, and he longed to be anywhere else. He noticed Ginny biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

"Come on, Katia. You're embarrassing the kid. Leave him alone," Charlie said, chuckling and tugging on his girlfriend's hand.

Ginny giggled. "You've never got used to that, have you?"

Harry shrugged. "I wish just once someone would say, 'Hullo, Harry. Nice to meet you,' and leave it at that."

Ginny grinned and stuck out her hand. "Hullo, Harry. Nice to meet you."

"Ha, ha."

"Oh, 'Arry. 'E iz still zo 'umble," Fleur said, increasing Harry's embarrassment. "'Ee weel 'ave all ze girls lining up to dance wiz 'im at ze reception."

"As long as he saves one for me," Ginny said, and Harry could hear the hard edge in her voice. She was challenging him.

"I can do that," he said, locking his eyes on hers and raising an eyebrow.

"But, Ginny. Don't go promising all your dances before ze wedding. Jean-Luc is zo anxious to meet you. You may find yourself wishing you had a free dance card," Fleur said, wagging her finely arched eyebrows.

"I think I can manage my own dance partners, thank you, Fleur," Ginny said through gritted teeth.

"But of course you can," Fleur replied, waving her hand dismissively. "I just zink you will be pleased when you meet 'im."

"I'm certain I'll be happy to meet all your family, Fleur," Ginny said sweetly.

Harry had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from bursting into laughter. She sounded so sincere, yet he could hear the snide quality in her voice. His inner monster was dancing an intricate waltz with the knowledge that she wasn't going to let herself be set up with Jean-Luc. Harry hated his name just on principle.

Of course, that same monster had been snarling in fury just moments ago when Fleur had been attempting to play matchmaker for his Ginny.

He had to stop thinking like that. She wasn't his Ginny anymore.

"Fleur, my love, you have to stop worrying about everyone else's dance partners," Bill said, wrapping his arms around Fleur's waist and nuzzling her neck. "You only have to think about sharing all your dances with me."

Fleur's eyes softened as she turned to rub her nose against Bill's. Harry turned away in embarrassment and walked towards the other end of the table.

"They're sickly sweet, aren't they? I hope they cool off after they've had a honeymoon," Ginny said, wrinkling her nose. "Maybe regular shagging will help."

"Ginny!"

"What? Come on, Harry. They've been living here with Mum, who has impropriety detectors hooked up in every room. All that sexual tension has to be released somewhere," Ginny said.

Harry didn't know if she was joking or not, and he stared at her uncertainly. "Er."

"Oh, I'll be so happy when this wedding is finally over," she exclaimed.

He didn't know what possessed him, but he couldn't stop the words from coming out. "Yeah, and maybe you and Jean-Luc will hit it off splendidly and dance the night away. You'd better keep your mum's detectors in mind then."

He knew he was in trouble before the words had even finished leaving his mouth.

"Don't worry, I know my way around them," Ginny said, her voice rising angrily. "What's it to you, anyway? The idea is to not let anyone know there was ever anything between us, right? Maybe kicking up my heels with a handsome Frenchman is a good way to get that rumor moving."

"Wouldn't know. Why don't you try it?" Harry replied, his own anger mounting.

"Maybe I will," Ginny snapped, her eyes suspiciously bright.

"Fine."

"Fine."

Harry turned on his heel and stomped away from the table. He knew his and Ginny's raised voices had attracted the attention of several of the others, but he didn't really care at the moment. He stopped at the front of the Burrow and took several deep breaths. None of the Dursleys had managed to get this much of a rise out of him in the entire fortnight he'd spent there. How did she manage to do it three times in the space of a few short hours?

Damn, she can get under my skin.

Harry noticed a fat little garden gnome munching on one of Mrs. Weasley's prize rose bushes right out in the open without even making an attempt at concealment. With his Seeker reflexes, Harry's hand shot out and grabbed the little gnome around its middle. Winding up and releasing some of his anger and frustration as he did, Harry flung the creature and watched as it sailed over the fence, screaming all the way.

That felt good.

Harry began searching for gnomes in earnest and releasing some of his pent up frustration by cleaning them out of the garden. He wasn't certain how long he'd been there – long enough to work up quite a sweat – when Ron joined him. His ears were a deep magenta, and he was a scowling fiercely.

Harry silently handed him a struggling gnome. Ron looked at the ugly little creature for a moment without saying a word, then, with a snarl, he tossed it well past the garden gate.

"Nice one," Harry said appreciatively.

They tossed a few more gnomes in silence before Harry finally asked. "What set you off?"

"Have you seen the guest list for this wedding?" Ron asked, tossing another gnome.

"Er, yeah, Ron. It was the first thing I did when I got here," Harry said sarcastically. "How was I supposed to have seen the guest list? Why? What's wrong with the guest list?"

"Turns out you and Fleur aren't the only former Tri-wizard champions who will be attending," Ron said, viciously swinging a gnome in the air.

"Huh?"

"Viktor Krum, Harry. Vicky was invited, and he responded that of course he'd be here and looked forward to catching up with old friends. I'll just bet I know who he's really looking forward to catching," Ron spat.

"Ron. Fleur and Viktor competed together in a grueling competition. We bonded in a weird sort of way. It only makes sense that we'd all be here together when one gets married," Harry said, not quite believing he was actually saying it.

"Cedric won't be here," Ron said testily.

Harry flinched.

"Sorry," Ron said quickly. "It's not your fault. It just hacks me off."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"You're one to talk. I saw you go storming out of the back garden. Ginny looked like she was about to cry," Ron said, crossing his arms across his chest.

Harry flinched again. If he'd felt bad before, he felt ruddy awful now. Maybe letting Ron and his brothers clobber him would help.

"Don't worry. She'll be all right; Mum will see to it. A few of my brothers might be ready to hex you, though, so I'd watch your back," Ron said.

Harry looked at Ron with some apprehension. He raised an eyebrow but didn't voice the question.

"No, I'm not angry with you. You're just as upset as she is; you just hide it better. Hermione told me," Ron said, smirking.

"Remind me to tell Hermione I owe her one," Harry said, tossing another gnome.

"You'll work it out. Both you and Ginny are more resilient than most people are. You're more resilient than me, anyway. Hermione told me that, too. It'll all work out in the end, though; I'm certain of it. Maybe we can hex Vicky and Jean-Lucifer into fancying each other," Ron said, only half-joking.

"Maybe Jean-Lucifer is just what Ginny needs," Harry said despondently, unable to resist using Ron's nickname.

"Don't be stupid. What Ginny needs is you, same as you need her. I know my little sister, Harry. She didn't spend how many years waiting for you only to give up now that you're finally paying attention. Ginny's way more tenacious than that," Ron said, shaking his head.

Harry smiled, feeling a little better.

"What's going on between you and Hermione, Ron? Are you together or not?" Harry asked, not entirely certain he wanted to know. Still, Ron had made him feel better; he should at least try to do the same.

Ron was quiet for a few minutes. "I think so. I mean...we never actually said anything, but...after Dumbledore's funeral...it just all sort of clicked, you know? We didn't have to say anything."

"Er, Ron. I think maybe you do have to say something. This is Hermione we're talking about. She likes words," Harry said, grimacing.

"You think?" Ron asked, looking dumbfounded.

"Yeah, I do," Harry replied confidently.

"Bloody Hell."

Harry snorted. "After all this time, you'd think we would have figured out what we're doing."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Ron asked, handing Harry another gnome.

"Prat."

"Git."

Chapter Four

Until Death Do Us Part

The day of the wedding dawned bright and glorious. Harry was awoken at what felt to him to be an ungodly hour by the chirping of birds. The

sun streaming in from the cracks of the blinds in Ron's attic bedroom pierced his skull with a fierce, unforgiving intensity. The ruddy twittering was driving him mad.

Harry had been to his first stag party the previous evening, and even the sobering charm that Mrs. Weasley had performed on them all before ushering them off to bed hadn't stopped the pounding of his head this morning. He had a vague feeling of unease, but he wasn't certain if it was only due to the nauseating headache.

It had been one of the strangest weeks in Harry's life, and that was saying something. The Burrow - a hub for chaos and activity under normal circumstances - was the center of operations for the upcoming nuptials. If Mrs. Weasley had appeared frazzled to Harry over the previous years while working with the Order, it was nothing to her state while preparing this wedding.

The Delacour family had arrived two days ago with more trunks and belongings than a small army should rightfully own. The ceremony itself was to take place in the meadow where Harry had played Quidditch with Ron and his family on many occasions. Therefore, the Delacour family took over the other side of the garden, where they had erected a large tent surrounded by lush flowerbeds.

Harry had never seen anything quite like it, even at the Quidditch World Cup. The tent was more like a castle - with peaks and turrets - and bore the French flag on the top. The area surrounding the tent blossomed with an array of exotic plants and flowers, and a small fountain appeared in a newly formed pond.

If Mrs. Weasley was stressed, it was nothing compared to the state of Mrs. Delacour. Harry had yet to hear her speak in anything but a shout, and he'd noticed Mr. Delacour liberally filling her tea with some oak-matured mead on more than one occasion.

Bill and Fleur appeared oblivious to all the fuss and merely floated in and out of the chaos with the sappiest expressions upon their faces. Fleur had moved out of the Burrow, where she'd been staying, and in with her own family, leaving Ginny, Hermione and Ekaterina sharing one room. Harry supposed that Ginny liked Ekaterina better than Fleur, because the tautness in her face had lessened considerably after the French girl's departure.

Since their blow up in the back garden nearly a week ago, the tension between Ginny and him had been so thick it could be cut with a knife. They had taken great pains either to act overly civil to one another or to avoid each other entirely. Ginny again proved her accomplished acting ability by easily pretending that nothing was wrong, treating Harry as no more and no less than Ron's visiting friend. She was civil, polite and frustratingly distant. It was only on brief, rare occasions that Harry thought he caught a glimmer of something in her eyes, but when he looked closely, it was gone.

Harry, on the other hand, was failing miserably at playing along. He couldn't just close off his feelings and pretend there was nothing wrong, no matter how hard he tried, and the effort was making him increasingly bad-tempered. It occurred to him that while he had failed

dismally at mastering Occlumency during his fifth year, Ginny would probably be very good at it.

The presence of Jean-Luc Delacour certainly hadn't helped matters. Suave and debonair, Jean-Luc was everything Harry wasn't. He was only a year older, but he somehow managed to appear vastly more sophisticated. He had dark hair that he wore slicked back and robes that not only fit impeccably, but also were made of the finest material.

It gave Harry a new determination to go shopping for some Muggle clothes of his very own and in his own size for the first time in his life.

Jean-Luc had kissed Ginny's hand when he first met her, and always seemed to know the right thing to say or had some witty response to everything said to him.

Harry felt as if he were tongue-tied in comparison.

All the women in the house were fawning over Jean-Luc, and Harry had memories of being back in fourth year and trying to compete against Cedric to get a date to the Yule Ball. The only consolation was that none of the other Weasley brothers cared much for Jean-Luc, either. Ron acted out overly exaggerated imitations of his prancing ways, and Harry suspected the twins were devising a major prank.

Couldn't happen to a nicer bloke, Harry thought savagely.

Despite her brothers' obvious disapproval - or maybe because of it - Ginny appeared quite enamoured with the dashing Frenchman. Every time Harry saw her, she was with him, laughing at his stupid jokes or listening intently to whatever it was he had to say. Harry had seen her take his arm on several occasions, and he appeared to take every opportunity to place his ruddy hands upon her waist.

The monster in Harry's chest had been roaring with such intensity that Harry was shocked no one else could hear it. He'd been in a right foul mood, and most of the Weasleys had been giving him a wide berth because of it. The only one who apparently wasn't bothered at all by his foul disposition was Gabrielle Delacour. She'd become Harry's shadow, following him nearly everywhere and helping him with whichever task Mrs. Weasley or Mrs. Delacour assigned to him.

Gabrielle chatted incessantly as they worked, and Harry hadn't yet found a way to disengage himself from her presence. She followed him, laughed at nothing, and then blushed the deepest shade of Weasley red if he happened to answer one of her endless questions. He remembered when Ginny had a crush on him, back in his second year, but that had been different somehow. Ginny had never been this annoying.

It was as if he were assigned Colin Creevey as a Potions partner, only with more giggling. The only slight positive to the whole situation was that Fleur had stopped pushing Harry to entertain Gabrielle. It was as if ever since Harry and Ginny's shouting match in the back garden, Fleur had a new pet project. She purposely arranged tasks and insisted that both he and Ginny needed to work on them together.

Harry would have been eternally grateful to her if the circumstances been different, but spending time with Ginny while she was acting coolly polite and detached was nearly driving him to distraction.

Hence the reason he'd imbibed so much at the stag party the previous evening.

It had started innocently enough. Charlie had gathered all the Weasley brothers (minus Percy), Harry, Jean-Luc, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Delacour, and they had Apparated to a private room at the Leaky Cauldron. Remus, Mad-Eye Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt and several other members of the Order had met them there, along with some of Bill's co-workers and old friends.

Harry had taken a seat with Ron in a corner, somewhat distanced from the rest of the crowd. He'd been happy enough with his cold Butterbeer when Charlie approached their table with a bottle of Firewhiskey and added a shot to his and Ron's drinks. Harry hadn't yet tried the legendary drink and was quite keen to oblige. It burned going down, and he spluttered and coughed until he got used to it.

He'd only intended on trying it and leaving it at that, but he'd ended up taking a fair share of ribbing over being the only bloke there still underage. He felt he had something to prove, particularly to Jean-Lucifer, whom the alcohol didn't appear to be affecting at all.

He had soon found it very difficult to string words together clearly - more difficult even than he normally did - and he wasn't quite certain how he'd got back to the Burrow at the end of the night.

Which was how he'd ended up lying here on the camp bed in Ron's sickeningly orange room, trying to decide if he had the energy to cast a Reducto spell on the sun.

"Bloody hell," Ron groaned from beneath the covers on his bed.

Harry tried to sit up but ended up falling back onto his pillow and swearing. "I am never drinking Firewhiskey again as long as I live," he moaned. "Whose brilliant idea was that, anyway?"

"I think it was yours, mate," Ron replied, and his voice sounded abnormally loud in the stillness of the room.

"Good morning, boys," Hermione's voice trilled as she pushed open the door and entered Ron's room, grinning merrily. Both boys cringed and pulled away.

"Oh, it's a perfect day for a wedding. Mrs. Weasley has breakfast ready. Come on, get up. The guests will be arriving soon, and you need to be dressed in order to greet them."

"Hermione," Ron groaned, rolling over and pulling the covers up over his head. "It's only the crack of dawn."

"Nonsense," Hermione said, pulling the covers off him completely and then turning and doing the same to Harry. "It's almost ten o'clock."

Everyone else is up and has been for quite some time. Ginny, Fleur and Gabrielle have already left to have their hair done."

"Left where?" Harry asked, suddenly interested. He grabbed his blanket back from Hermione to cover his bare chest.

"Oh. They Apparated to some cousin of Fleur's in London. Ron, your mother is going to be up here in a minute if you don't get up," Hermione said.

"My head," Ron moaned.

"Oh!" Hermione said, starting. She pulled two phials from the pocket of her dressing gown. "Here. Your mum said to give these to you to help clear your heads."

Harry took the phial eagerly and downed the contents, wincing at the taste. His mind cleared instantly, and the throbbing in his temples receded.

"Why didn't you say that bit first?" he asked irritably. Now that he could think, he realized he still had that distinctly uneasy feeling. He suspected it had something to do with his hangover, along with his apprehension over having to spend the day watching Jean-Luc fawning over Ginny. Still, the prickling on the back of his neck caused him some concern. He'd have to remain alert. He wasn't about to let anything spoil this wedding for the Weasleys.

Several hours later, Harry found himself dressed in his stylish gray dress robes and helping Ron and the twins escort guests to their seats out in the meadow. Rows and rows of white chairs were set up in a semicircle around a white gazebo adorned with more white roses than Harry had ever seen. Aunt Petunia would have been beside herself at the lushness of the blooms.

Viktor Krum's arrival caused Ron's eyes to narrow and his ears to grow red, despite the fact that Viktor arrived with a stunning blonde beauty on his arm. Harry hurried over to greet them and escort them to their seats before Ron could make a scene. Viktor did ask about Hermione, but Harry chose not to mention that fact to Ron.

When the wedding began, Harry went to take a seat towards the back of all the rows, but Ron grabbed him and dragged him to sit with him and Hermione in one of the rows reserved for all the Weasleys. Harry felt oddly touched.

He honestly didn't remember much of the ceremony after Ginny walked down the aisle. Gabrielle had walked down first, wearing gold dress robes with a bit of a ruffle and lacing up the front. The sleeves rested on her shoulders, and she wore a gold shawl draped across the top. Her golden curls were piled heavily atop her head, and even Harry had to admit she looked thoroughly charming.

Ginny followed next, and Harry felt his mouth go dry. He couldn't even manage to swallow. The gold robes, while pretty on Gabrielle, looked

stunning on Ginny. They appeared to hug every curve, and Harry would have been hard pressed to drag his eyes away if Voldemort had chosen that moment to attack. Her hair was curled softly and piled into an intricate pattern of plaits atop her head with thin wisps surrounding her face. She'd tied the shawl more closely around her than Gabrielle had done, but even with it there Harry could tell the sleeves on the robes bared her shoulders completely.

She was stunning, and he was lost.

The ceremony commenced, and he supposed Bill and Fleur had said their I do's at some point. Honestly, however, Harry hadn't been aware of anything else but the shine of the sun on Ginny's fiery hair, and the pink lipstick she wore on her softly smiling lips. He watched several times in fascination as Ginny's small tongue darted out to moisten them, making the lipstick shine.

Before he knew what was happening, Bill and Fleur were kissing one another, and small white doves flew from all the trees surrounding the gazebo.

"Now, let's get this party started," Fred said, slapping George on the back.

"Right, brother mine. We promised to dance with each and every one of Fleur's friends. I, for one, took that promise as a personal oath," George replied.

Harry rolled his eyes and followed them to the area where tents had been set up holding tables of food and drink. He took a seat with Ron and Hermione and wasn't surprised to find Gabrielle at his elbow almost instantly.

"Oh, there iz an empty zeat right next to me, 'Arry," the young girl said eagerly, patting the chair beside her.

Gritting his teeth and ignoring Ron's snigger, Harry sat down. Ron and Hermione sat across from him, looking extremely cozy. Fred and George were up and already instructing the band by the dance floor in the middle of the tent.

Bill and Fleur were seated at a table for two at the front of the tent, with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Mr. and Mrs. Delacour occupying a table to their right. Harry sat with the other Weasley siblings and Gabrielle at a table on the left of the happy couple. Harry looked up in time to see Ginny and Jean-Luc taking the remaining seats at his table.

Harry's eyes locked on Ginny's for a moment as she sat down, and he was unable to pull them away. She was wearing make-up on her eyes that made them look kind of smoky and unbelievably sexy. He didn't remember ever seeing her wearing more than lipstick at school.

"Let me pour you zome of zis wine, Ginny," Jean-Luc said, and it sounded like he was caressing her name.

Harry's beast snarled crossly.

"Thank you, Jean-Luc," Ginny replied sweetly.

Scowling, Harry took a liberal drink of his own wine.

Despite all the delectable food that was offered, the dinner dragged excruciatingly slow for Harry. Between Gabrielle's hints about how much she wanted to dance and Jean-Luc's constant attentiveness to Ginny, Harry was ready to leap on his Firebolt and dive bomb the whole affair.

The only upside was the wine that had made him pleasantly warm. He'd quickly forgotten his promise of just that morning never to imbibe again. Even a hangover would feel better than the way he felt at the moment.

When he finished his dessert, he thought he'd managed to make it through the evening. He'd planned on slipping away from the festivities quietly and making it an early night. They were leaving for Godric's Hollow in the morning, and he wanted to be well rested.

That plan changed when Jean-Luc asked Ginny to dance. She nodded brightly and turned around. Looking directly into Harry's eyes with something he thought looked like a challenge, she allowed the shawl that she'd been wearing to drop from her shoulders.

Harry gulped as his mouth went dry. He felt as if all the air in his lungs had been forced out of him. The neckline of Ginny's dress suddenly appeared much lower than the modest cut of Gabrielle's, and Ginny's bosom looked as if it were barely being contained. Her robes no longer looked as if they had been made for a little girl at all.

Harry's jaw dropped open, and he wasn't even been aware of it until Hermione elbowed him sharply in the ribs. Ginny's eyes sparkled with triumph.

Jean-Luc, of course, handled the situation with much more grace than Harry had managed. He leaned over and whispered something in Ginny's ear, causing her to blush and look toward her feet. In doing so, she missed the appreciative look the Frenchman cast down her cleavage.

Harry didn't miss it, however, and jumped to his feet.

Once again, it was Hermione who held him back. "Don't make a scene, Harry," she hissed.

Harry glared at her. "Did you see where he was looking?" he demanded crossly.

"Yes. The same place you were looking. Honestly, Harry. It's called a push-up bra," Hermione said, her cheeks turning pink.

"What the bloody hell has Ginny done to herself?" Ron demanded, finally finding his voice after Ginny and Jean-Luc had walked onto the dance floor. "That...that doesn't look like my baby sister, and I don't want all these blokes looking at that."

"Would you lower your voice," Hermione snapped. "Ginny wanted something to make her dress robes look less childlike, so I told her what to get."

It's a Muggle thing, and it's designed to take what you've got and...push it all up a bit."

"A bit?" Ron demanded furiously.

"Never mind your sister, Ron. She can take care of herself. Besides, she's only dancing amidst the presence of her entire family. Speaking of dancing, I believe you promised me one," Hermione said, raising an eyebrow.

Ron gulped but held out his hand and escorted her onto the floor, still throwing murderous glances towards Ginny and Jean-Luc.

Scowling, Harry turned on his heel and stormed away from the table. While Charlie was watching Ginny closely, Ekaterina was smiling knowingly at Harry, and he couldn't stand it. He saw Remus standing with Tonks near one of the bars and walked over to join them.

"Wotcher, Harry," Tonks said. She was wearing bright fuchsia robes with a hair color to match. Harry was happy to see that both her Metamorphmagus abilities as well as her relationship with Remus appeared to be back on track. The couple was nearly beaming. Despite the sting he felt from the mess his own relationship with Ginny had become, he was pleased the fates appeared to be smiling on his former professor.

"Hi, Tonks. Hello, Remus," Harry said, shaking the older man's hand.

"What's the matter, kid? You look like you just lost your best friend," Tonks said with concern.

Harry shrugged. "I'm all right."

Remus's eyes scanned the dance floor and came to rest on the glittering figure in gold with the fiery red hair. "Ah. I see," he said, before handing Harry a shot of Firewhiskey.

Harry raised his eyebrow.

"Sirius always said it helped to take the edge off," Remus said, raising his own glass. He and Harry clinked their glasses together before tipping back the shots.

"How are things going at headquarters?" Harry asked once his eyes had stopped streaming.

He noticed the furtive glance that passed between the two Order members before Tonks answered. "Busy. There has been a lot happening."

"Like what?" Harry demanded. "I know someone's staying there that you're protecting."

The last statement was merely a shot in the dark, but it appeared to hit its mark. "Not here, Harry," Remus said, speaking in a low voice. "We can talk about it another time in a more secure location."

As he spoke with Remus and Tonks, Harry's eyes kept glancing surreptitiously at the dance floor. He watched as Ginny danced with several partners in addition to Jean-Luc, although he appeared at her side more often than not. She looked as if she were having the time of her life. He hadn't known she could dance so well. If it weren't for the fact that Jean-Luc was out there with her, he would have enjoyed watching her.

The monster in his chest was screaming at him to go out there and ask her to dance, but he held back. He couldn't do that. If he went near her now, he'd be lost, and he knew it. It was better for her and all involved if he kept his distance and allowed her to move on with her life.

He just wished it didn't have to hurt so much.

As Tonks turned to speak with someone from the Ministry, Remus leaned over to speak softly in Harry's ear. "If she won't leave your thoughts even when you try to keep her away, perhaps the answer lies in keeping her closer to your heart."

Harry sighed, still staring at Ginny as she danced. "I wish it were that simple."

"Sometimes it is," Remus said mildly.

"It's too dangerous right now, and I don't want to see her hurt," Harry replied, the standard answer suddenly sounding weak even to his own ears.

'Ah, I see. That old mistress Nobility appears to run strong in your family, Harry. Your father went through a stage of wanting to protect your mother, too. He didn't want her involved in the Order or fighting Voldemort, but he finally came around and allowed her to be herself. He realized that he fell in love with that feisty, stand-up-for-what-she-believed-in girl, and then he asked her to change. That wasn't really fair to either of them," Remus said, taking another drink.

"Is that what I'm doing?" Harry asked, shocked. He'd never quite looked at it that way. Of course his parents had both been involved in the fight against Voldemort. The prophecy had said they'd defied him three times. His mother was in the Order, the same as his father, yet he'd still tried to protect her when Voldemort had first arrived at Godric's Hollow. How had he reconciled the two such opposing desires?

"It would be highly unfair if Ginny locks away her true personality in order to support your quest, only to have you fall out of love with her because she's no longer the same girl with whom you fell in love in the first place," Remus said.

"That would never happen," Harry stated firmly.

"I feel like a hypocrite giving you this advice, Harry, considering my actions of the past year," Remus said, wincing. "But take it from a man who knows where you're coming from, you're much stronger and a more able wizard with her than without her."

Harry sipped his wine, mulling over Remus's words. Hadn't he said himself that he'd never felt stronger than that brief time he and Ginny were together? Hadn't his own parents decided that living and loving were worth all the risk?

"Come on, Harry. Let's dust off your dancing shoes," Tonks said, grabbing his hand and dragging him onto the floor. He danced with Tonks, Mrs. Weasley, Hermione and even Fleur before insisting he needed a break.

A disturbance near the entrance of the tent caught his attention, and he walked over to investigate. Fred and George stood there with arms akimbo, glaring at Percy, who was standing at the entrance, looking extremely uncomfortable. With him stood the Minister of Magic, dressed in his finery and bearing gifts. Harry was reminded of a similar scene this past Christmas.

"What are you doing here, Percy?" Ron demanded, storming across the tent and stopping within inches of his elder brother.

"I was invited," Percy said, lifting his nose and adjusting his glasses.

"Yeah, and you didn't reply," Fred spat.

"Mum had a good cry over it, as I recall," George said.

"Unfortunately, my busy schedule didn't allow my prompt response, and I do apologize for my ill manners," Percy said stiffly. "I've come to deliver a gift to my eldest brother, so if you'll excuse me..."

"Mr. Potter," Rufus Scrimgeour said before Harry could slip away. "I wondered if we might have a word while Percy here discusses a private matter with his family."

"Harry is family," Ron snarled. "More so than this sod," he said, jerking his head in Percy's direction.

"Percy? Is that you?" Mrs. Weasley cried, interrupting them all. "Oh! You did come; I knew you would. Come over and see the newlyweds. Bill will be so happy to see you."

As Mrs. Weasley led Percy away, Scrimgeour stared pointedly at Harry. "A word, Mr. Potter?"

Harry crossed his arms across his chest but didn't move away from Ron and the twins. "We have to stop meeting like this, Minister. I suppose old habits are hard to break."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Scrimgeour's face. "Things are dismal, as I'm certain you are aware. Now that some time has passed since Albus Dumbledore's death, I'm wondering if you've taken the time to reconsider my proposition?"

"Your proposition?"

"About Ministry protection, Harry. I'm certain you've read the reports of Muggle casualties. Just last week there was another attack in Diagon Alley, where several shops were destroyed."

"I'm aware of them. What are you doing about them?" Harry asked.

"The Ministry is doing everything within its power—"

"Released Stan Shunpike yet?"

"That is not going to get us anywhere," Rufus Scrimgeour said, his voice rising slightly.

"No, what's not getting us anywhere is your refusal to accept that I'm not going to be your poster boy," Harry said, snarling. "If you want my approval for the way things are being done at the Ministry, then earn it. Start doing what needs to be done. Skip these useless handbooks on how to protect yourself and start teaching people something useful. Teach them how to cast a Patronus, or how to deflect the Inferi. Stop terrorizing people you know are innocent just to make it look like you're doing something."

"You can start with questioning those former suspected Death Eaters who claimed to be under the Imperius. Hell, any Death Eater worth his salt knows to claim he was acting under the Imperius, and you'll release him. The fact that Stan Shunpike never thought to claim it should tell you he's no Death Eater."

"This is getting us nowhere," Scrimgeour said irritably.

"No, and I can see from your refusal to accept some cold hard truths that it's not going to. You might have once wanted to help people when you first became an Auror, but now you're just like Fudge, more concerned with politics and public perceptions. That isn't the kind of leader we need in this climate, Minister. So, you go right ahead and do what you've got to do, while I'm going to go and actually get something done," Harry said, fuming.

"Exactly what is it you think you're going to be doing?" Scrimgeour asked suspiciously.

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," Harry replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"You know what Albus Dumbledore was doing before he died, and I intend to find out," Scrimgeour accused, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

"As I said," Harry replied with dead calm, "you do what you have to do. Right now, I have a wedding to enjoy, and your presence is neither needed nor wanted here." With that, Harry walked away from a spluttering and very angry Minister of Magic, Ron following closely in his wake. Harry was amused to see Fred and George remain behind to escort Scrimgeour from the tent.

"Whoa, Harry," Ron said, grinning appreciatively. "You just dismissed the Minister of Magic. I'm glad Hermione didn't hear that, though. She would have started hyperventilating."

Harry smiled. "Are you two having a good time?"

"Yeah, we are," Ron said, watching Hermione chatting with Viktor Krum.

Harry tensed, waiting for the explosion. "Ron."

"She came here with me. She wants to be with me," Ron said firmly, keeping his eyes fixed on Hermione as she walked across the dance floor.

He could hear that slight measure of uncertainty still in Ron's voice. Deciding to tease a bit, he asked sharply, "Did you get a nice look at her bum?"

Ron jumped. "What? I- I- I didn't."

Harry couldn't hold the stern face any longer. "You did so! I just watched you. You can't take the mickey out of me anymore about Ginny unless you want to get it back about Hermione. She's the closest thing I've got to a sister, you know."

"Sod off. Don't let her hear you say that, either, or she'll cry all over you. We all know how well you handle crying girls," Ron said, elbowing Harry in the ribs.

Harry shoved Ron's shoulder. "Git."

"Would you like to dance, 'Arry?" Gabrielle asked. She'd walked up behind them without his noticing.

Harry groaned inwardly, while Ron sniggered.

"I'd be honored, Gabrielle," he said gallantly, causing the young girl to beam. He glared at Ron as he led Gabrielle onto the dance floor. As the music played, he caught sight of Ginny, once again dancing with Jean-Luc, and had to grit his teeth in frustration. He tried to steer Gabrielle away from where Ginny and Jean-Luc were dancing, finding it unbearable to watch her. Somehow, however, every few steps Gabrielle managed to maneuver them nearly next to the chatting couple. He knew he was the one who was supposed to be leading, but he'd never quite got the hang of the steps.

Just as they came alongside Ginny and Jean-Luc, the music changed into a slower song, and the couples surrounding them pulled each other closer.

"I zink it iz time to switch partners," Gabrielle said, shocking both Harry and Jean-Luc. She let go of Harry and wrapped her arms around her cousin. She said something in French as the two began to dance.

Harry and Ginny were left staring at one another.

"So, are you going to ask me to dance, or what?" Ginny asked, raising a finely arched eyebrow. Harry could read the challenge in her eyes. She was daring him to walk away.

Damn it all to hell, but he couldn't do it.

"Would you care to dance with me, Ginny?" he asked hoarsely, licking his suddenly dry lips. A thin sheen of sweat formed on his upper lip as he got a better look at the neckline of Ginny's dress. His eyes wouldn't behave and kept trying to look down.

Ginny's eyes softened as she put her small, warm hand within his own. He wrapped his other arm around her waist and pulled her firmly against him, inhaling the sweet, flowery scent he remembered so well.

He forgot about his feet and counting the steps and simply allowed himself to be swept away in the moment, loving having her body pressed against his. He ran his hand along the silky material of the dress robes on her back and hissed involuntarily when he reached the bare skin near her shoulders.

"You look lovely," he whispered.

"Merlin's Beard, Harry. Was that a compliment?" she asked, laughter dancing in her eyes.

His eyes dipped to the cleavage that seemed to be fighting its constraints, and he swallowed heavily. He could now feel the sweat rolling down his back. "I suppose it was."

Ginny smiled gently and leaned in to rest her head on Harry's shoulder. He shut his eyes and placed his cheek against the softness of her hair. He had no idea how long they stood there, simply swaying to the music; he just knew this was where he wanted to be. When Ginny finally looked up and into his eyes, he was mesmerized by the play of lights on her face. He leaned over slowly and her lips parted, but before he kissed her he glanced around the room.

He suddenly realized they were the only ones still on the dance floor. The band had taken a break, and there were several people watching with watery eyes as the two of them swayed back and forth to phantom music.

Harry pulled back sharply, his eyes darting wildly. Ginny giggled and hid her face against his arm. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her off the dance floor, stopping only to grab a glass of wine for each of them, and outside of the tent into the warm summer air. The meadow was lit with hundreds of floating candles, and several other guests had come outside to enjoy the slight breeze.

Harry kept ahold of Ginny's hand as they walked across the meadow and stopped by the pond that the Weasley children often used as a swimming hole. Ginny leaned her back against a big old oak tree and placed both glasses on the ground.

"Are you going to finish what you started, Harry?" she asked.

Harry knew she meant the almost-kiss on the dance floor, but his head kept screaming that she was talking about so much more. If he did it, if he leaned over and kissed her now, he didn't think his resolve was strong enough to let him walk away again.

"Ginny," he whispered, his eyes once again displaying a will of their own and dipping to the ample display of cleavage.

"Harry!" Ginny said, stamping her foot. "My eyes are up this way."

"Sorry," Harry mumbled, heat rising to his cheeks.

Ginny folded her arms across her chest crossly. "You should be."

"You were the one who put it on to make...those...pop out at me," Harry said, waving his hand in the direction of her chest. "You must have wanted them to be noticed. You can't get angry with me for noticing."

"I did want you to notice...but I wanted you to notice the whole package," Ginny replied, stamping her foot again. "I wore make-up and stockings on my legs. I have a new hair style...not just the boobs."

"I can't help it; I like the boobs. I like the whole thing. That dress is snug in places where school robes just aren't," Harry said earnestly.

Ginny's anger began to melt, and her shoulders started to shake with laughter. "How much of that wine have you had to drink, Harry?"

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Enough not to care what I'm saying."

Ginny wrapped her arms around his neck and began playing with the bit of hair at the nape of his neck. "So, you like the robes, then?" she whispered, sending a shiver of pleasure up his spine.

"I like the robes," he groaned before crushing her body to him and kissing her firmly. It was some time later before they came up for air, both panting heavily.

"I missed that," Harry said.

"Me, too," Ginny replied. "What happens now, Harry?"

"No clue," Harry responded truthfully. "I really don't think there is a person under that tent that doesn't know exactly how much I care about you...except maybe Jean-Lucifer...so what's the point in denying it?"

"Jean-Lucifer!" Ginny gasped, giggling. "He's an idiot."

"Yeah. I think so, too," Harry responded, thrilled to hear it. He took her in his arms and kissed her again.

When they broke apart, Ginny brushed the fringe from his forehead and rested her own against his. "We'll work it out, Harry, and we'll work it out together. For tonight, let's just enjoy the rest of the wedding, yeah?"

"Yes. I'm finally going to take Hermione's advice and go back inside that tent, dance with my girlfriend, and even snog a bit if the mood hits me."

"Hermione told you that?"

"Can you believe it? She practically insisted, but I was too busy being noble to listen," Harry said, smirking. "Who'd have thought all it would take was some gold dress robes and a push-up bra."

"The dress robes were more an act of rebellion, really," Ginny said, sighing. She held tightly to Harry's hand as they walked back towards the tent, as if afraid to let him go. "They can stuff me into it, despite the fact that it's designed for someone who is eleven, but the fact remains that I'm not eleven. I'm not a little girl anymore, and my body is going to burst out of it."

"It's bursting just fine," Harry said cheekily.

Ginny smacked him on the arm. "Prat. It's only an illusion, you know. Once the bra comes off, everything settles right back down where it was."

Harry grinned. "That's okay. I always looked; I just didn't get caught as much."

Ginny giggled and hugged him around the waist. He wrapped his arm around her, and they entered the tent. Jean-Luc immediately made a beeline towards them.

"Zere you are, Ginny. I have been looking everywhere for you," he said, looking slightly irritated.

"No time to chat now, Jean-Luc," Harry said, handing him their empty glasses. "I promised my girlfriend the next dance."

He swung Ginny onto the dance floor, completely ignoring the stunned expression on the Frenchman's face.

Ginny laughed fully, and Harry realized for the first time that he hadn't heard that real laugh of Ginny's since he'd arrived at the Burrow. It was like music to his ears. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gabrielle watching them with a sad smile. When she noticed Harry watching her, she raised her chin and smiled bravely. Harry smiled back, mouthing the words, 'Thank you.' She truly had given him the shove he needed. Gabrielle straightened her posture and winked before blending into the crowd.

They danced to several more songs, completely oblivious to the fond stares they were receiving from some of the other guests and ignoring anyone - the twins in particular - who tried to interrupt them. As the night began to wear down, some of the guests began to depart, leaving more empty space on the dance floor.

When some loud bangs were heard from outside the tent, Harry thought Fred and George had ignored their mother's warnings about not bringing any Weasley Whiz Bangs to the affair. It was only after the screaming started that he realized something was terribly wrong.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as he spun toward the entrance. Ginny was right beside him with her wand already drawn.

"Stay beside me," he hissed, beginning to walk towards the tent opening. He cursed himself for becoming so involved in the drama of his personal life that he'd completely ignored that feeling of unease that had plagued him this morning.

His eyes scanned the room quickly, but he couldn't see Ron or Hermione anywhere. As he reached the tent's entrance, he immediately knew what was happening, despite the fact that several members of the Order were glancing around wildly with their wands drawn, searching for the cause of the disturbance.

There had been many wards placed around the Burrow, not only to protect the Weasleys, but also due to the fact that Harry had been staying there. Additional wards had been placed in preparation for this wedding, and while they kept the Death Eaters outside the perimeter, they had no effect on Dementors.

Harry could already hear his mother's distant screaming in his head as he strode outside the tent.

"Anyone who can cast a Patronus, do it now," he bellowed. "We've got Dementors coming from that direction," he said, raising his wand towards the other side of the meadow. "Expecto Patronum."

Prongs leapt from his wand and charged toward the tree line. Immediately, he could see several other Patronuses following in that direction, as well. Ginny's tiger erupted from her wand a moment later.

"Are you certain, Harry?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked, trying to herd some of the screaming guests away from the tent and back to the Apparition point. In their panic, some of the guests were running right toward the Dementors.

"I'm certain," Harry replied grimly.

"How do you know? I don't see any of them." Kingsley said.

"Trust him," Ginny replied, looking pale and strained. "He's right. I can hear it now, too."

Sirius's voice entered Harry's mind, growing clearer by the second.

"There," he said, pointed at a spot in the trees. Several of the hooded, black-cloaked figures were emerging onto the meadow, and their numbers appeared to be growing at an alarming rate.

Harry cast another Patronus and shouted at Mrs. Weasley, who had just emerged from the tent, her face a mixture of fear and rage. "Mrs. Weasley, get anyone who can't cast a Patronus back to the Apparition point and get them out of here. Arrange some portkeys to go to headquarters for anyone who can't Apparate. Who is the new Secret Keeper?"

"Minerva," Mrs. Weasley said. She appeared slightly stunned, and Harry's heart lurched in sympathy. She'd worked so hard for this wedding.

"But, Harry, we can't send them there; it's supposed to be secret," she said nervously.

"As long as it's under the Fidelius Charm no one can tell its location, anyway. Besides, it's my house, and I like the idea of it being used as a place to house refugees," Harry said, directing Prongs towards another Dementor.

"But--"

"Mrs. Weasley, there's no time. We have to get everyone out of here." Harry suspected that Mrs. Weasley's arguments had more to do with whoever the Order was hiding at Grimmauld Place, rather than a concern for headquarters. In normal circumstances, she most likely would have demanded the evacuees be sent there.

"You're right; I'm on it. Ginny, you come with me," Mrs. Weasley said, squaring her shoulders.

"No, Mum," Ginny said. Her voice trembled slightly, but her eyes were firm.

"Ginny, this is no time to argue," Mrs. Weasley said, grabbing her daughter by the arm.

Ginny pulled away from her grasp. "Exactly. I can cast a Patronus, Mum. I'm needed here."

Mrs. Weasley's resolve wavered. She looked indecisive for a moment before a Dementor appeared directly beside her.

"Expecto Patronum," Ginny bellowed, and her tiger mowed down her mother's attacker. "Go now, Mum."

Mrs. Weasley looked one more time at Ginny and Harry with despairing eyes before turning and hurrying toward the house.

A loud, clanging sound filled the night air, reverberating across the open meadow.

"What was that?" Harry shouted, glancing around wildly.

"I think it's the wards coming down," Ginny replied grimly.

"Great. Have they started clearing any of those people out yet?" Harry shouted over the noise of the battle now taking place.

Ginny looked over towards the direction of the house, squinting her eyes to see. "Some. A lot of people have had a bit to drink so they're arguing. Some are just panicking. I can see Mum and Professor McGonagall trying to move everyone. The crowd has thinned some, but not a lot."

Flames could now be seen around the perimeter, and the scent of smoke was rapidly filling the air. Harry stared around hopelessly. He could see various Order members on the front line, trying to hold back the

Dementors. Several of the soul-sucking demons had breached the line and were moving toward the tent. He could see the Death Eaters, as well. Their masked shapes were creeping from the shadows and casting spells to weaken the wards, Harry assumed.

Squinting his eyes to try and see through the smoke, he could tell that even the Patronuses were weakening the wards. It wouldn't hold much longer. The members of the Order looked tired and drained.

He could see Fleur, her beautiful white wedding robes streaked with dirt and Auntie Muriel's tiara askew on her head, standing firm and firing off her butterfly Patronus as she covered Bill. Bill was hunched down and waving his wand in intricate patterns. Harry assumed he was attempting to strengthen the wards.

Staring desperately at the chaos around him, it occurred to Harry that he still hadn't seen either Ron or Hermione, and the feeling of hopelessness began to build in his chest.

Where are they? And how am I going to stop this from happening?
Chapter Five

And Life Goes On

An unearthly fog covered the length of the Weasley meadow, where only moments before a celebration of life had been taking place. The floating candles had all been extinguished by the cold, damp fog that always accompanied the presence of Dementors. Shouts and muffled grunts mixed with the sounds of rapid spellfire as those guests who had chosen to stay and fight attempted to hold back the approaching Dementors. Death Eaters could be seen gathering along the edge of the forest, casting a barrage of spells and further weakening the already strained wards.

Harry was cold and feeling slightly dizzy from the intensity of the memories flashing through his mind. His teeth chattered as he moved quickly toward the crouched figures of Fleur and Bill, Ginny's hand held firmly in his own. He could feel her small body trembling, and he knew the Dementors were affecting her as badly as they were him.

"What are you doing 'ere, 'Arry?" Fleur hissed, directing her butterfly Patronus toward the direction Harry had just sent Prongs. Her beautiful white wedding robes were smeared with dirt and mud, and one sleeve looked as if it had been singed. "If zose Death Eaters do get in, zey will come right for you. You should evacuate now."

"I'm not leaving," Harry said firmly, his eyes locked with Bill's. This was as much his home as any other place he'd ever stayed, and he would not leave it without a fight. He saw a look of acceptance and understanding flash on Bill's scarred face, and he was grateful for it.

Finally, someone who wouldn't treat him as if he were a child.

Bill nodded, and Fleur apparently took this as reason enough to cease her demands. Auntie Muriel's tiara remained perched on her head, shimmering as the lights from various spells illuminated it. The

thought rose unbidden in Harry's mind that it was Ginny's right to wear that one day, and he'd see to it that she got the chance.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked.

Bill sighed heavily, and Harry was struck by how strained and exhausted the eldest Weasley sibling appeared. The scars lining his face stood out starkly against the paleness of his skin. "The wards around the Burrow are failing. That loud clanging sound and the flickering lights that appear every few seconds are indications that the wards are about to collapse. I'm trying to strengthen them, but I don't know if I can."

"Strengthen them how?" Harry asked.

"I designed the framework for these wards by using strength from the positive emotions that I feel for the Burrow," Bill said, and Harry could easily envision him as a Professor of Ancient Runes. "The wards are capable of being strengthened by transferring power from a witch or wizard connected to the place within the boundaries. I reckoned that one of us would always be here in case of an attack and could use our emotions to power it. I hadn't expected the sheer number of spells being cast in each direction, however. The Burrow has always been crowded, but not this crowded."

"So, anyone who feels strongly about the Burrow could do it?" Harry asked, frowning his brow.

"Anyone who feels positively about it, yes. It takes a lot of power, Harry, which is why I can't even stand up right now," Bill warned. "I don't think I have the strength to hold them up much longer."

Fleur placed her hand protectively on Bill's shoulder.

"What if we try to do it together?" Harry asked, and now he felt Ginny's hand on his own shoulder.

Bill looked at Harry uncertainly, his eyes flicking back and forth between his sister and Harry. Harry though he appeared vaguely uncomfortable, but he couldn't dwell on that now.

"Look, I love this place as if it were my own, and you said yourself that what you're doing now isn't going to work," Harry said with a hint of annoyance.

"I don't have time to teach you all the spells and wand movements in a few seconds, Harry, but I think I can continue casting them by using your strength and transferring it to the wards," Bill said contemplatively. "Head to that hill over there and climb to the top; that way, we can cover the whole area. On my signal, you have to project all the positive emotion and anything good you feel about this place into your thoughts. I'll take it from there. Make certain to have some cover, though, as this will leave you feeling very drained."

"I want to help, too. I'll go with you," Ginny said immediately, her eyes glinting with determination.

"No. Stay and help Fleur cover Bill; he's more exposed here, and we can't lose more than one Patronus while I'm up there," Harry replied, knowing she'd hate the answer.

Ginny frowned and stared back and forth between Harry and Bill, lying on the ground. Finally, she looked out across the meadow at the pitifully few Patronuses struggling to hold back the surging Dementors. Nodding, she squared her shoulders and whispered, "Be careful," before kissing him fiercely.

"You, too," Harry replied, squeezing her hand once.

He turned, crouching down low and running behind some of the others, as he moved carefully toward the small hill that Bill had indicated. He stumbled several times as waves of Dementor-inspired memories crashed over him. By the time he'd climbed the hill and reached the right spot, he was panting from exertion.

He could barely distinguish Bill and Ginny through the smoke, but thank Merlin for that red hair; he could spot it anywhere. He'd also been able to spot the twins standing near the perimeter with Tonks, her wolf Patronus signaling their position. He wished he could see Remus, but that search would have to wait.

When Bill sent red sparks into the air, Harry shut his eyes and channeled every positive thought and memory he had about the Burrow into the front of his mind. He had many to choose from and started focusing on memories of the Burrow connected with all that lived there.

He remembered the wonder and awe he'd felt as a twelve-year old coming to stay here for the first time. He'd learned so much that summer, not only about the wizarding world, but also about how it felt to really be a part of a family. He'd experienced how it felt to belong and not simply be cast aside as a nuisance.

He remembered the smell of freshly baked scones, roasted chicken, treacle tart, steak and kidney pie and all his other favorite foods that Mrs. Weasley had quickly discovered and always served in ample supply. He remembered the feeling of pleasure he'd felt that first time she'd washed and darned his socks right along with Ron's and her other children's. She'd folded them and put them back in his trunk, and he'd sat there in slack-jawed amazement for a full minute until Ron had asked him what was wrong. Aunt Petunia had usually just given him the socks once Dudley poked holes in them; Mrs. Weasley had actually mended them for him.

Harry took a deep, steadying breath and continued focusing on his memories.

He remembered Mr. Weasley's shed, full of more electrical sockets than anyone could ever need in a lifetime, and the elder man's open glee over sharing his discoveries. He remembered not only being asked his opinion for the first time, but also actually feeling as if his answer mattered.

Harry's legs shook as he stumbled but managed to remain upright.

He remembered Quidditch matches in the meadow, tossing gnomes in the garden, and the camaraderie of a slap on the back from a group of redheads that had treated him as another brother, rather than the freak in the cupboard. He had laughed here, really laughed and enjoyed the summers for the first time in his young life.

Harry's legs finally gave out, and he stumbled to the ground, panting heavily. He was tired, and his head ached, but he pushed the positive memories through and battled against those the Dementors tried to force to the front.

He remembered the face of the prettiest girl he'd ever seen smiling at him warmly in greeting, her eyes alight with such warmth, compassion and downright orneriness he thought he could drown in their depth. He remembered kissing her barely an hour before, and the feeling that he could do anything as long as she remained in his arms.

Harry needed his arms to support his weight now, yet still he pushed the memories and emotions forward.

This was the home of his best friend, the friend who'd opened his arms wide and shared his family with a lonely boy who'd never had even a glimpse of such a life. It was the home of the girl he loved, the girl who loved him enough to let him go. It was the home of the family that had stood by him and believed in him when no one else had, and he would not allow it to be taken from them now.

Not if he could help it.

A loud surge of blinding light illuminated the meadow for a brief moment, and Harry had to shut his eyes against the glare. A whoop of joy that unmistakably belonged to one of the twins filled the air and caused Harry to blink dazedly. Shouts of glee filled the night, and Harry became aware that his body was no longer chilled. He could find no trace of the Dementors.

He lay on the ground, panting, for a moment, trying to summon the energy to stand. He could see Prongs cantering back towards him and running with a small Jack Russell terrier Patronus that he knew belonged to Ron.

Ron was all right! He was somewhere in this chaos, and hopefully that would mean Hermione was all right, as well.

He recognized most of the faces remaining in the meadow and hoped that meant that Mrs. Weasley had managed to help the other guests escape. He fought against the dimness trying to encroach upon his vision, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. The motion caused his world to tilt alarmingly, and for a moment he thought he might get sick. He had just managed to control his nausea with a few deep breaths when Ginny appeared by his side.

"Harry!" she shouted, dropping to her knees beside him and cradling his head in her lap while gently running her fingers through his hair. "Are you all right? Oh, you poor thing. Bill said you'd be exhausted. You did it, Harry! You really did it. You were magnificent."

Harry grinned and leaned into her touch. "It worked then, yeah?"

"It worked splendidly," Ginny replied, her eyes bright with excitement. "Not only did you strengthen the wards, but you somehow pushed them even further back and forced the Dementors out, as well. I literally saw one Death Eater's body being flung through the air. You were brilliant, Harry. Even Bill is impressed, and it takes a lot to impress him. I wouldn't be surprised if he offers you a job after you leave Hogwarts."

"Yeah? Harry Potter, Curse Breaker, eh?" Harry said, managing a weak smile. "Maybe if being an Auror doesn't work out for me."

"Let's get you back to the house where you can rest. Do you think you can stand?" Ginny asked.

Harry tried to rise on his elbows but couldn't manage to make his body respond and flopped back onto the ground. "Right here is fine," he said, fighting to keep his eyes open. Suddenly, he felt his world tilt again as he was scooped up into thick, heavily muscled arms.

"Come on, Harry. Let's get you out of here," Charlie Weasley said. "Ginny can say thanks by snogging your brains out later."

"She said I was magnificent," Harry said, slurring his words.

"Yeah, well, don't let it go to your head, mate. She said you were a hopeless idiot yesterday. She's always been temperamental, that one," Charlie replied, grinning.

"Hey!" Ginny cried, slapping her brother on the arm. "I'm right here, you know."

Despite his closed eyes, Harry could tell Ginny was smiling. He was too tired to care that Charlie was carrying him to the Burrow, so he just let his body relax, and the dimness on the edge of his vision covered his eyes completely.

The tinkling of glass, the drone of muted music, and the distant peals of laughter were the sounds Harry heard as he slowly drifted back to awareness. He was warm and comfortable and felt more secure than he had in quite some time. He wasn't willing to give that up by opening his eyes just yet.

"Exactly how long are you going to pretend to still be asleep, Harry?" Ginny asked. He could hear the amusement in her voice as that sweet, flowery scent he always associated with her wafted across his nostrils. "You're not hurt, and being too tired is no excuse to deny me the dancing that was promised me."

"We danced," Harry said, smiling but keeping his eyes closed.

"Barely! You'll have to do better than that to keep me satisfied," she said primly.

"Is that so?" Harry asked, enjoying the banter. He opened his eyes wide as memories of the night crashed down upon him.

He sat up suddenly, glancing around the room and feeling slightly panicked. He felt his heart rate increase as he recognized his surroundings. He was back in the one place that he'd sworn he never wanted to see again. He was back at Grimmauld Place...at Sirius's house.

He was lying on a couch in one of the small sitting rooms off the main hallway, and his head had been resting on Ginny's lap. She rubbed his back soothingly, apparently understanding his dismay.

"Why are we here?" he asked tightly, struggling to do anything but look around at his surroundings.

Ginny moved closer and wrapped her arm around his stiff shoulders. "We sent a lot of refugees from the wedding here, remember? Mum was too uptight to leave anyone at the Burrow until the wards are thoroughly checked, so we've moved in for the night. Bill and Fleur absolutely refused to allow Voldemort to spoil their special day. They've continued the party right in the ballroom; the band set up their equipment and are down there playing right now."

Harry could hear the grudging respect for what Fleur had done in Ginny's voice.

"Bill's all right?" he asked. If he felt as bad as he did, certainly Bill couldn't be dancing. He cracked his neck from side to side, trying to judge if he had the strength to dance. He felt as if he could sleep for a week, and it galled him to think Bill was in much better shape.

"Oh, he's just sort of propped up in a corner, watching Fleur dance. He can barely keep his eyes open, but she wasn't about to let him use up all his remaining energy dancing. I'm certain she has other plans for him this evening," Ginny replied, her eyes twinkling.

It took a moment for the full impact of what Ginny said to sink in, and when it did Harry blushed crimson. "Ginny!"

Her words stirred images about what Bill and Fleur might get up to that he really didn't want to think about. Having Ginny pressed so nicely against him caused his train of his thought to switch tracks to images of her that none of her brothers would want him thinking about, and his anatomy began to respond. He shifted uncomfortably, the collar of his shirt suddenly becoming unbearably tight.

"That caught your attention," Ginny said, smirking as if she knew exactly what she'd done.

She was right, too; he had been preoccupied with the idea of being back at Grimmauld Place until she'd moved his thoughts to other things.

"Ron and Hermione," he said suddenly, staring into her eyes with alarm. "I saw Ron's Patronus, so I know he did turn up eventually, but-"

"Nothing to worry about," Ginny said soothingly, shaking her head and placing her soft hand on his lips. "Hermione did get cursed with

something, but she'd already been tended to by Mum when I saw her. I haven't got the full story out of anyone yet, as I've been rather preoccupied with you, but I believe it had something to do with an altercation between Ron and Viktor Krum."

Harry groaned and dropped his head into his hands. Ron, what did you do?

"All three of them are here somewhere. Ron's been by several times to check on you, along with Fred, George, Charlie and Mum. Every ten minutes or so one of them pops their head in. I think it's a conspiracy," Ginny whispered dramatically. Soft wisps of hair had broken free from the intricate knot on her head and tickled his face as she leaned near him. He longed to free the rest of her hair and let it fall loose.

"Don't they trust us?" he asked, grinning.

"Should they?" she asked, arching her brow.

"Well, we'd best live up to our as yet unearned reputation, shouldn't we?" he asked, quickly rolling over and twisting so that she was now resting back on the couch, and he was leaning over her. More pieces of her hair came undone as he pressed his lips to hers and lost himself in the sweetness of the kiss.

It felt like only an instant later when there was a sharp clearing of a throat from the entranceway to the room. Harry pulled back reluctantly, to find Ron standing in the doorway, glowering, his lower lip swollen to twice its natural size.

"Do you have to do that?" he asked, his speech oddly distorted from his fat lip.

"Most definitely," Harry replied cheekily and quickly planted another kiss on Ginny's lips. "What happened to you?"

Harry and Ginny sat up and moved apart slightly on the couch, as Ron entered the room and took a seat across from them.

"Well, if you hadn't noticed because of all your snogging with my sister...there was a battle with Death Eaters at my house a bit ago, Harry," Ron said, disgruntled.

"You don't say? That would explain why I'm flat on my back then, wouldn't it? Funny, I don't remember seeing you during the battle," Harry said, cocking his eyebrow.

"You told him," Ron said, scowling at Ginny.

"Of course I did," Ginny replied, smirking and snuggling closer to Harry again. He wrapped his arm around her and ignored Ron's glare.

"What happened to Hermione?" he asked, torn between enjoying seeing Ginny spar with Ron and wanting the details before it erupted into all-out sibling warfare.

"Vicky tried to get me with a Reducto spell that ricocheted off Mum's hutch and hit Hermione. Mum patched her up, but she's not talking to me. As if it's my fault," Ron said, crossing his arms across his chest and scowling at the room in general.

"Why did he try to curse you?" Harry asked, suddenly feeling very tired again.

"He could have been provoked," Ron admitted grudgingly. "That's not the point, though. He curses her, and she won't talk to me. How am I supposed to ever figure that one out?"

Harry groaned. "What did you do, Ron? Why were you hexing each other? I thought you'd told me earlier that you knew Hermione went to the wedding as your date. I thought everything was okay between you."

"It was okay until that git tried to make his move on my girl," Ron said angrily, and Harry suspected he didn't even realize how he'd referred to Hermione. "After you went off with Ginny, I knew you'd end up snogging, and I didn't want to see it, so I went to look for Hermione. I found her cozied up with Vicky back inside the Burrow."

"But Ron, I thought we'd talked about this. She went to the wedding with you, as your date. I thought you were okay with her and Viktor," Harry said wearily.

"I was okay with it when he was just an old boyfriend on the dance floor, but I wasn't okay with finding him chatting her up while she was wearing that dress and looking like that and sitting in my house at my kitchen table. No bloke would be okay with that, Harry," Ron finished with a shout, his ears as bright as his hair.

He had a point. Harry hadn't liked seeing Jean-Luc with Ginny, and there wasn't even a past between them. For the first time, Harry understood and sympathized with Ron's feelings about Viktor.

"So, what happened? And what do you mean you knew we'd end up snogging?" Harry asked, suddenly realizing what Ron had said.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Come off it, Harry. You haven't been able to keep your eyes off of her all week, and Merlin knows she wanted to snog you. She can't seem to control herself."

"Hey!" Ginny cried indignantly.

"Neither of you were very discreet," Ron said, sounding remarkably like Percy at that moment

"Obviously not, if you noticed," Ginny replied coolly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Well, obviously I was right if what I just walked in on was any indication. Good thing I wasn't Mum," Ron said, narrowing his eyes.

"Mum is so grateful to Harry right now that we could have been shagging, and she would have allowed it," Ginny replied dismissively.

"Ginny!" Harry yelled, glancing quickly at Ron to gauge his reaction. He sat stone still and gaped like a fish.

"Well, she is. You saved the Burrow, Harry. She'd look the other way for just about anything right now. You really should use that to your advantage and let her know that you're not coming back to our house. Get that out of the way," Ginny said, biting her lip in thought.

That's not a bad idea, Harry thought, wondering how Ginny already knew he wasn't going back. They hadn't yet discussed anything about the future. He only knew that he wanted her in his.

"I can't let her know my plans when I'm not even certain what they are yet. Besides, I would have helped Bill no matter what," Harry said sincerely.

"About that, Harry...I'm really sorry," Ron said, staring intently at the carpet.

"Sorry for what?" Harry asked.

"Sorry for not being there when the fighting started. I promised you that I'd be at your side through this whole thing, and I let stupid Vicky distract me at the first hint of trouble. I didn't even know about the Dementors because I was so busy rowing. Then, when Hermione got hurt, I lost it. I couldn't think of anything else but getting her sorted. It wasn't until you were already up on that hill helping Bill that I got my arse into gear. I should have been right there with you the whole time," Ron said, his shoulders slumping.

"We both should have done, Harry," Hermione said from the doorway. She was very pale, and her eyes were shining bright with unshed tears as she gazed intently at Ron.

"Hermione!" Harry said, relieved to see her up and walking.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her eyes darting to him for a moment to do a cursory inspection.

"I'm fine. You're the one who got hurt, from what I'm hearing," Harry replied.

"Oh, it's nothing. I need to take it easy for a few days and take a potion for a few cracked ribs. Nothing too serious. You've been out of it completely, and Ginny wouldn't let anyone near you," Hermione said with a disapproving sniff.

Ginny blushed, abashed. "He was sleeping."

"It looks like things are okay between you two. I'm happy for you. You really were being silly, Harry," Hermione said, smiling fondly at both him and Ginny.

Harry ignored her slight rebuff. "Speaking of being silly..." he said, staring pointedly at her and Ron.

Hermione raised her nose slightly in the air. "As usual, Ron overreacted."

"Overreacted, did I? When I walked into the kitchen he had his hands all over you. What was I supposed to think?" Ron demanded angrily.

"All over me? He most certainly did not, Ronald Weasley. He asked if I was happy, and I assured him that I was. We embraced and would have ended the conversation there if you hadn't stormed into the room as if the hounds of hell were on your tail," Hermione said waspishly.

"He had his hands...wait...what? You told him you were happy? With me?" Ron asked, suddenly sounding very insecure.

Hermione's eyes softened. "Did it really worry you when you thought I was hurt?" she asked in a small voice.

Harry immediately wished he were somewhere else. Anywhere else. Ron and Hermione were his best friends in the world, but he really didn't want to be a witness to this side of their relationship.

"So, is Mum still hanging all over Percy?" Ginny asked. Obviously, she was uncomfortable with Ron and Hermione's conversation, as well.

"Percy? Percy is still here?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. He was still talking with Mum and Dad when the attack began, and Mum just insisted we all stay together," Ginny replied.

"The git was shocked that Death Eaters would actually attack the Burrow. It was as if he couldn't believe they would ever actually take notice of it...or us. I know Mum is happy to have him here and talking to her, but I don't trust him. I don't think he should be here," Ron said darkly.

"I was wondering about that, Harry," Hermione ventured tentatively. "I mean, there are a lot of new people here learning about headquarters. Do you really think it was such a good idea to use this place as a sanctuary?"

"Yes," Harry replied shortly.

"I mean, obviously it was imperative to get everyone to safety, but the Ministry has safe houses and checkpoints for just such occasions," Hermione said.

"I think using this house as a sanctuary for anyone running from the Death Eaters, or from the Ministry, is exactly what Sirius would have wanted," Harry replied quietly. "Besides, I'm certain Mad Eye is performing Memory Charms on anyone who leaves, and with the Fidelius Charm in place, no one can reveal the location, anyway."

"They can't reveal the location, but they can reveal who is here and who they think is in charge," Hermione insisted.

"How come the Fidelius still works if Dumbledore is d..." Ron asked, trailing off with a sharp glance in Harry's direction.

"The Fidelius doesn't end when the Secret Keeper dies, or else all anyone would have to do is kill the Secret Keeper. It's a slow, gradual fade of the magic, and it leaves time to reapply the charm with a new Secret Keeper. Professor McGonagall is ours, I believe," Hermione said.

"She is," Ginny said, nodding. "Percy isn't the only potential security risk here. There are several of Fleur's extended family here that we know nothing about."

"And I'd say Jean-Lucifer is too stupid to be a Death Eater, but they took Scabbers, so you can never tell," Ron said, grimacing.

Harry had forgotten about Jean-Luc with all the chaos after the attack. He glanced quickly at Ginny to see her reaction.

She simply rolled her eyes. "You weren't very nice to him," she said to the room at large, although she didn't appear concerned over it.

"Harry hates him," Ron replied, as if that settled everything.

"None of us liked Jean-Luc," Harry said indignantly. "I think Fred and George were planning to prank him, although I don't know if they ever did."

"They didn't," Ginny said, picking a piece of lint off the skirt of her robes.

"How do you know?" Ron asked.

"Because Bill warned them off doing it. Jean-Luc was making Harry jealous, and Bill thought it was the best thing to push him past his nobility complex. Fleur put him up to it, actually," Ginny replied, futilely trying to control her grin.

"So it was a conspiracy?" Harry asked, dumbfounded at the lengths all the Weasleys would go in order to set him up.

"Of sorts," Ginny replied, shrugging. "Don't mess with us Weasleys."

"What's this I hear of Weasleys being messed with? That just can't be allowed," Fred said as he entered room.

His robes were torn and dirty, and he'd magically stuck flowers in odd locations to mask the destruction. Of course, the plan had failed miserably and only enhanced the ruin. Somehow, Harry suspected that was exactly what Fred had intended.

"It's wrong on so many levels," George replied in that odd way of sharing the same thought with his twin.

"What are you gits doing here? I thought you were busy groping all of Fleur's friends," Ron asked, sounding both disgusted and proud of his elder brothers.

A wave of exhaustion flowed over Harry once again, and he leaned back against the couch and shut his eyes as he listened to his friends banter.

Fred sighed dramatically. "So many women..."

"...so little time," said George.

"Why didn't the two of you get your own dates for this wedding, anyway?" Ginny asked. "I'm certain there must be some witches somewhere who haven't been warned off yet."

"Dates?" asked Fred in mock horror. "Why would we want to bring dates to an event where there would be many beautiful French women..."

"French Veela women," George added.

"...who hadn't yet had the pleasure of being introduced to us. We were willing to sacrifice ourselves for their greater benefit," Fred said.

"Good grief," Ginny said, rolling her eyes and elbowing Harry in the ribs. He'd started to drift off again. He opened his eyes owlshly wide and tried to focus on the conversation.

"What about Angelina?" Hermione asked. "I'd thought that you two were seeing each other."

"Angelina?" Fred asked, blinking. "We went to Yule Ball together back in sixth year, but as far as I know it wasn't a lifetime commitment. If it were, technically you should be sitting on that couch with Viktor Krum."

Ron's expression soured instantly, and Hermione's cheeks pinkened.

"Oh, let's not do this again," Ginny said with a tired sigh. "What are you two up to, anyway? You had extremely guilty expressions on your faces when you came in here."

"Us? Guilty expressions?" Fred asked in mock horror.

"We'll have you know, sister dear, that we've perfected the art of covering our guilt with expressions of nonchalance," George replied, scowling.

"We did not appear the least built guilty," said Fred.

"Uh, huh," Ginny replied drolly.

"We were merely avoiding Mum's wrath. She's quite put out at the moment, because it appears the nightingales from the wedding ceremony have not only followed us here, but have also taken an odd liking to Percy's head," George replied with a mischievous grin.

"They're fluttering about in a most unattractive way," said Fred.

"And you know nothing about that?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I suppose it could have something to do with the reproducing bird feed we sprinkled in his hair when he wasn't looking," George said, scratching his head thoughtfully

"With a disillusionment charm on it, of course," said Fred.

Harry, Ginny and Ron all sniggered, while Hermione tut-tutted her disapproval. Harry's eyes were itchy, and he tried unsuccessfully to cover another yawn.

"Mum is over the moon that he's here, but Moody is insisting he can't leave without a Memory Charm. They're battling it out now. Moody is handing out Memory Charms like Honeydukes chocolate," George said.

"Well, then, let's go and get our last dances in before the party is over completely," Ginny said brightly.

"I don't think Harry looks up for much dancing, Ginny," Hermione said, glancing at Harry. He forced himself to sit up straighter.

Ginny looked Harry over for a moment before nodding resolutely. "He'll be fine. We need one good night before we decide on what happens tomorrow."

Harry knew she was right. They hadn't really discussed much of anything. They'd spent most of the time since reuniting snogging each other senseless. Not that that was a bad thing, mind, but he would have to make some hard decisions on the morrow. For tonight, he wanted this one last chance at glittering fairy lights and pretending the future didn't appear so bleak.

Leaning on Ginny and Ron, he followed the others from the room to have that one last dance.

The next morning, Harry sat in Sirius's old spot at the worn kitchen table at Grimmauld Place. He sipped a steaming cup of coffee and tried to figure out his next move, as he fingered the tiara that Fleur had worn yesterday, which he'd found on the table this morning. He'd planned on leaving for Godric's Hollow today with Ron and Hermione, but that was before Hermione got hurt, and Ron had had to abandon his home. Now, he didn't know what he was going to do.

And then there was the complication of Ginny.

Harry knew she suspected they had planned on leaving, but she was still trying to piece together what they were going to do. He knew now that he couldn't cut her out of things entirely – he needed her. He found he was far more focused now that he wasn't worried about where she was and what she was doing.

Still, he'd promised Dumbledore only to reveal the information about the Horcruxes to Ron and Hermione. He hadn't even told Professor McGonagall when she'd asked what they'd been doing. He couldn't break that promise, and he hoped Ginny would see it that way. He did have to tell her about the prophecy, however. He owed her that much. But the Horcruxes...

He trusted her implicitly, of course, but a promise was a promise. He supposed it was his own way of hanging on to his connection to Dumbledore, but he felt he still needed that. He ran his hand through his tousled hair and groaned.

"Things that bad, are they, lad?" Moody's voice croaked.

Harry looked up to see the grizzled ex-Auror standing in the doorway, squinting his one good eye as he scrutinized Harry.

"Things could be better," Harry replied wryly.

"Aye, that they could," Moody said, sitting down at the table with Harry.

"Can I ask you something?" Harry asked.

"Appears to me you just did," replied Moody.

"When an Auror is on a case, is there a spell he can perform to detect if Dark Magic has been used?" Harry asked, thinking back to a cold, dank cave on a chilly spring night.

"Of course there is," Moody said shortly.

"Can you teach me?" Harry asked.

Moody's glass eye narrowed as he studied him. He was silent for a moment before he waved his wand towards the open door. A moment later, a small black case came zooming into the kitchen. Moody opened it and pulled out what looked to Harry like a pair of theatre glasses.

"This is used by upcoming Aurors during training. It's a Spell Detector. When you wear it, you can see traces of a magical imprint surrounding objects. Dark magic shows as red," Moody said, pushing the glasses towards Harry. "As an Auror becomes more proficient with them, some can even use their wand and a Revelo spell to detect the imprints, but you need to be able to achieve a unique level of concentration to detect the colors."

"Professor Dumbledore did it with just his hands," Harry mumbled, his mind in the not-so-distant past.

"Well, that was Dumbledore, wasn't it?" Moody said gruffly.

"It can have a feel to it, too, can't it? Just enough to cause a shiver, maybe?" Harry asked, searching for the words to relate his meaning.

Moody glanced sharply and appraisingly at Harry. Harry had the vague feeling that Moody was somehow impressed. "Anyone able to feel a magical imprint would have to be mighty powerful, indeed. That would be a highly useful skill for anyone who wanted to be an Auror. One would want to keep such abilities quiet. That kind of information should be kept from the wrong hands."

"Indeed," Harry replied, his eyes widening. Had he really felt something that night in the cave when Dumbledore was looking for the traces of Voldemort's concealment? Harry couldn't be certain, but he at least now had a way to attempt to find out.

"Can I borrow this?" he asked, holding the Spell Detector.

"I don't think I'd notice if it went missing," Moody replied, shrugging.

Harry nodded and tucked the black case into his shirt pocket. "Where is everyone this morning?" he asked.

Moody slowly poured himself a cup of coffee. "Avoiding me, most likely," he said at last. "None of the Weasleys are too happy with me right now."

"Because of Percy?" Harry asked. He knew Percy had finally managed to leave headquarters the previous evening, and he could tell that Mrs. Weasley hadn't been happy about whatever arrangements had been made.

"I understand he's Molly and Arthur's boy, but he's a liability. It's my job to concern myself with liabilities," Moody said gruffly.

"You used a Memory Charm, then?" Harry asked.

"No, but I still think we should have. Molly was adamant that he be allowed to remember reconciling with his family. Memory Charms are tricky business, mind, so I couldn't promise her that. We finally settled on an Unbreakable Vow. Arthur agreed to it, but Molly was livid. I don't envy being in Arthur's position this morning," Moody said with a grimace.

Harry sniggered over the idea that battle-scarred Mad-Eye Moody was intimidated by Molly Weasley. Not that Harry wasn't, as well, but still...

"She probably won't speak to me for days before she lets loose again," Moody said. "I'll miss the meals. I haven't eaten this well in years."

"I don't know. I don't think Mrs. Weasley could let anyone go hungry, no matter how angry she was," Harry said.

Moody chuckled. "Let's hope you're right. She doesn't have a soft spot for me like she does you."

Harry grinned and said cheekily, "Lucky me, then."

The kitchen door swung open again, admitting Ginny and Hermione. Both girls looked rather disgruntled and only half-awake. Harry poured them both cups of coffee, and they accepted gratefully.

"Morning, ladies," Moody said.

Both merely grunted.

"Why did you get up if you're still so tired?" Harry asked.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Do you know my mother? She's on a rampage this morning about cleaning this place up before we go back to the Burrow."

"She is rather adamant about leaving," Hermione said sleepily. .

Ginny took the tiara from Harry's hands. "This belongs to my Auntie Muriel. There is a great story behind it. It-,"

"She wants us busy so we don't look around too much," Hermione said, suddenly wide-awake.

"Pardon?" Ginny asked, frowning and placing the tiara back on the table.

"Your mum. She doesn't want us looking around here too much," Hermione said, raising her eyebrows significantly.

Harry suddenly remembered the conversations about a guest staying at Grimmauld Place.

"Good morning," Remus said, entering the kitchen with Tonks following closely behind him. "You're all up bright and early today. I would have thought you'd all have wanted a lie-in after all the dancing last night."

"Who else is staying here?" Harry asked sharply, his eyes locked on Remus. Remus lowered his gaze to pour a cup of coffee.

"The Weasleys and the Delacours are here until the wards at the Burrow can be checked," Remus replied calmly.

"This is m-my house," Harry stated with a slight tremble in his voice that he hoped no one else heard. "I may have agreed that the Order could use this house, but I want to know who this mystery guest is; I want to know why he is here, and I want to know now."

Remus looked at Moody, who shrugged. "It is his house, and he appears to know more about what Dumbledore was up to than any of us."

Remus's shoulders sagged. "I know," he said. "And Harry, we need to know what you're planning in order to help you. We want to protect you."

"You can't. No one can. I can't tell you what I was doing with Professor Dumbledore, Remus. I promised him I wouldn't. If he'd wanted the Order to know, he would have told you himself," Harry said firmly, feeling slightly uncomfortable in denying Remus.

Beneath the table, Ginny took his hand and squeezed it slightly. He gave her a weak smile, appreciating her support.

"Of course," Remus replied, and Harry could easily read his conflicting emotions. He trusted Dumbledore implicitly, but he also wanted to protect Harry. When would they ever understand that it was beyond them to do that now? It always had been.

"Who is the Order protecting?" Harry asked again.

"Draco and Narcissa Malfoy," Tonks said, speaking for the first time. Her face contorted into an ugly scowl. "My family."

Harry's jaw dropped open. He wasn't certain what he'd been suspecting, but that wasn't it. Draco Malfoy? Here? Malfoy, the one who'd plotted Dumbledore's death all last year? The one who'd led the Death Eaters onto school grounds in search of a little glory? And Narcissa! The one who'd plotted with Kreacher to get Sirius killed? Here? In Sirius's house?

"What?" Harry exploded, pushing back his chair and causing it to clatter to the floor. He was at the door in two strides, ready to mount the stairs and strangle Malfoy with his bare hands.

Remus grabbed him by the shoulders and held him back. "Listen to me, Harry."

"What in Merlin's name is he doing here?" Ginny demanded, her eyes blazing in fury.

Hermione's face had turned chalk white, as she stared back and forth between Harry and Remus.

"He's supplied us with some valuable information," Remus said, struggling to hold Harry back.

"Whatever it is, he's lying," Harry snarled.

"He's not. It's information that has been confirmed," Remus said. "We were able to stop several deaths because of it."

Harry stopped struggling, breathing heavily. "Why would Malfoy give you any information? There has to be something in it for him."

"Of course there is. He has strong survival instincts. Voldemort ordered his death for failing to complete his orders. According to him, Snape helped him and Narcissa escape. They were trying to go into hiding when we caught them," Tonks said.

"Snape?" Harry snarled, seeing red again. "Why would he help them?"

"He's always had a soft spot for Narcissa. Voldemort ordered her death, as well, for asking Snape to help Draco," Remus said softly.

"He killed Dumbledore, and Malfoy helped him do it," Harry said. He was physically shaking with fury.

"He got in over his head, Harry," Remus said, sighing wearily. "Look, I don't believe he's helping us out of any great desire to right past wrongs, but he does want to live. His only hope of being able to do that now is if we win; otherwise he knows he'll be hunted for the rest of his life. And it won't be a long one. It's a forced partnership with mutual benefits for both sides. He doesn't want to die, and he does want to protect his mother."

"She helped kill Sirius; I don't want her here. She has no right to seek refuge in this house," Harry said, a hard lump forming in his throat.

Remus hung his head and answered in a strained voice, "I know, Harry. Believe me, I understand how you feel, but we have no choice. We no longer have our spy among the Death Eaters. Both Draco and Narcissa were heavily involved in some of Voldemort's plans. They understand how the minds of the Death Eaters work better than we do. We can use their help."

"And in exchange they stay alive," Harry said bitterly.

Remus nodded, still keeping a hand on Harry's shoulder. He could see Hermione fearfully watching him, waiting to see what he was going to do. Ginny's expression was fierce; she didn't like this any better than he did, but she was prepared to follow his lead.

"I hate this," he whispered, taking a deep breath.

"I know," Remus said sadly.

"That little ferret better stay out of my way. If I so much as see him, or hear him make one snide remark, he'll never see the hex coming. And no one better stop me this time," Harry said fiercely.

He took one last look around at the pale faces of the others before storming from the room.

Harry spent the remainder of the day stewing over the fact that Malfoy was here, in Sirius's house. His reaction could be called tame compared to the howl of rage Ron bellowed when he learned of the arrangement. Mrs. Weasley had been informed that they'd all have to remain at Grimmauld Place for a few days before anyone could inspect the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley hadn't been pleased at all.

As he paced in his room, Harry came to the conclusion that he needed to get out. He needed to set his plan in motion, and something told him that his plan needed to commence at Godric's Hollow. Something was drawing him there.

He'd promised Ron and Hermione that they'd work together to find the Horcruxes, and he still needed to figure out how Ginny fit into all this, but Godric's Hollow was his own. This was his private quest. He wasn't certain why he needed to go there so badly, but he knew that he did. And he knew he wanted to do it alone.

That night, as everyone slept and all was quiet in the house, Harry packed a light rucksack and took along the address Aunt Petunia had given him. He left a note telling Ginny not to worry and that he'd be back, there was just something he had to do first.

A/N: This chapter was written before JKR clarified how a Secret Keeper worked, so I left it as is. I do need others able to get into Grimmauld Place.

Chapter Six

Godric's Hollow

The steady hum of the train lulled its few scattered passengers to sleep as they traveled from England into Wales on a cool summer night. After his unannounced departure from Grimmauld Place, Harry had headed directly for the train station. While staying at the Burrow, he'd arranged to have some of his gold converted to pounds, thus enabling him to purchase a train ticket.

He was still underage and unable to Apparate legally, and he'd also been concerned that the Order would have been able to trace him if he used any magic. He was certain Ron and Hermione would deduce where he was going, but he hoped that they wouldn't reveal his destination out of anger over being left behind.

He'd never shown them the slip of paper Aunt Petunia had given him that last morning at Privet Drive, but he reckoned that Lupin would know the address if they mentioned Godric's Hollow. There was nothing to be done for it now; he could only hope they'd hold their tongues.

He didn't plan on being gone very long and fervently prayed they'd understand by the time he returned. He still wasn't certain what was drawing him to the place where it had all began for him. He was unsure what his own reaction would be on seeing the spot where his parents were killed, and his life had been irrevocably altered. It all felt sort of surreal to him as he stared unseeingly out the train's window.

Ever since Dumbledore's funeral, the idea of seeing his parents' final resting spot had obsessed Harry. He'd agreed to allowing Ron and Hermione come with him, but the more he'd thought about it, the more he wanted to make this journey alone. He knew his friends cared about him and only had his best interests at heart, but he didn't feel up to answering Hermione's unending questions or dealing with Ron's awkwardness over any show of emotion. He needed to do this alone.

Luck had been on his side when he'd reached the train station. He'd managed to catch the evening's last train to Swansea with only ten minutes to spare. Even if they'd noticed him missing immediately, no one could have figured out where he'd gone and caught him in time. He'd have to switch trains when he arrived, but only for a short distance. Then he hoped to catch a taxi that would take him to Hillside Lane.

His stomach roiled at the thought. He had no idea what to expect once he arrived. Try as he might, he could recall nothing of his life in Godric's Hollow. His earliest memory was of massive amounts of green light. Hagrid had told him the house had been ruined, but he'd never heard if it had been rebuilt, or sold, or what had become of the land. He didn't even know if it was a Muggle or wizarding area. He bounced his leg on the ball of his foot anxiously as the train drew ever closer to Wales.

He kept his wand at the ready, and his eyes scanned the train car warily, but no one had bothered him since he'd climbed aboard and taken his seat. It was as if he'd finally achieved the anonymity he'd always desired while traveling amongst the Muggles. He wasn't about to let

his guard down, however. The prickling sensation on the back of his neck made him feel as if he were being watched.

There was no moon to brighten the landscape, so Harry could only stare into the darkness and imagine it racing past. From the map he'd glanced at back in the train station, he knew Godre'r-graig was near the sea. He allowed his mind to wander over pleasant images of his parents walking along the beach.

He pressed his nose against the window as thoughts of Ginny once again filled his mind. She'd looked lovely in her wedding finery, and he savored the memories of their shared kisses. He smiled as the thoughts of their day together washed over him. She was a bright spot in the cold, dismal murk that was his life at the moment. How had he ever hoped to do this without her?

As dawn's light crept slowly across the horizon, Harry tiredly rubbed his itchy eyes. He collected his bag as the train pulled into the station and stepped off and into Wales. It took him awhile to find the connection he was seeking, but he managed without a lot of fuss and by the time the morning sun was blazing and life was returning to the sleepy holiday village, Harry was standing on Hillside Lane.

He'd asked the cabdriver to let him out at the end of the quiet street, preferring to walk up to the house and give himself some time to adjust. The nervous fluttering in his stomach continued and seemed to increase the closer he got to his destination. It was a bright, clear morning, and Harry was pleased to note that the street with its secluded cottages appeared unique and so unlike Privet Drive. That alone bolstered his spirits somewhat.

Godre'r-graig was a quiet Muggle village with quaint Birch-lined streets of old stone cottages. It wasn't located directly on the sea, as Harry thought, but was set further back and was more woodsy than he'd anticipated. Still, he could smell salt in the air and knew he wasn't far from the coast. As he trudged up the street, his heart hammering in his chest, he clenched and unclenched his fist around the fake Horcrux in his pocket. He found his hands were suddenly sweating profusely, despite the coolness of the morning.

As Harry turned around the bend in the road, his breath caught in his throat. The lots on either side of number sixteen were vacant, making it appear that it was set on its own in the forest. Nature had reclaimed most of the land and it was overgrown with weeds and vines. In the midst of it all, Harry could see the remains of a stone structure. Only one wall still stood amidst the rubble and stone in a depressed crater.

Harry found something lodged in his throat, and swallowed painfully. He had to drag his unwilling feet closer as his mind warred with the conflicting desires to both see the destruction and to run away from it. He had the oddest sense of familiarity, even though he knew that was impossible. He'd been just over a year old when he'd left here; there was no way he could remember this place. Still, the feeling persisted as he trudged closer.

He again felt that prickling on the back of his neck and turned around apprehensively. The wind ruffled the trees slightly, but other than the droning buzz of insects and a few birdcalls, nothing disturbed the peace of his surroundings. Harry kept his wand in his hand as he moved closer.

It's just nerves.

Thick clumps of lilies grew along the edge of the house foundation, and Harry wondered if his dad had planted them for his mum. He swallowed again, realizing for the hundredth time how little he actually knew about his parents and their life together.

As he inched closer and closer towards the ruins, he wondered - if things had happened differently - whether his dad would have put a tire swing on a low-lying branch of one of the garden's many trees. There was a swing at the Burrow that appeared to have seen a lot of use, and it had come to symbolize a happy family home to Harry. He would have liked to see a swing in his own yard.

He wondered if he might have had younger brothers or sisters who would have swung with him or maybe demanded that he push them. He thought he would have liked being a big brother.

The persistent lump in his throat grew in size as he imagined both his parents taking him to King's Cross on his first day of Hogwarts and actually accompanying him onto the platform. Everything could have been so different...

Rage and loss filled Harry's heart as he stared at the destruction around him with deadened eyes. Voldemort did this. He stole whatever chance of happiness and a normal childhood Harry had ever had. It wasn't fair!

It doesn't do to dwell on dreams...

Dumbledore's voice echoed in Harry's head as he stepped over the threshold and inside what would have once been his family's home. Harry shuddered; there had been entirely too much death already. He could feel a tingling sensation under his skin that made him uneasy, and he glanced warily at the street once again.

Nothing disturbed the peacefulness of the morning, and Harry scolded himself for losing his nerve. Being here was making him jumpy. In his mind's eye, he could vaguely imagine how it would look if all the walls had remained intact, and thanks to the memories the Dementors had evoked in him, he could hear the echo of his parents' voices.

He inched forward, pushing random pieces of rubble out of the way with his foot, until he came upon a piece of blackened, scorched earth. It appeared as if there had been a fire on this one small bit of ground. Harry knelt down and ran his hand in the dirt. It felt decayed, lifeless, as if nothing would ever grow in that spot again.

A chill ran down Harry's spine. This was where his father stood when he'd been murdered. Harry knew it with the same certainty that he knew his own name. He shut his eyes tightly and took a deep, shuddering

breath. He continued walking through what once was his home, staring without really seeing. He kept hoping for some stray memory to surface, but there was nothing.

An overwhelming sense of despair and hopelessness washed over him as he sank to his knees and sat amidst the ruins, uncertain where to go or what to do next.

What am I doing here?

Suddenly remembering his conversation with Moody the previous morning, Harry removed the Spell Detector from his rucksack and placed it on the end of his nose. He inhaled sharply as pale images of blue, pink, and green light emanated from every direction on the lot at number sixteen. Harry frowned in confusion.

He walked back to the spot of scorched earth and stared through the Spell Detector. The light he saw was vivid red and appeared to be pulsating. Harry yanked the Spell Detector off his nose and backed away as if he'd seen something indecent. This place - his familial home - was virtually alive with magic.

It suddenly occurred to Harry that the entire area must be under a concealment charm, otherwise the Muggles might have rebuilt it, or worse, the wizarding population would have turned the spot into a tourist attraction. He'd found the location very easily, but he'd known where to go, or perhaps it wasn't hidden from him since it was his family. All of these uncertainties made his head pound.

He put the Spell Detector back on and continued to poke around. It took several minutes before he saw more traces of red. They were coming from a spot near the back of the dwelling, where much of the rubble was piled. He wondered if perhaps there had been another floor since there was so much debris. He moved some stones and dirt again until he saw the same, deadened black marking. This was where his mother had died, where he'd received the mark on his forehead. Harry absently ran his fingers along the scorched earth, his mother's screams echoing in his head.

Putting away the Spell Detector, he reached out with his thoughts to try and identify the magic on his own. He felt the same shiver he remembered from the cave on that fateful night with Dumbledore. Still, he didn't know if that was simply coming from the maelstrom of emotions this place was evoking in him.

Harry sighed heavily and stood upright. There was nothing here but memories now, and he'd have to test his ability to feel the magic in a less traumatic place. It was useless to attempt it here. As he turned on his heel and took a single step, he saw a quick flash of a long, wiry tail flicking behind some rocks. Harry drew his wand, aiming at the pile of rocks.

"Reducto," he hissed, blowing the rocks apart.

The rat squealed and scurried toward another pile of rubble, revealing its telltale silver paw as it sprinted.

"Reducto," Harry growled again, sending more dust and particles into the air. "Hiding in cracks and holes again, Wormtail? I suppose a rat can never change its spots, either, eh? Come out and face me man to man."

As the dust from his second blast settled, Harry looked around warily. There was no sign of the rat anywhere.

"Come out, Wormtail. I don't have time for your sodding little games. You've been following me for quite some time now; you must have something to say. Spit it out before I do what I should have done a long time ago," Harry said, his hand shaking. All the rage, fear and pent-up emotion over seeing the destruction of his parents' home finally had an outlet, and Harry was nearly radiating fury. Here in front of him was the stinking little rat who'd betrayed his parents and was directly responsible for everything that had happened here. The thought that Wormtail could still find his way here because he was supposed to have been this home's protector made his blood boil.

Harry was going to see to it that he finally paid.

"Where are you?" he snarled, enraged. A slight noise caused him to spin and blast a spot on the ground, but still Wormtail didn't reappear.

"You coward. You've always been a coward. You never deserved their friendship," he said, panting.

He was met with silence. He stalked around the area, chest heaving and clenching his teeth as he tried to control his anger.

After several moments, a raspy voice from somewhere on the other side of the one remaining wall startled him. "Will you put down your wand and listen to me for a moment? If you won't listen, then I can just disappear once again."

"What do you have to say that I would possibly want to hear?" Harry asked, slowly inching along the wall and preparing to strike when he reached the end.

"I want to discuss a common enemy," Wormtail replied, his voice wavering.

"'A common enemy,' is it now?" Harry asked. He was almost there, just a few steps more. "Have you earned Voldemort's disfavor, Wormtail? He's your enemy now, is he?"

"No! I didn't mean the Dark Lord," Wormtail squeaked, sounding panicked. "I'm talking about Snape."

"Snape?" Harry asked, stopping dead in his tracks. "What about him?" He momentarily forgot his rage and hatred of Wormtail as he heard the name of the man he loathed above any other, save Voldemort. Snape had killed Dumbledore in cold blood, and he'd helped to kill Sirius. There was no doubt in Harry's mind, and he was going to see to it that he paid.

"Yes, I thought that might interest you," Wormtail said as he slowly scurried around from behind the wall and came face-to-face with Harry. Both held their wands on one another, although neither made a move to cast a spell. Wormtail's eyes darted rapidly, and he appeared ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

Harry was momentarily tempted to simply curse him anyway, but his curiosity about Snape was overpowering that impulse. Still, Ron's words from long ago arose in his mind.

Throw your wand away and punch him in the nose.

Harry drew back his fist and did just that. Wormtail's head snapped back, and he fell to the ground, clutching his bleeding nose as he scrambled away from Harry.

"Be glad that's all I did," Harry spat, shaking out his split knuckles.

"I thought you'd want to discuss Snape," Wormtail said, sniffing.

"What about him?" Harry repeated.

"He's gained great favor with the Dark Lord for killing Albus Dumbledore. There isn't a plan underway that he isn't involved in or at least aware. Where the Dark Lord once trusted many, he now trusts only one," Wormtail spat, bitterness unmistakable in his voice as he dabbed at his still-bleeding nose and rose to his feet.

Harry watched him warily, seeing red when he so casually mentioned Professor Dumbledore's demise. "Voldemort doesn't trust anyone. You're the fool if you believed that, and Snape is a fool now to think he won't turn on him in an instant when his usefulness has expired. You're not his friends but his servants, nothing more."

"You underestimate the benefits of the Dark Lord's favor," Wormtail replied reverently.

"I underestimate nothing. I know exactly what he's all about," Harry said coldly.

"I once stood in that spot of great favor," Wormtail said, puffing out his chest and raising his chin defiantly.

"Yeah, I remember; you lost your hand over it. So what? Now you've been bumped down a spot, Wormtail? Being replaced not sitting well, is it? What do you want me to do about it?" Harry asked incredulously.

"I know you despise Snape as much as I do. I know you'd like him brought to justice. I might be able to help you with that," Wormtail said, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

"And get him out of your way in the process?" Harry asked, finally cottoning onto Wormtail's agenda.

Wormtail shrugged. "Indeed. Snape's capture could be mutually beneficial."

"And after Voldemort's fall, the fact that you turned Snape in couldn't hurt your own sentencing. Isn't that true?" Harry asked.

"I honestly don't see that happening, Harry, but it never hurts to have all your options covered," Wormtail said.

"How very Slytherin of you," Harry said drolly.

"Some would take that as a compliment."

"So, this is why you wanted to talk to me? You've followed me all the way here from the train station for this? Hold on. Why were you at the train station, anyway? How did you know I was coming here?" Harry asked, raising his wand.

"Actually, I expected you yesterday," Wormtail squeaked, his beady eyes darting back and forth. "At the Burrow you said that you'd be here the day after the wedding. I suppose the unexpected guests delayed your arrival. My master was livid that you'd managed to get away. Snape told him exactly how the wards at the Burrow were constructed. He hadn't expected them to be able to reinforce them against the Dementors."

Harry's mind reeled. Wormtail had heard him at the Burrow? How? But of course! As Scabbers, Wormtail would know all the ways in and out of the Burrow, and as a rat he could probably breach the wards, much as Sirius had done at Hogwarts in Harry's third year. Wormtail knew everything there was to know about the Burrow, right down to the gnomes in the garden.

Damn! Ginny had never been safe there, and he'd almost left her alone and undefended.

"You've been at the Burrow all this time?" Harry asked, his throat dry.

"I was assigned there. The Dark Lord knows everything and doesn't hesitate to use anything to his advantage. You'd do well to remember that, young Harry. He's aware of my connection to the Weasley family, and he knows of their importance to you," he said, a hint of pride showing on his pasty face. "Your interest in the Weasley girl has not gone unnoticed by the Dark Lord. Severus specifically mentioned how taken you are with the girl. He's right that you do wear your emotions on your sleeve."

"So, you've been spying all this time," Harry said, his voice deadened.

"You'd be surprised at the knowledge I can accumulate in my Animagus form. Even those that know that I have the ability to transform forget and speak openly without realizing I am there. I know more about the Dark Lord and his plans than any of the rest of them. I know more than even he's aware I know," Wormtail said, beads of sweat glistening on his brow as he spoke.

"What do you know? I can't imagine he'd trust you with anything important," Harry said, thinking quickly. He was purposefully goading him, but he could see a resemblance to Dudley in Wormtail. Dudley had

always said too much if Harry merely showed the slightest skepticism in his imagined greatness. Harry hoped the same ploy would work on Wormtail.

"I know plenty. I was there. I was the one who nursed the miserable wreck of a creature he was. It was me who helped him prepare the potion. It was me who helped him return. I was his most loyal servant," Wormtail shrieked plaintively.

"And he discarded you when he was done," Harry said, feigning boredom.

"I know about the Horcruxes," Wormtail whispered triumphantly.

Harry's blood ran cold. "What?" he asked numbly.

"I know about the Horcruxes. There are seven of them, two of which have already been destroyed," Wormtail said. "You destroyed the first one."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry said unconvincingly.

"I think you do. I think the part you don't know is the part only the Dark Lord, Severus, and I know. I suspect Dumbledore had also at least pondered it before he died," Wormtail said mysteriously, obviously relishing having something to hold over Harry.

"What are you on about?" Harry asked.

"I'm talking about the reason the Dark Lord will win in the end - his Seventh Horcrux - the one you will be unable to destroy," Wormtail replied smugly.

Harry was perplexed. He didn't want to reveal any of the Horcruxes if Wormtail was only bluffing, but even as the thought occurred to him, he discarded it. Wormtail was more certain of himself than Harry had ever seen the man. He knew something, and Harry had to find out what it was, despite every internal nerve and instinct that was screaming at him that he didn't want to know.

"After the Horcruxes are destroyed, he'll be mortal. He can die like any other man," Harry said firmly.

"I'm not speaking about the bit that's still in him. I'm speaking of the Horcrux even he wasn't aware of until two years ago. The Horcrux he never intended to make," Wormtail said, eyeing Harry speculatively.

"What are you on about?" Harry asked in frustration.

"Don't you know, Harry? Haven't you at least suspected?"

The pit in Harry's stomach was growing heavier by the moment. "What are you saying?"

"Didn't you wonder why He left you alone all of last year? Why after the Department of Mysteries fiasco he never made another attempt on your life? Even during the battle at Hogwarts, all the Death Eaters had strict orders not to harm you. You were to be left for him, he told

them. I know the real reason. I've heard him talking to Severus," Wormtail said, sneering.

Harry was momentarily stunned. He was right; Voldemort had been unusually quiet all of last year. He should have come after Harry with a vengeance for all the trouble he'd caused at the Ministry.

Why hadn't he?

Trembling visibly, Harry forced himself to ask the question, "Why?"

"He possessed you at the Ministry. I heard him talking to Severus about it. That's when he realized the truth, and it shook him. It's you, Harry. You are his Seventh Horcrux," Wormtail said, smiling with a mad gleam in his eyes.

Harry's throat was dry, and he suddenly felt very cold. "That can't be true," he whispered hoarsely.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

"But it is true, and I can see by the look on your face that you know it is. He intended to make a Horcrux that night he came here for you," Wormtail said raising his arm expansively. "It was his plan. He told Severus that the spell to make a Horcrux is wordless, it takes the act of murder and an intense amount of concentration, but there is no incantation; the force of will powers the spell."

Wormtail's casual discussion of murder made Harry's stomach churn.

"He believes that he got over-excited the night he came to kill you. He thought he was going to eliminate the only obstacle in his path. He was thinking of his final goal, already planning to kill you, when your mother got in the way," Wormtail said, and here his voice did waver slightly.

Harry's heart pounded in his chest so loudly that he could barely hear what Wormtail was saying. This can't be happening.

"It was her death that caused the creation of the Horcrux, and when he cast the Killing Curse at you, it rebounded on him but sent that piece of his soul into you. You are the Seventh Horcrux, Harry," Wormtail continued unmercifully.

Harry stepped back as if struck. Of course! It made perfect sense, why hadn't he seen it before? Harry felt sick. Why hadn't Dumbledore prepared him? Had he been trying to protect him from the truth yet again? For in his heart, Harry knew this was true. It was as if the last piece of a puzzle finally clicked into place.

"That's why he'll win in the end, Harry, because the only way for you to defeat him is to destroy yourself," Wormtail said, shaking his head with mock sadness.

"And what makes you think I won't do that?" Harry asked, surprised by how strong his voice sounded.

Wormtail frowned. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm speaking of dying. Why would you sacrifice yourself? That wouldn't make any sense."

"Of course it wouldn't make sense to you. You were the one who betrayed your best friends to save your own neck. You couldn't possibly understand dying so that they might live. Look at that," Harry screamed, pointing at the spot of blackened earth. "That's where my father died because of you. He died right there, and nothing will ever grow there again. You did that to him."

Wormtail cringed and pulled away, refusing to look at the spot.

Harry's head began to spin. No, no, no.

"He wants to get to you now, Harry. He wants to capture you and lock you away where he can keep you safe. He won't kill you, but he won't make your life pleasant, either. Snape will see to that. Snape hates you and longs to see you suffer," Wormtail said, sniffing. He was sweating profusely and appeared suddenly agitated, his beady eyes shifting in every direction.

"If you can't destroy the Dark Lord, you can at least ruin Severus," Wormtail said, taking a step closer towards Harry.

Harry was shivering violently now, so much that he could barely hold onto his wand. He couldn't understand how it had got so cold. His vision was blurring slightly, and he blinked to try and stay focused.

Wormtail inched closer again, but in his confusion Harry couldn't seem to care.

"Get away from him, Peter," Remus's sharp voice rang out across the garden.

Harry blinked dazedly, uncertain how Remus came to be there just then. Wormtail reacted much more quickly. He squealed and ducked behind Harry, using him as a shield between Remus and himself.

Harry was too stunned to move and only stared at the two men uncomprehendingly.

Remus glanced at Harry with a worried expression. "What have you done, Peter? What did you say to him? Harry, move away."

Harry turned to look at Wormtail and blinked. In that instant, Wormtail morphed back into his Animagus form and sprinted into a pile of debris, squealing in fright.

Remus immediately gave chase, running towards the spot where the rat had disappeared and blasting it with his wand.

Unable to wrap his mind around what was happening, Harry stood numbly as the two raced around the ruins. He felt oddly disjointed, as if he weren't really there and only witnessing something happening on the Dursleys' telly rather than real events. It was Remus's piercing cry of pain that snapped him out of his fog.

He hurried over to his former professor, who was crouched on the ground, cradling his hand. Harry could see a thin trail of blood running between Remus's fingers.

"Damn it, he's gone. He got me with that damn silver hand," Remus said, shaking his hand. "It's only superficial, nothing Poppy can't fix. What happened here, Harry? Are you all right?"

Harry swallowed, unable to form any words. His mouth opened and closed futilely.

I'm going to die, anyway.

Remus grasped him by the shoulders and shook him slightly. "Stay with me, Harry. Tell me what happened."

Neither can live...

Harry tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. "How did you find me?" he asked in a raspy voice.

Remus stared at him thoughtfully for a few moments, but Harry couldn't decipher what he was thinking. Finally, he wrapped his arm around Harry's shoulder and led him over to a pile of broken stones that was big enough to rest upon. He pushed Harry down and sat beside him.

"Hermione first noticed you'd gone missing and found your note this morning. She was rather hysterical. You're going to have quite a bit of explaining to do upon your return, Harry," Remus said with a hint of amusement. "Everyone flew into panic mode trying to figure out where you could be. To his credit, Ron remained stoically silent, even under his mother's tirade."

Harry blinked. He heard Remus's words, but felt as if he was speaking about something distant and not really connected to him. He couldn't shake the fog that had enveloped his brain.

I'm going to die.

"Hermione finally caved under the onslaught from Molly. She told everyone about your plans to visit Godric's Hollow. She wanted to follow you immediately, but Ron said it was most likely something you wanted to do alone," Remus said.

Harry looked away. He knew Ron would understand, if only because of his own desire to avoid awkward displays of emotion. He found himself wishing they had come with him, if only to help him wrap his mind around this Horcrux business. Hermione would know what had to be done.

"Ginny had been quite livid with you, as well, until that point. She evidently felt you'd promised not to exclude her and then went back on it. She only softened when Ron explained your desire to see this place alone. It occurred to me that she's a remarkable blend of both your friends, your Ginny," Remus said mildly.

Harry smiled weakly. He'd never thought of it that way, but he supposed it was true. Ginny did display a lot of the qualities that

attracted him to both Ron and Hermione. He shivered again. Merlin, he'd give anything to see Ginny and be away from here right now. Why was it so unseasonably cold?

He realized Remus was waiting for him to speak.

"Ron's right," he said, his throat very scratchy. "I needed to do it on my own. I'd wanted to see their graves, but I haven't found any trace of them...just this," he said, gesturing to the ruined structure.

"I see. I understand your desire to see it, Harry, but I wish you'd at least taken someone with you. It isn't something you should have done alone," Remus said quietly.

Harry shrugged. "Nothing to be done for it now."

"Would you still like to see where they're buried?" Remus asked, his voice strained. A brief flash of sorrow crossed his face as he asked the question.

Harry nodded solemnly.

Remus stood up, and Harry followed him, finding a detached amusement in the fact that Remus still went through the now non-existent door. They walked up a hill to the area behind the cottage ruins, almost to the line of trees. Harry reckoned he could vaguely see the hint of blue that indicated how close they were to the ocean. It was a calm, peaceful resting-place. It was what Harry would have chosen for them.

Remus placed his hands on Harry's shoulders and gave a slight squeeze. "I'll give you a few minutes alone, but I'll be right over there if you need me," he said, walking back down the hill.

Harry looked down at the small stone marker baring the names of each of his parents. It seemed somehow fitting to him that they should share the same marker. He swallowed against the painful lump in his throat and sank to his knees beside the stone.

"Mum? Dad?" he whispered. "I'm here. I came back."

Harry swallowed again; he really didn't know what to say. "I wish...I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He listened disjointedly to the sounds of birds in the trees, wondering how they could sound so cheerful when his own world was falling apart. He'd succeeded in finding one of the Horcruxes, but did he have the strength to destroy himself? How could he tell Ron, Hermione and especially Ginny? He stared hopelessly at his parents' gravestone.

"I don't know what to do," he whispered brokenly. "I could really use some help here."

He waited for a moment, unmoving except for the increasing trembling of his body. He didn't know what he'd expected, but nothing had changed. The sky hadn't opened up with answers, and no great voice of wisdom directed him on where to begin. There was nothing here. His parents'

bodies had been buried here long ago, but the only piece of them that was left behind was Harry. He'd had them with him all along.

Tentatively, he reached his hand towards the grave marker and ran his hand along the engraving of his parents' names. The pressure of his fingers tracing the letters was met with nothing but cold, unyielding stone. Harry shut his eyes tightly and willed the tears away.

Suddenly, it had all become too much. Harry wrapped his arms around himself and hung his head, as reality seemed to slip away.

Remus appeared next to him, but Harry didn't know how he'd got there. He wasn't real, anyway. Nothing was real.

Remus, who appeared very concerned, was speaking to him, but he wasn't really there. Words didn't mean anything anyway, because it was all just an illusion. Why wouldn't Remus stop calling his name?

He wasn't going to answer someone that wasn't really there.

He was walking now. Remus was leading him away - he couldn't form the words to tell him that he hadn't found what he'd been looking for in the first place. His legs felt heavy, and he could barely move them. The sudden, crushing sensation of being squeezed hit Harry like a blow, but he didn't cry out because it wasn't really happening.

Harry blinked and realized he was somewhere else. Headquarters, it looked like, but he wasn't really here. It was so very cold and there was nothing he could do to get the warmth back in his body. He stumbled but Remus caught him before he fell.

"Harry!" Remus's voice was harsh and slightly panicked. Harry remained silent.

Remus led him inside and into the main parlor. A great crowd of people was there, faces he knew but couldn't place. He didn't know why he was even trying, anyway. The room began to spin, making him feel nauseous. Voices rang out, calling to him, but he couldn't understand the words, so he ignored them.

He saw Hermione move toward him, tears streaming down her face as she spoke. He shrank away from her, and Ron held her back, whispering something in her ear. She frowned at him, but stopped shouting and instead stared at Harry worriedly. Harry turned away, not wanting to answer her questions. His gaze roamed over the many faces, searching...

When he saw her, she was sitting alone in a chair in the corner of the room, but to him she appeared to be the center of all the activity. Her brown eyes were filled with concern as she slowly rose and simply held out her arms to him. He was drawn to her as if she were a beacon on a rough, stormy sea. He moved into her embrace, and although she was a good head shorter than he was, he bent low and rested his head upon her shoulder. She closed her arms around him and held him tightly as he clung to her, not even caring that anyone else was there.

He could hear shuffling sounds behind him and thought Remus might be clearing the others out of the room, but he paid no attention. Every

ounce of energy he had was focused on keeping his composure and not falling to pieces. Ginny helped him to do that.

Images of his day, of Wormtail's words and what they meant flashed in his head, and he began to shake. Ginny tightened her hold around him and began whispering soft, gentle words meant to comfort, and he felt like a heel knowing he was going to break her heart.

He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing the world away. "Ginny," he croaked. "I'm going to die."

"Don't talk like that, Harry. Of course you aren't going to die. We're in this together, and I won't let anything happen to you," she replied fiercely.

Harry was unable to form the words. He'd have to tell her everything but not just now. He just wanted to hold and be held by her right now, feeling safe for the first time that day.

Standing there wrapped in the warmth of her embrace and smelling the sweet flowery aroma of her hair, for one brief moment, he could almost believe that was true.

Chapter Seven

Forward Progress

Harry slowly drifted awake, gradually becoming aware of a brightness piercing his closed eyelids. He lazily rolled to one side, hoping to doze again and nearly fell to the floor. He managed to catch himself just in the nick of time, but was startled fully awake. He blinked several times in confusion.

Dazedly, he glanced around the room and realized that he was sprawled on the couch in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place with Ginny snuggled close and sleeping peacefully at his side.

She shifted in her sleep, seeking the warmth from his body that had pulled away from her during his near fall. Soft tendrils of her hair tickled his nose and stuck to his lips as he pulled his head back, trying not to wake her.

He had vague recollections of holding her in this very room the previous evening, but he found it hard to believe that Mrs. Weasley had allowed her to stay here with him all night. He wasn't even certain how he'd got back to Grimmauld Place in the first place, never mind how he and Ginny apparently had spent the night together.

It was just his luck that the first time he'd ever found himself in this predicament, he had absolutely no memory of how it happened. That scenario seemed horribly appropriate for how his life worked, he thought bitterly. He shifted slightly, and Ginny's eyes fluttered open.

"Morning," she said groggily.

"Morning," he replied, smiling softly at her sleepy expression. He pushed the hair out of her eyes and kissed her forehead.

"Are you all right?" she asked, suddenly sitting up straighter. The memories of the previous evening were obviously coming back to her.

"Yeah," he said sheepishly, not quite meeting her eyes. "Thanks, Ginny."

She'd been there for him when he'd needed her the most, but he couldn't put that into words. He didn't yet want to confront what he'd learned yesterday. He needed to work it out in his own mind before telling his friends. It was even more difficult with Ginny since she had no knowledge of the prophecy or the Horcruxes. This was too big to keep from her, however. He just had to figure out exactly how much to tell her, never mind how to say it.

"We were all really concerned about you last night," Ginny said tentatively, and he was grateful to her for not demanding answers right away. "Mum didn't want to disturb you after you'd fallen asleep, but she used a charm to alert her as soon as you woke. Expect her any minute. She'd never allow enough time for any funny business."

Harry blushed deeply enough to do any Weasley proud and tried to extricate himself from Ginny's embrace.

"Don't worry. It's not you she doesn't trust; it's me," Ginny said, grinning. She arched her eyebrow and looked him up and down speculatively. "She's probably right about that."

Her words intrigued him as his brain started thinking of all the possibilities in that statement. He knew that any one of her brothers would likely hex him for the thoughts in his head, but at that moment, he didn't really care.

He leaned over to kiss her just as Mrs. Weasley rushed through the open door, wearing her dressing gown and looking slightly flushed. There was no doubt in Harry's mind that she'd sprinted from her bed and raced to the drawing room the moment her charm had alerted her that Harry was awake. He was happy Ginny had known about the charm so they hadn't been caught in a full-out snog.

Ginny lowered her head and rested it against his chest, giggling. "Morning, Mum," she said, her voice muffled.

"Good morning, Ginny, Harry. How are you, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked, moving towards the sofa and sitting down between Harry and Ginny. Ginny stood up and made faces at Harry behind her mum's back as she spoke.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, grinning at Ginny over her mother's head.

"Honestly, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, sounding more stern. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you. Running off like that alone. What were you thinking? You could have been killed. Now, I know you've become used to handling things on your own, but there is really much too great a risk for you to be running off without protection. I love you as if you were one of my own, dear, and I couldn't bear to see you hurt."

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, touched by her devotion. She really had been the closest thing to a mother he'd ever known, but she had to understand right now that she couldn't stop him from doing what he had to do. "Don't think I don't appreciate that you're trying to protect me, because I do. No one has ever done that, and it means the world to me...but you can't protect me from this. I'm more than involved in this fight...I am this fight. It centers around me more than you realize"

"I know you've suffered more than most in this whole wretched war, Harry, but you're still very young – too young to be fighting. You're still in school," Mrs. Weasley said, desperately. Tears filled her eyes, and Harry felt like a heel for hurting her after all she'd done for him, but he'd come this far. He couldn't turn back now.

"It doesn't matter, Mrs. Weasley. Professor Dumbledore gave me a job to do. We were working on it the night he died, and I intend to finish it," Harry said firmly, glancing at Ginny to gauge her reaction.

She'd silently watched the exchange, an unreadable expression on her face as she stood behind her mother. She'd stayed in the room to offer her unconditional support, but Harry knew she'd insist upon some answers soon.

"What do you mean Professor Dumbledore gave you a job to do? Certainly Albus didn't mean for you to put yourself in harm's way," Mrs. Weasley asked shrilly. He watched as she swelled with indignation, ready to unleash her outrage on a man who was no longer there to take it.

"We're all in harm's way, Mrs. Weasley, and I'm going to do everything I can to stop it. I can't tell you anything more right now, but I'm asking you to please trust me on this," Harry said, staring intently into Mrs. Weasley's watery eyes.

"I'm not going to tell you I'm happy about this, Harry, because I'm not, but I know I can't stop you," Mrs. Weasley said, sniffing. "Ginny, go upstairs and change your clothes. I'll start breakfast."

Harry hung his head wearily as Mrs. Weasley bustled from the room. That hadn't gone as well as he hoped, and he wondered if he'd get a similar reaction from the rest of the Order. He dreaded her reaction when she learned that not only wasn't Harry returning to school, but he was taking Ron and Hermione with him.

Ginny squeezed his shoulder reassuringly as she left the room. Harry got up and stretched. He had to talk with Ron and Hermione and begin making some plans for finding the other Horcruxes, but now all he wanted was a hot shower. He felt dirty and abused somehow, and desperately wanted to clean the filth away.

As he'd suspected, the shower helped immensely. He had a clear head and felt ready to confront Ron and Hermione with his startling news. He'd sunk as low as he'd ever felt in his life the previous evening, and he felt there was no place to go from here but up. He didn't want to die, but if that was the only way..

Ron and Hermione wouldn't like it, but they were as committed to ending Voldemort's reign as he was; they'd do whatever it took. Perhaps they could even help him figure out what would be the easiest way to...to...to eliminate the seventh Horcrux.

Harry was doing better than he'd been when he'd first heard Wormtail's news, but it was still easier to separate the thing from himself, even in his own mind. It made it easier to think about what he had to do, anyway. He'd need to do it at virtually the same time as he killed Voldemort. Perhaps Hermione could help him figure out a way to take care of both things simultaneously.

After his shock had worn off, a new determination had settled over Harry. If it had to be someone, it was better that it be him. He couldn't stand to have anyone else die for him, and his entire family might be waiting for him on the other side. He knew his friends would miss him, but it wasn't as if he'd be leaving any family behind. Better that it was him rather than one of them. That was his driving force at the moment, anyway.

He was so lost in thought as he emerged from the bathroom that he walked right into someone who'd been waiting for the shower.

"Pardon," he said, the rest of the words dying in his throat. He blinked in surprise.

Standing right there in front of him, wearing an expensive-looking dressing gown with a golden "M" emblazoned on the left pocket and an infuriating self-satisfied smirk, was Draco Malfoy. His usually sleek blonde hair was mussed as if he'd just awoken, but his eyes narrowed when he saw Harry.

"Do watch where you're going, Potter," Malfoy said, wiping imagined dirt from his dressing gown. "I can't believe I'm being forced to share a bathroom, never mind having to share it with you."

Harry's shock melted into rage. "Malfoy," he spat. "I may have said you could stay here, but it doesn't mean I'm happy about it, so stay out of my way."

"You said I could stay here?" Malfoy said incredulously. "I'm staying here because your precious Order needs me. I'm the only one who can give them the kind of information they need. This house is rightfully mine, anyway. It belongs in my family. I'm certain there is a will lying around somewhere that will declare it as true; my mother will see to it that it goes to me. Best be nice to me, Potter, or when that happens I'll have your own Order chuck you out on your arse."

"Here's a bit of a news flash, Draco," Harry said, clenching his teeth. "The will has already been found and confirmed. This house and everything in it belongs to me. Imagine that. Me, owning all this stuff that belongs in your family lineage."

Harry ignored Malfoy's expression of stunned outrage, picked up an ancient-looking vase that was resting on a display table in the hallway and cavalierly tossed it in the air.

"Be careful with that," Malfoy hissed. "That's been in my mother's family for generations. It dates back to the Blacks that were present during the time of the Founders."

Harry looked at the vase intently, then raised his eyes to stare into Malfoy's gray ones. Tipping his hand over, he allowed the vase to fall and shatter on the floor.

"Oops," he said tonelessly.

"You idiot!" Malfoy screeched, kneeling on the ground and trying to scoop up the pieces. "My mother will kill you for that, Potter. How can this house possibly be yours if you'd so easily destroy its treasures?"

"Sirius left it to me. I think it was his final prank on you sorry lot," Harry said, raising his chin defiantly. It felt as if he were giving Sirius the final shot against the family who had turned against him.

"Sirius," Malfoy said, disgust dripping from his words. "He never should have been the heir. He had no pride, no family honor. Regulus was the rightful heir to this house; he knew his proper place."

"Tell it to the Goblins," Harry said, turning his back on Malfoy. "I'm certain they'd love to hear it."

He left Malfoy fuming in the hallway and walked back to his own room to get dressed. Baiting Malfoy might have been childish, but it had felt really good, and Harry's heart was lighter as he ran down the stairs to the kitchen. He found Ron, Hermione and Ginny all seated at the large table waiting for him.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, jumping out of her seat and rushing towards him before Ron could stop her. "Are you all right? What happened yesterday? What were you thinking running off and leaving us behind? We'd talked about this, Harry. Ron and I were supposed to go with you. We were all going to do this together. You can't go around changing our plans and singularly making these kinds of decisions. Why did you do that? Why?"

"Hermione!" Ron said, grasping her shoulders and leading her back to the table. "Give him a chance to speak. I'd like to hear this as well,"

Harry could see the telltale red on Ron's ears and knew that Ron was equally upset with him for leaving them behind.

Harry took a deep breath, trying to control his irritation. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was going. I just decided that I needed to see my parents' graves alone." He looked over at Ginny. "That's where I went, to my family's home in Godric's Hollow."

"Yeah. We'd worked that bit out ourselves," Ron said.

"But why?" Hermione cried plaintively. "It's too dangerous to do these things on your own, Harry. We'd already planned it,"

"Plans changed," Harry said, running a hand through his hair in exasperation. "Look, I don't know if I can make you understand this, but it was just something I had to do alone. I won't do it again; we're in this together, but I had to do that part alone."

"What happened while you were there?" Hermione demanded crossly. Harry wasn't certain which she was angrier about, the fact he'd gone alone or that he'd altered her carefully laid out plans.

"Hermione," Ginny said warningly, speaking for the first time since he'd entered the room. Keeping her eyes fixed on Harry's face, she said, "I think that might have been rather personal for Harry."

Harry felt bolstered by her defense, and he smiled weakly. "Thanks, Ginny. It was difficult, and I do need to talk to you all about some of it. Maybe we could go up to the drawing room where it's a bit more private." He'd been watching the door warily, hoping they wouldn't be interrupted. The kitchen always seemed to be the center of activity at headquarters.

As they followed him up the stairs, Harry's heart raced. He'd really mucked up this time. He needed to talk to Ron and Hermione alone in order to get his thoughts together before approaching Ginny. But how was he supposed to ask her to leave without hurting her feelings, or worse, getting hexed? Ron took the problem out of his hands.

"Beat it, Ginny," he said, turning in the doorway to block her entrance.

"What?" Ginny asked indignantly, surprise and irritation clearly showing on her face. She placed her hands on her hips and glared at her brother.

Ron crossed his arms across his chest. "We've got things to discuss that you don't need to hear. You can snog him later."

"You're not getting rid of me that easily, Ron. I want to know what happened at Godric's Hollow, too. You don't mind, do you, Harry?" she asked, looking up at him, color rising on her cheeks.

Harry could see the trace of uncertainty in her eyes, and he cursed Ron for his tactlessness. "Back off, Ron. Give me a minute," he said, pushing Ron into the room and turning to face Ginny. Her eyes were glistening slightly, and his stomach clenched.

"Ginny, I do want to tell you about Godric's Hollow. There are things I want to talk to you about that I can't discuss with Ron and Hermione, but there is also something that I need to discuss with them that I just can't share with you. I promised. Please understand," Harry said, his heart dropping when he saw the determined glint in Ginny's eyes.

"Oh, get over yourselves," she snapped, pushing Harry backwards into the room and irritably casting the Muffliato spell as she stepped through the door.

Ron and Harry stared at her, stunned, although Hermione was grinning slightly.

"Ginny, you used magic," Harry said stupidly.

"Yeah, what of it? You and I are the only underage people in a house full of qualified wizards; they'll never trace it back to me. Besides, this house is Unplottable anyway," Ginny said, brushing her hair out of her eyes with exasperation.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ron bellowed. "I'm telling Mum."

"Yeah, why don't you run along and do that, Ron? Meanwhile Harry can tell us what happened in Godric's Hollow, and what he plans to do about the Horcruxes," Ginny replied calmly, sitting on the couch and crossing her legs. She looked up at Harry expectantly.

Both Ron and Harry stared at her, mouths agape. Hermione, Harry noticed, shrank deeper into the corner of the couch where she was sitting.

"What did you just say?" Ron asked, his voice coming out in a strained squeak

Ginny ignored him and turned to Harry. "Well?" she asked, arching an eyebrow. It was only down to how well he'd come to know her that he saw the nervous tremble in her hand as she twisted her hair. Ginny always twisted her hair when she was anxious.

He glanced between Ginny and Hermione. Hermione wouldn't meet his eyes.

"You told her," he snarled, glaring at Hermione. "Dumbledore asked us to keep this to ourselves. I gave my word."

Ginny leaped from the couch and stood in front of Hermione, glaring right back at Harry. "Don't be stupid – of course you wouldn't tell me – you were the one that promised, not Hermione. You couldn't say anything because it would go against that blasted nobility of yours. No matter how infuriating it can be, we don't want to mess with the kind of person you are. It's important for you to keep that integrity, I think.

"Of the three of you, Hermione is the logical one who would seek help. She wants facts and data and will use any means necessary to get to the answers she needs. Of course she told me, she knows I can help. She's also a good friend and knew I was going mad. I knew enough to be terrified for you, but not what was real and I think my imagination was making everything worse."

"Hermione?" Ron asked, shocked. Harry would have found the expression on his face comical if he hadn't been so angry.

"I'm sorry!" Hermione shrieked. "I wasn't getting anywhere with our research, and I needed someone who could sneak me some books from the library here at Grimmauld Place. Ginny would come to the meetings with your parents and wait for them in the library so she could sneak some books out to me. I know you promised, Harry, but I honestly think Professor Dumbledore would have allowed you to include Ginny if he knew the stakes. You need her."

Harry swore violently and turned his head away. He wasn't even certain why he felt so angry. This was the solution he'd been seeking, a way to share things with Ginny without having to betray his word, but damn it, he'd wanted to keep Ginny out of this, and she'd been at the heart of it all along. It was galling.

"How could you do that, Hermione?" Ron shouted, his temper finally exploding. "She's not getting involved. It's too dangerous."

"Honestly, Ron. I realize you're very protective of your sister, but--"

"My baby sister, Hermione. She's too young to get involved in this," Ron said.

"Would you have followed Harry if all this had happened last year?" Hermione asked. "Of course you would. She's the same age as you were then. The difference in her age and Harry's is nearly the same as Harry's and mine. Do you think he's too young to be involved?"

"What? Of course not; it's not the same thing," Ron shouted, flailing his arms in the air. "It's his fight. Ginny's not getting involved because it's too dangerous for her."

Ginny whipped her head around so fast that Ron took a step backwards from her fury. "Don't you dare say you want to keep me out of this or it has nothing to do with me, Ron Weasley. It has much more to do with me than it does with you. These Horcruxes are bits of sodding Voldemort's own soul. I had one of those bits in me, and I'm going to make damn sure that never happens to anyone else! And as for being too young; I'm older than you were when we went to the Ministry. As I recall, I came out of that fight a damn sight better than you did."

She turned to Harry, determination gleaming in her eyes. "This, this is my fight, and you're not going to keep me from it. I have as big a stake in this part of it as you do."

Harry thought she'd never looked more beautiful with her hair flowing down her back in waves, looking almost as if it were standing on end like an angry cat. Her gaze was passionate and fierce, and it occurred to Harry that he'd never thought of it this way, from her point of view. Of course she had a personal stake in this. She'd been possessed by one of these very Horcruxes. If anyone would know how it felt to have a bit of Voldemort's soul stuck inside him, it was Ginny.

What was done was done. They couldn't go back, and she was right. For her, like him, this was personal.

"All right, quiet," he bellowed over the arguments of the other three who were all bickering and snapping at one another. The tense atmosphere in the room had dissolved into complete chaos. "This is getting us nowhere. Ginny knows what we're up against, but from this point forward, we keep this information amongst ourselves. Are we clear?" he asked, staring hard at Hermione.

They all nodded and looked at him expectantly. He noticed that Ron still looked disgruntled, while Ginny appeared triumphant, and Hermione

merely looked satisfied, as if her plan had come together in the end. Harry had to bite back a smile. They really were the best friends he could have ever wanted.

Taking a deep breath, he said, "So, we need to go after the Horcruxes before I can face Voldemort. The problem is, I really have no idea where to begin. Professor Dumbledore showed me all those memories from Riddle's past, and he thought the clues were hidden in them."

"Why do you have to be the one to face Voldemort?" Ginny asked, her eyes wide. It was as if now that she'd finally been accepted into their confidence, the reality was frightening her.

Harry glanced sharply at Hermione

"I told her about the Horcruxes because I needed some help with the research materials, and I thought you could use some moral support. I didn't tell her about the prophecy. I thought you should do that," Hermione said, giving Harry a weak smile.

"The Chosen One," Ginny whispered, a distinct catch in her voice. "It's true then?"

Harry nodded and watched as her lower lip trembled slightly. His gut twisting, he waited while she steeled her resolve. "Are you okay?"

Ginny gave him a watery smile. "Shouldn't I be asking that of you?"

He took her hand in his and rubbed it reassuringly. "I've had awhile to take it all in. Believe me, I didn't handle it well at all when I first heard."

"I'm scared for you, but I know you can do this. You're a powerful wizard, Harry. You can beat him, and you will survive," Ginny said solemnly.

Harry swallowed painfully. This is it. "That's what we need to talk about. I wasn't alone in Godric's Hollow yesterday. Someone followed me."

Ron's head whipped up, and Hermione gasped, "Who?"

"Wormtail," Harry replied grimly, the name leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

"Wormtail? What did the little rat want?" Ron snarled. "I'm surprised you let him live."

"Ron," Hermione hissed reproachfully.

Harry ignored her. "He's jealous of Snape. He thinks Snape has stolen his thunder or something. He wanted me to eliminate Snape for him."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Ron said, his eyes nearly popping out of their sockets.

"I'm dead serious," Harry said, barely moving. His jaw was beginning to ache from clenching it so hard. "He said he knows a lot more about what's going on in Voldemort's inner circle than even Voldemort is aware."

"I find that hard to believe," Hermione said, frowning. "Doesn't Voldemort use Legilimency on his Death Eaters?"

"Yeah, but no one ever considers Scabbers to be a real threat, do they?" Ron asked.

Harry took a deep breath. "He knows about the Horcruxes," he said quietly.

"Bloody hell," Ron swore.

"What?" Hermione shrieked simultaneously. "Did he say that? Did he actually say Horcrux?"

Ginny crossed her arms across her chest and pursed her lips. "The circle of people who know this secret is getting bigger and bigger. Perhaps that will be what leads to his downfall."

Harry's hands began to shake, and he clenched them to hide it from the others. "He...he told me about the Seventh Horcrux. The one he doesn't think I'll be able to destroy."

"The Seventh Horcrux. Well, that's him, isn't it?" Ron asked, perplexed.

"Technically, the bit that's still in him is the last that has to be destroyed, but it's the bit that all the others were created from, so it's actually the first. The seventh is the last one he created," Harry replied, his voice sounding strained even to his own ears.

"So, that's Nagini, right?" Hermione asked, studying him carefully.

"No," Harry said, his throat dry. "Dumbledore was wrong...or merely misleading. Nagini was never a Horcrux. All his Horcruxes were created before he lost his powers."

"How is that possible though?" Hermione demanded. "I thought you said he was planning on making the Seventh Horcrux with your murder."

"He was," Harry said, nodding stoically.

"Well then how...Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, clamping a hand over her mouth.

"What?" Ron asked, lost.

"Oh no, Harry. This can't be true," Hermione cried, tears springing to eyes.

"What are you on about?" Ron demanded, frustrated.

"How did this happen? He must be mistaken. He's just trying to scare you," Hermione said shrilly, clutching Harry's arm and growing more hysterical by the minute.

Ginny put her arm around Hermione's shoulder and said fearfully, "I think you'd better explain, Harry."

And so he did. He told them all about his confrontation the previous day and how Wormtail had explained to him how Voldemort's own overconfidence and excitement had created the Horcrux from Lily's death, and how the soul fragment had ended up inside Harry.

The others listened in horror, their faces mirroring his dismay. Harry cleared his throat. "So, the way I see it, we have to figure out a way to destroy both Voldemort and the Seventh Horcrux at the same time."

"No!" they all shouted at once, their shock giving way to fierce determination.

"Don't be stupid," Harry snarled without mercy. "Don't you think I haven't been thinking about this? There is no other way. Voldemort has to be destroyed, and if I have to sacrifice myself to do it, well...that's just what I'm going to do."

Hermione wiped the tears from her eyes, biting her lip in thought. "No, Harry. There has to be another way. It can't end like this. Professor Dumbledore never would have given you hope that you could survive if it weren't possible," she said fiercely. "Riddle's diary was still a diary after you sank the fang into it. And the ring! Dumbledore was still wearing it as a ring after he removed the bit of Voldemort's soul."

"Yeah, but with a big crack down the middle. I don't want to live the rest of my life like the Longbottoms, Hermione. I'd rather die," Harry said vehemently.

Ginny whimpered slightly from where she was seated on the couch. Harry reached out and took her hand. He could feel her trembling even though she tried to hide it.

"But, the diary wasn't damaged," Hermione insisted. "Professor Dumbledore hurt his hand horribly destroying that ring, but you didn't hurt yourself destroying the diary, and the diary remained intact. Only the soul fragment was gone. There has to be a way."

Ron stared at Hermione hopefully, nodding his head. His Adam's apple bobbed convulsively.

"Maybe," Harry replied, refusing to allow the seed of hope to blossom too fully. "But we can't trust that. We'll have to explore both options - a way to destroy both remaining bits of soul, and a possible way to survive." He still couldn't bring himself to say out loud that he was the Horcrux.

"I won't lose you now," Ginny said quietly but firmly.

Harry knelt down in front of her and took her face in his hands, lowering his voice so only she could hear him. "I can't make any promises to you, Ginny. Merlin knows I wish I could, but if there was ever something worth fighting for, it's what you've shown me my life can be. I do want that, Ginny. I want you," Harry said, leaning over and kissing her softly. He could taste the salt from her tears and hated himself for making her cry.

"We'll do this together," she whispered. "We'll find a way."

Harry wrapped his arms around her and hugged her fiercely. He decided then and there that he would live and be happy with Ginny while he could. It was exactly what his parents had done. His one greatest regret about losing Sirius was that they'd never had enough time simply to be together. He'd give Ginny the gift of time; it was all he has to give.

As he embraced Ginny, his eyes fell on the tapestry hanging on the wall and it sparked a memory.

"Oh, I ran into Malfoy this morning," he said, sitting next to Ginny and putting his arm around her shoulders. Both Ron and Hermione's heads shot up from their discussion in the corner.

"You did?" Hermione asked blankly.

"What did the wanker have to say?" Ron asked darkly.

"He was sputtering about owning this house. You should have seen his face when I told him that I actually did. He said Regulus should have inherited it, not Sirius," Harry replied, reliving the memory of Malfoy's shocked expression.

"Regulus?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"Sirius's brother," Harry replied, forgetting that none of the others had heard that story when Sirius told him.

"Regulus Black?" Hermione asked, her brow knitting.

"Yeah, his name is still on that tapestry over there," Harry said pointing. Hermione jumped up and nearly sprinted to the tapestry. "Sirius showed it to me the summer we stayed here. His mum burnt his name off it, but she kept Regulus's because he upheld the family's honor by becoming a Death Eater."

"Sounds like Mrs. Black," Ron replied. "Mad as a Hatter, that one."

"Regulus Alphard Black," Hermione squealed, waving her hands in the air. "Harry! R.A.B. - his initials are R.A.B."

Harry stared at her, blinking stupidly. There was no way it could be that simple. Things in his life didn't just work out that way.

"You can't be serious," Ron said, voicing Harry's thoughts.

They all moved toward the tapestry where Hermione was repeatedly jabbing Regulus's name with her finger.

Harry's mind raced, trying to recall any bit of information about Regulus Black that he might have gained. "He did become a Death Eater then panicked when he realized exactly what he'd got into, and he tried to run. Remus said he only lasted a couple days before they caught him."

"Maybe he panicked because he learned Voldemort was making Horcruxes. Dumbledore did stress how much of a taboo they are. Maybe he actually tried to do the right thing by destroying one," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"So, where's the locket, then?" Ron asked.

Ginny knitted her brows together thoughtfully. "Do you think it could be right here in Grimmauld Place? What happened to all that stuff we cleared out of here during my fourth year?"

"Didn't it all get thrown away?" Hermione asked, horrified.

"Actually, I think some of it is stored up in the attic," Ginny replied, her eyes widening as if she'd finally remembered a piece of the puzzle she'd been seeking.

Harry turned and bolted from the room, Ron and the girls following right at his heels. Mrs. Weasley's sharp voice stopped them in the hallway.

"What are you lot up to? What has you all in such a hurry?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Harry made a derogatory remark about the Cannons, and Ron took offense," Ginny lied smoothly.

"Honestly, Ron, you and that ridiculous orange team. Leave Harry alone and stop running in the house," Mrs. Weasley scolded as she headed back towards the kitchen.

Harry arched his eyebrow at Ginny, impressed. She shrugged and quickly moved towards the attic. The others followed, walking quickly but taking care not to run.

The attic was cluttered with boxes piled from floor to ceiling in rows and rows from the door all the way to the far back corner of the room.

Harry groaned when he saw it.

"Bloody hell," Ron moaned, looking around hopelessly. "Hermione, this looks like something you would have organized."

Hermione sighed. "It's daunting, I know, but the fact it's organized might prove helpful. Things have most likely been stored according to which room they were found. Once we find the right room, it should narrow our search considerably."

Harry thought Hermione sounded almost gleeful at the prospect. He caught Ron's eye, and they both grimaced.

"How are we supposed to know which room we want though?" Ron asked.

Pulling the fake Horcrux from his pocket, Harry showed it to the others. "We're looking for an amulet very similar to this one."

"I think I remember something like this when we cleaned one of the rooms," Ginny said, taking the locket from Harry. "I remember that it wouldn't open, but I don't recall which room we found it in."

"Well, that does help," Hermione said eagerly. "We cleared a bunch of rooms on the second floor landing together, so we'll begin our search there."

They spent the next several hours going through box after box but not finding what they wanted. Harry was growing frustrated and weary when Ginny's shout distracted him.

"Did you find it?" Ron asked eagerly.

"Well no, not the amulet," Ginny said, "but look at this."

Hermione grabbed an old painting out of her hand. The frame was scratched and scuffed, and it looked incredibly old.

"Sweet Merlin," Hermione said, breathing heavily.

"What is it?" Harry asked curiously.

"Is it what I think it is?" Ginny asked.

Harry glanced over Ginny's shoulder to see the painting Hermione was holding. It depicted two couples standing in what Harry thought was the great hall at Hogwarts. They were clad in exquisite dress robes, one of the men standing slightly apart from the other three.

"It's the founders of Hogwarts," Hermione said, awestruck. "Look, Harry, Godric Gryffindor is wearing the sword you used against the Basilisk."

Harry looked closely and realized she was right. He looked carefully at the other founders, recognizing Helga Hufflepuff from a painting he'd seen at Hogwarts. The other woman, a stern looking witch wearing a glittering tiara, reminded him of Professor McGonagall. He assumed this was Rowena Ravenclaw. The fourth person – the one standing slightly apart and scowling – was Salazar Slytherin.

"How did this end up packed away up here?" Hermione asked, breathing heavily. "This is a priceless piece of history. Harry, you have to show this to Professor McGonagall."

"I bet it's worth a fortune, mate," Ron said.

"I'll give it to her when she arrives for the Order meeting this evening. They want to talk to me about yesterday, and what I was doing

with Professor Dumbledore. I'm going to have to put them off, and they're not going to like it. Maybe this can be a kind of peace offering," Harry said, smiling weakly.

"Harry! Call Kreacher. Maybe he can help us," Hermione said suddenly.

Harry's eyes widened. "Kreacher!" he bellowed.

There was an immediate crack and the dirty, disheveled house elf appeared, scowling at all of them. He was wearing a filthy tea towel with the Hogwarts logo emblazoned upon it.

"The halfblood whelp summons him, and poor old Kreacher must answer. Oh, if his mistress only knew what Kreacher has been reduced to," the elf muttered under his breath, woefully shaking his head from side to side.

Hermione knelt down in front of him. "We're terribly sorry to have disturbed you, Kreacher. We're in need of your help," she said kindly.

"The mudblood dares to speak to Kreacher directly. Kreacher won't answer her," the house elf said.

"That's enough, Kreacher," Harry said angrily. "I won't have you using that foul word. Do you understand me?"

"It's all right, Harry. He doesn't know what he's saying," Hermione said.

"Don't be fooled by him, Hermione," Ron said, staring at Kreacher menacingly. "He knows exactly what he's saying. We want to know about Regulus Black."

"Master Regulus was a great and honorable wizard. He never once broke his poor mother's heart. He died in service to the Dark Lord," Kreacher said reverently.

"He died because his friends murdered him," Harry said flatly. "Look, we're not here to listen to you spout off about how great it is to serve the Dark Lord. I want to know if Regulus ever had something that looks like this," he said, holding out the fake Horcrux for Kreacher to see. "I want you to tell me what happened to it."

Kreacher twisted his lips together and grunted, obviously trying not to answer. Finally he could resist no more. "It was here, on a shelf in the drawing room. That horrid halfblood thief who has stolen many of my mistress's fine things took it."

"Mundungus!" Ron exclaimed.

"Of course. Remember, Harry? We saw him in Hogsmeade with a trunk full of your things from this house," Hermione said.

"Where does Mundungus live, though?" Ron asked.

"I bet Fred and George will know," Ginny said.

"That's our next step then. We have to find out where Dung lived before he was arrested and then search his place," Harry said. "I'm assuming the Ministry is still holding him?"

"Yeah, Dad mentioned something about it recently. Let me talk to Fred and George; I bet they'll know where he lived. I think they'll tell me," Ginny said.

"Why would they tell you and not me?" Ron asked, frowning.

"They like me better," Ginny said simply.

Harry smirked at Ron's disgruntled expression. He felt better now that they were finally making some progress. A clear objective always calmed and focused him. Two Horcruxes had been destroyed, and they had a good lead on another. He knew what the final two pieces were, so only two left to find. He was doing better than yesterday.

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were determined to find a way for him to survive. He didn't think they'd succeed, but the fact they were so focused on it warmed his heart. He could do this. He could eliminate Voldemort so his friends and the people he loved, at least, had the chance for a better life.

Chapter Eight

An Uneasy Alliance

Due to a number of unforeseen interruptions, the Order meeting scheduled for that evening never actually happened. Harry squirmed in his chair, poking at the remains of his supper with his fork and dreading all the questions the Order members were sure to ask. He knew that some of them, Remus and Moody, for instance, would accept what he had to do. Others like Mrs. Weasley and Kingsley Shacklebolt certainly would demand more information than he could give.

He was startled out of his musings by the arrival of Mr. Weasley and Professor McGonagall, who entered the room wearing grim expressions. The kitchen at Grimmauld Place, which only moments before had been filled with pleasant chatter and the raucous laughter of the twins, became oddly still. This ragtag group of survivors had been through too much recently not to feel anxious over the prospect of more bad news.

"What is it, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley asked fearfully, jumping up from her chair and pushing Mr. Weasley towards it.

Harry suddenly realized how tired and old Mr. Weasley appeared. His eyes were red-rimmed with dark circles beneath them, and white hairs were visible on each temple. Harry turned his gaze to Professor McGonagall, to whom Hagrid had given his chair. She, too, appeared to have aged rapidly since Professor Dumbledore's death only a month ago.

Harry's throat grew tight. This war was killing them all. Voldemort was killing them all, and he had to be stopped.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice sounding stronger than he felt. He rapidly scanned the room, trying to determine if anyone was missing.

The expressions on both Mr. Weasley's and Professor McGonagall's faces made him worry that there had been another death.

He felt a small hand creep into his own beneath the table and turned to see Ginny watching her father with fearful eyes. He threaded his fingers with hers and squeezed reassuringly.

"I've just come from a meeting with the Board of Governors," Professor McGonagall said. "They've made their decision."

"Scrimgeour called in all the department heads to hear the results," said Mr. Weasley wearily.

"They're not reopening Hogwarts, are they?" Harry asked numbly, uncertain if he should feel shocked or enraged.

"No, they are not. They've decided that they cannot guarantee the safety of incoming students. The Aurors are simply stretched too thin as it is," Professor McGonagall replied, an uncharacteristic waver in her voice.

"How can they do that?" Hermione cried, scandalized. "Where are students going to go for their education?"

"The governors feel that not enough students would have returned, anyway. It's no secret that You-Know-Who has a great interest in Hogwarts. Most believe he only stayed away because of Dumbledore, and that there is nothing to stop him now. Parents won't send their children directly into his path," Mr. Weasley said, sharing a pointed look with a numb-looking Mrs. Weasley.

"Dumbledore would 'ave wanted it ter remain open," Hagrid said, pulling a handkerchief the size of blanket from his pocket.

"I realize that, Hagrid, but the Board would not be swayed," Professor McGonagall answered briskly.

"Did Rufus Scrimgeour push for it to be closed?" Harry asked. He wouldn't put it past the man to keep Hogwarts closed in retaliation for Harry's refusal to aid the Ministry. He'd think Harry would be far more vulnerable and in need of assistance outside Hogwarts walls.

"No. This decision came from the Governors," Professor McGonagall replied, sighing.

"He's not an evil man, Harry; he's just not going about this the way we'd like," Tonks said. "He does want to bring an end to this war; he just wants to be the one to get the credit for doing it. He won't stand in our way, but he will try and find out what we're doing. He's used to being in charge, and he doesn't like feeling like an outsider."

"Scrimgeour's become as obsessed with the politics of being Minister as Fudge was. He's not doing enough because he fears the public's reaction," Bill said angrily. He'd become somewhat embittered toward the Ministry since Greyback's attack.

As several arguments over the pros and cons about having Scrimgeour as Minister broke out around the table, Remus leaned over to speak quietly with Harry.

"All right, Harry?"

"I'm fine, Remus. Thanks for coming after me yesterday," Harry replied, staring intently at a dark spot of wood on the table in front of him.

"I'd easily do it again, Harry, but I'd prefer it if I didn't have to," Remus replied. "I sincerely hope you won't be running off without telling anyone again."

Harry didn't respond but continued to stare at the table, lightly tracing the spot with his finger.

"Harry," Remus said, waiting for a response.

"I can't make you that promise, Remus," Harry whispered.

On his other side, Ginny was doing a poor job of feigning disinterest, and he was certain she was hanging on every word they said. Ron and Hermione also appeared to be watching him closely. He wondered why Mrs. Weasley hadn't insisted all of them clear out when the others had arrived. He supposed she would if the topic turned to anything she deemed inappropriate for their young ears.

"Harry, you need to inform the Order about what you're going to do. I know you well enough to see you're planning something. We can help you," Remus said, a pleading quality in his voice.

"I can't. Remus, you told me once that it all came down to whether or not we trusted Dumbledore's judgement. At the time you said you did. Is that still true?" Harry asked, turning to face him for the first time.

"I- I do, but Dumbledore is gone, Harry," Remus said quietly, his voice pained.

"And he left me a job to do. He wanted me to do it, and to keep quiet about it. I'm going to honor that request," Harry said vehemently.

Remus hung his head, his shoulders slumping. "Very well, Harry. I won't do anything to stand in your way. However, if there is anything I can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask."

Harry nodded. "There is something you can do. The Weasleys have to stay here; they can't go back home. You have to make certain they stay here. Wormtail said he's been at the Burrow, and that he was assigned there to keep an eye on them. Voldemort knows about their connection to me. It's not safe for them to return."

Remus's face darkened. "Understood. I don't think Molly will be happy about it, but Arthur will see reason. Peter's not going to destroy another family."

He wanted to tell Remus about what Wormtail had said about Ginny, but not while she was eavesdropping. It was yet another reason he wanted to keep her close to him. It was the only way he could ensure her safety.

"Anything else?" Remus asked.

"Yeah, there is," Harry said thoughtfully. "When I went to the Quidditch World Cup with the Weasleys, we stayed in magical tents. There were some that were small enough to look like Muggle pop tents, so they could be transported easily. Do you think you could locate one for me? You can take the funds from my account at Gringotts."

"Consider it done," Remus said.

"There is one other thing I'd like to discuss," Professor McGonagall said, standing up and raising her voice above the chatter. The room quieted and turned towards her once again.

"Please go ahead, Minerva," said Mrs. Weasley.

"I visited the Hog's Head earlier today and spoke with Aberforth Dumbledore," she said, her voice quavering slightly.

Harry's head shot up, an image of the tall barkeep from the Hog's Head pub rising in his mind. He was Professor Dumbledore's eccentric brother? Harry sat slack-jawed, wondering how he'd never made the connection – the similarity between the two appeared so obvious now. An inexplicable swell of sadness arose in Harry's chest at this revelation. There was so much about Professor Dumbledore he'd never known, and now he never would.

"Did he have anything unusual to report?" Moody growled.

Harry's eyebrows rose to his hairline. Of course! That was how Dumbledore always knew what was happening in Hogsmeade. His brother would have kept him abreast of anything unusual. Harry smiled sadly, feeling great fondness for his cagey former headmaster.

"He's finished putting Albus's affairs in order. He said that Albus left specific instructions on where some of his belongings were to go. I've brought several items with me to deliver to some of you," Professor McGonagall said stiffly, waving her wand. Several plain brown boxes appeared around her.

Harry's insides went cold. These were Dumbledore's things, his prized possessions...

"Harry," Professor McGonagall said, sounding distinctly gentler than she had a moment earlier. "This one is for you. Aberforth was particularly adamant that you receive it posthaste."

Harry nodded numbly and took the package without comment. He rested it in his lap, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. Hagrid began blowing his nose into his huge handkerchief, and Mrs. Weasley dabbed at her eyes. Harry's heart hammered inside his chest, and he found the air in the room had become stifling.

"Hagrid," Professor McGonagall said, but she didn't get any further as Hagrid dissolved into wracking sobs, mumbling about what a great man Dumbledore had been. Hermione jumped from her chair and began patting him on the back consolingly. In the confusion, Harry quietly took his package and slipped from his chair, escaping from the room unnoticed.

Harry sat cross-legged on his bed with his chin in his hands, staring at the box Professor McGonagall had given him. The package remained sealed, unremarkable really, with its plain brown wrapping, but Harry knew that opening it would be a last goodbye. Professor Dumbledore was really gone; he wasn't coming back. He knew that not opening the package wouldn't change anything, but to Harry, it would somehow make it final.

He'd been sitting in the same spot for over an hour and wasn't certain if everyone was still meeting downstairs. He'd wanted to open whatever it was Dumbledore left him privately, in case it contained anything to do with Voldemort or the Horcruxes. He also didn't trust his own emotions and didn't want a crowd to witness yet another breakdown. He knew he should get on with it before anyone came up to check on him, but he couldn't seem to force himself to do it.

His door creaked open slightly, and Ron poked his head inside. "All right, mate?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I'm fine. You can come in."

Ron pushed open the door and entered the room followed closely by Hermione and Ginny.

"Harry!" Hermione said, frowning slightly. "Why did you leave without saying anything? I hadn't even noticed you had gone."

Harry merely shrugged.

"What did he leave you?" asked Ron, nodding toward the package.

"Dunno," Harry replied, shrugging his shoulders again.

"You haven't even looked?" Hermione cried, aghast. "It could be something important, Harry, something we could use."

"I know," he said quietly.

Hermione apparently realized the reason for his hesitancy because her face softened, and she gazed at Harry with something that looked like pity. He averted his eyes, and she backed off and sat beside Ron on his bed.

"Everyone's gone now; they never really had a proper meeting. I can't believe Hogwarts won't be opening at all," she said tremulously.

Harry started when the edge of his bed dipped slightly. He looked up to see Ginny sitting on the end, watching him closely. Her expression was neutral, and he was grateful for it.

"So, did Professor McGonagall finish delivering everything?" Harry asked in what he hoped was a casual voice.

"Not everything," Ron replied darkly.

His curiosity piqued, Harry looked towards Ron and raised his eyebrow.

"Dumbledore left something for Snape," Ron said, spitting the name.

Harry clenched his fists tightly. "Not surprising; he always did trust the git."

"It is rather startling, though," Hermione said, looking troubled.

"Why's that?" Harry asked through gritted teeth.

Ginny took his hand and gently unclenched his fist, revealing several crescent shaped drops of blood where his nails had dug into his skin. She wiped the blood away and clasped his hand within her own warm one. His stomach settled slightly.

"Well...now, I know you don't want to hear this, but just listen to me," Hermione said nervously. "Professor Dumbledore adamantly trusted Professor Snape. He insisted that he was on our side-

"Until he killed him," Harry shouted, unable to contain his fury.

"I know that, Harry," Hermione said. "Still, I kept hoping there was some other explanation, that maybe they had planned it this way for some reason."

"You think Dumbledore planned for Snape to do him in?" Ron asked incredulously.

"I don't know," Hermione cried, exasperated. "I just can't help wondering if there is something we're missing. But now, if Dumbledore left Snape something...maybe he didn't know. I'd like to know what he left him. It might answer some questions."

"There is no question," Harry said flatly. "Snape killed him. Dumbledore left him something because he trusted him; he thought he was his friend. Snape's no different from Wormtail."

"You can't honestly still think Snape is working for our side, Hermione," Ron said.

"No. I suppose not," Hermione said, deflating, "but I just wish I knew for certain."

"There's nothing to know," Harry said angrily, feeling more agitated by the moment. "He's a murderer, Hermione. He killed Dumbledore, and he can never be forgiven for that."

"I spoke with Fred and George," Ginny said suddenly. "I asked them if they knew where Mundungus lived."

"Did they?" Ron asked.

"No, but when I told them Harry needed to know, they said they'd do some checking. They said Dung never seemed to stay in any one place too long," Ginny replied.

"Great," Harry said, that hopeless feeling threatening to overtake him again.

"Don't worry, Harry. Leave it to Fred and George. If anyone can find his last address, they can," Ginny said bracingly.

"It's something, I suppose," Harry said. "I asked Remus to see if he could find us a magical tent to use while we're travelling. We can use Headquarters as our base, but I reckon we'll have to be on foot a lot. Dumbledore was away a lot last year, and we know that's what he was doing."

"That's a very good idea, Harry. When do you think we'll go?" Hermione asked.

"Not until after my birthday," Harry said. "I don't want any Ministry entanglements about underage magic, and it'll give us a little time to get everything in order. We need to decide where we should go first. Ron and I also have to take our test to get our licenses to Apparate."

Ron shifted uneasily, and Hermione gave him an encouraging smile.

"Why don't you open that box," Ginny said gently. "Maybe it will give us an idea."

Harry glanced at the ordinary-looking box and sighed heavily. Nothing left for it. "Yeah...okay," he said, pulling at the tape. Once he'd moved past his initial hesitation, he found his curiosity overwhelmed him, and he hurried to find what was inside.

He unwrapped the last of the packaging and lifted an incredibly old, stone basin from the box, placing it on his desk reverently. Several wrapped items were stored inside.

"What is that?" Ron asked, peering at it closely.

"It's Dumbledore's Pensieve," Harry said quietly, removing the items inside.

"Harry, these are really rare," Hermione said, curiously examining the runes along the edge of the Pensieve.

"And expensive," said Ron.

"This is how he showed you the memories of Tom?" Ginny asked, running her finger along the rim. "Are those the memories?"

Harry nodded, unwrapping the last of sealed phials. "Yeah. These are the memories he showed me in our lessons. He felt understanding Riddle's past was the key to finding the Horcruxes."

"But wouldn't Dumbledore's memories have died with him?" Ron asked.

"No. A lot of these memories belonged to other people, all of whom are long dead. One of them was even a house-elf," Harry said, as he unwrapped the final two items.

He turned quickly when Ginny gasped.

"Is that...?" she asked, her voice wavering.

Harry held the diary that had once wreaked havoc upon a young Ginny's life. He looked deeply into her troubled eyes, willing some of his strength to her. Having just dealt with confronting some of the horrors of his own past, he knew exactly what she was feeling.

"Yeah, it is. I don't know how Dumbledore got it. I gave it back to Lucius Malfoy with the sock that freed Dobby. Maybe Malfoy dropped it, or Dobby had it. I dunno, maybe Dumbledore somehow got it back from Malfoy Manor," Harry replied, watching Ginny closely.

Ginny reached a shaky hand toward the tattered book with the fang hole through the cover. Harry solemnly handed it to her, knowing she needed to confront her demons.

"No, Ginny, don't," Ron said, making a grab for the diary.

Harry grasped Ron's hand and held him back. "Let her do it, Ron. She needs this," he said, his eyes remaining fixed on Ginny.

Her eyes were dark and haunted, but remained free of tears. She silently flipped several of the pages before looking back at Harry. "Just a book," she said shakily.

Harry nodded. "That's all that's left now; just a book. You beat him, Ginny."

"No, you beat him," Ginny said with a small, humorless laugh. "I was unconscious."

"You did beat him; you survived. You were never supposed to have done that. You fought him for a year alone, and you survived. Never sell yourself short for that, Ginny," Harry replied vehemently.

Ginny's eyes filled with the tears she'd held off for so long, but she forcibly blinked them away. Harry leaned over and gently kissed her forehead. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder.

"What's in the last package?" Hermione asked quietly.

Still keeping an eye on Ginny, Harry opened it. It contained Marvolo Gaunt's black stone ring. "It's the other Horcrux. The one Dumbledore destroyed," Harry said.

"Ooh, can I take a look at it?" Hermione asked.

Harry handed it to her. "There's something else in this box," he said, pulling out one of Dumbledore's delicate silver instruments.

"What does it do?" Ron asked.

"No idea," Harry replied, studying the instrument closely. It consisted of several, fragile silver cylinders with a tube at the top.

"Are there any instructions?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry replied curtly, struggling with a memory on the edge of his consciousness. "I've seen this one before though," he said, distractedly.

"Well, of course you have. Dumbledore's office was chock full of them, and you were in there often enough," Ron said.

"When were you in Dumbledore's office?" Hermione demanded.

"Last Christmas. The night Harry had that dream about Dad getting attacked by the snake," Ron replied.

"That's it!" Harry exclaimed, snapping his fingers.

"That's what?" Ginny asked.

"That's where I've seen this thing. It was that night, the night I had that vision, or whatever it was. Dumbledore did something with this instrument. It had green smoke coming out of it," Harry said excitedly. "The smoke turned into a snake."

"I don't remember that," Ron said, frowning.

"Well, you had other things on your mind, didn't you?" Harry asked.

"But, isn't there a note or anything telling you how it works?" Hermione asked, blowing a stray piece of hair off her face.

Harry looked inside the box again, but it was empty. "No. There's nothing."

"I can try asking Professor McGonagall," Hermione said. "She might know how it works."

"That's a good idea," Harry said, nodding absently. "I still need to show her the portrait of the Founders."

"I think she'll tell you that it's safer here for the moment, since Hogwarts isn't reopening. I don't think she has much trust in the Ministry right now," Hermione said.

"Can't say as I blame her," Harry replied.

"So, if Hogwarts isn't reopening, at least I don't have to tell my mum that I'm not going back," Ron said.

"You'll have to tell her you're leaving though, Ron. She's still not going to be happy about it," Hermione said.

"I don't think we should tell her," Ginny said. "She'll never agree to it, and she'll more than likely try to stop us. We should just slip away the first time. You said we were going to use Headquarters as a base, didn't you, Harry?"

"Yeah, I said that to Lupin," Harry replied, grinning. "How did you hear that, Ginny?"

Ginny smiled. "I'm the youngest of seven, Harry. If I hadn't learned to eavesdrop, I'd never know anything."

Harry grinned. "That was how I managed with the Dursleys, too. I reckon we can go through these memories in the Pensieve until it's time to leave."

"Where do we go first?" Ron asked.

"I think the best place to start is the same place he did, at the orphanage," Harry replied.

"It was a Muggle orphanage, right?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, nodding.

"Can I borrow Hedwig?" Hermione asked. "I'll send a note to my mum asking her to get us the names of any orphanages that were running in London fifty years ago."

"How would she know that?" Ron asked, dumbfounded.

"She can just use the internet," Hermione replied, shrugging.

Ron's bewildered expression never changed. "The what?"

"Oh, that's a computer, right?" Ginny asked, grinning widely. Her enthusiasm reminded Harry of Mr. Weasley.

Hermione's cheek twitched as she tried to contain her laughter. "Yes, it involves a computer. Don't worry about it; she can do this. She'll be happy I asked her for some help."

Harry looked up and met her eyes questioningly.

Hermione shrugged. "She just feels a bit disconnected from my life now. How could she not? There's nothing to be done for it, Harry, but she'll like being asked for her assistance."

Harry sighed, feeling badly that Hermione's family was drifting apart. "Okay, then. It's a start. You three need to practice your shield spells while we're here, as well."

"Harry, we covered shields in fifth year in the DA," Ron said scathingly.

"If we run into any resistance, or if Voldemort figures out what we're doing, it's you three they'll go after. Voldemort wants me alive," Harry said firmly.

"Yeah, so he can do you in himself," Ron said darkly.

"Wormtail said that after he figured out I...when he...he ordered the Death Eaters not to kill me," Harry said, stumbling on the words. "That's why he never came after me all last year. He wants to capture me and keep me somewhere under his control."

The others gasped in horror.

"We won't let that happen, Harry," Ginny said, shuddering. She moved closer to Harry and wrapped her arm around his waist, as if anchoring him.

"Voldemort still doesn't know the whole prophecy. As long as Snape didn't know, that is. Dumbledore told me the only two people who knew the exact wording were him and me. So, if Snape didn't know, that means Voldemort still doesn't know that he has to be the one to kill me in order to come to full power," Harry replied.

"But Snape does know that Dumbledore was looking for the Horcruxes, right?" Hermione asked suddenly.

"Yeah. Dumbledore said that Snape was the one who saved him the night he hurt his hand," Harry said, wondering where Hermione was heading.

"Then if Snape really has turned-"

"He has."

"If Snape really has turned," Hermione said, ignoring Harry's interruptions, "he's told Voldemort what Dumbledore was doing. Voldemort isn't stupid. He's going to believe that Professor Dumbledore passed that information to someone else, and that person will try to do the same. He'll be guarding the other Horcruxes."

"Maybe," Harry said, nodding. "Not necessarily, though. Voldemort never would have told anyone else if he were secretly doing something to bring down an enemy. The Death Eaters are his minions, not his friends; Dumbledore stressed that over and over last year. He would never share that kind of information, so he'd never consider the idea that anyone else would."

"Do you think that's something Malfoy might know?" Ginny asked.

"It's possible, but he's not likely to tell me," Harry said, imagining the sneer on Malfoy's face if he were to question him.

"You could get Moody to ask him," Hermione said.

"Hermione, we're not telling anyone else," Harry said through gritted teeth. He ran his hand through his mussed hair in frustration.

"I still think someone in the Order ought to know what we're doing, but I understand how you feel about this," Hermione said, frowning slightly. "Still, I think Moody would help. I doubt Malfoy would know

about the Horcruxes, so you could just ask if he'd suddenly ordered any of them to guard anything without reason."

Harry frowned, mulling it over. Hermione had a tendency to always want to run to someone in authority, and she could never admit that the authorities might be wrong. Still, her idea could work, except...

"Moody's too suspicious; he'd never leave it at that."

"He trusted Dumbledore, and I think he trusts you," Ginny said.

"All right. I'll ask Moody if I can talk to Malfoy. That's just the thought I want in my head as I try to go to sleep," Harry said sarcastically.

Ginny ruffled his hair affectionately. "Aww, it's not easy to be the hero."

Harry scowled, making Ginny giggle.

The girls bade them goodnight and returned to their own room. It took Harry a long time to fall asleep, and when he did his dreams were marred with visions of werewolves, locked boxes and green smoke.

Harry's heart pounded as he paced inside a small room off the main hallway in Grimmauld Place. Amazingly, Moody had agreed very easily to Harry's request to question Malfoy. Harry's expression must have shown his surprise, because the old Auror began to chuckle.

"I figured you were working with Dumbledore on something, and I reckon you're going to carry on with it. If Dumbledore didn't think it was something I needed to know, that's good enough for me. Constant vigilance, Potter. The less people who know what you're up to, the less chance there is for a leak," he said. "I gave my word to Dumbledore that I'd see this through. If that means helping you with whatever it is you're doing, that's just what I'm going to do."

Turning, he stomped out of the room to fetch Malfoy, his wooden leg thumping on the floor with each step.

Harry moved to the back of the room and took a seat in a darkened corner, hoping for the chance to observe Malfoy's interaction with Moody before he was alerted to Harry's presence. He was doubtful that Malfoy would cooperate, but if he had any information that could aid him in any way, Harry was determined to get it.

Hearing voices in the hallway, he ducked into the shadows and waited.

"Just because I am forced to survive in these less-than-stellar accommodations does not give you the right to barge into my room uninvited, Mr. Moody. Decent wizarding manners dictate the necessity of sending an owl to arrange an appointment. Despite your lack of breeding, I expect you to uphold these common niceties," Malfoy sneered as he entered the room, sat down on a stiff-backed chair and placed his feet on the matching footstool.

Moody followed closely behind wearing an amused expression. He sat in a chair opposite Malfoy and leaned towards him so that their noses were nearly touching. "Listen here, Darren, and listen good-

"It's Draco," Malfoy spat, affronted.

Moody continued as if there hadn't been an interruption. "You're not here as a houseguest, you're here because if you were anywhere else, you'd be dead already."

"And without the information I can provide, you lot won't be long behind me," Malfoy replied, although he had paled slightly.

Harry took a moment to take a good look at Malfoy's appearance. He'd lost the dark circles beneath his eyes, and his skin no longer had an ashen pallor, but he still appeared pale and drawn. He spoke with all the haughtiness and bravado Harry had come to expect, but there was an air of brittleness beneath it that hadn't been there in the past.

"We've been through all of this already and agreed to come to an arrangement that could be mutually beneficial," Moody said, sounding weary, as if he'd been over this same conversation many times already.

"That doesn't mean you can barge into my chambers-

"I knocked on your door, David," Moody said dryly. "I have a few questions that need answering."

"It's Draco," Malfoy said through gritted teeth, "and when my mother hears about this, she won't be pleased."

Moody nodded his head towards the door. "By all means, if you need your mummy present, go and fetch her."

Malfoy puffed out his chest indignantly. "I won't be treated as a common house-elf, and I'm perfectly capable of handling my own affairs."

"And I won't be treated as your nanny. Grow up, Dudley," Moody growled, his magical eye looking directly at Harry's hiding spot and winking.

Harry nearly choked trying to hold back his laughter.

"It's Draco," Malfoy spat, clenching his teeth. "What is it you need to know? I don't have all morning."

"Sorry to interrupt your busy social schedule," Harry said, moving into the light and taking the chair next to Moody. He imitated Malfoy by placing his feet on the footstool and crossing his hands on his chest. "I hadn't realized how fascinating the portraits were up on your wing. I assume that's who's keeping you busy since none of the living inhabitants in the house will actually speak to you. I'll have to visit when I'm in need of stimulating conversation."

Malfoy's expression rapidly turned from stunned to angry. "Potter," he sneered, glaring down his nose at Harry. "What are you doing here? I'm not staying if he's in the room."

"He's the one who has a few questions for you, and since it's his house, he gets to decide where he goes," Moody replied indifferently.

"I have nothing to say to you," Malfoy said obstinately, looking away from Harry.

"All right," Harry replied, shrugging his shoulders. "I believe you know how to find the front door. Be sure to take all your belongings as there are plenty of people waiting to use your room. Moody, would you mind asking Narcissa Malfoy to join me? I'll see if she's any more cooperative than her son. We'll offer her the same deal."

"Stay away from my mother, Potter," Malfoy snarled, two bright pink spots appearing on his pale cheeks.

Harry gazed at him coldly. "If you won't cooperate, Malfoy, then I need to find someone who will."

Malfoy clenched his fists tightly, a myriad of expressions crossing his face. "What is it you want to know? I would have thought the precious Chosen One would have better things to do. If you want me out of here so badly, why don't you follow your destiny so the rest of us can all get on with our lives?" he sneered.

"That's enough," Moody growled, pulling out his wand and pointing it at Malfoy.

"It's all right, Moody," Harry said calmly. He knew Malfoy had the tendency to boast when he was angry; Harry was counting on that habit now. "That's exactly what I'm going to do, Malfoy, with or without your help. I don't care what happens to you anymore than you care what happens to me. But I think we both have other people living in this house that we do care about. Do you think you can control your childish outbursts for a few moments, or should I go ask your mother?"

Malfoy paled yet again at the reference to his mother. Still, his anger won out, and he sneered, "He's going to cut you into little pieces and feed you to his snake."

Harry forced himself to keep his voice steady. "Perhaps, but if I can't take him with me, your life isn't worth dragon dung."

Malfoy's anger appeared to swell, and for a moment, Harry was certain he would draw his wand and hex him. After a moment, however, he seemed to deflate and sank wearily back into his chair. "What do you need to know?" he asked tonelessly.

"I want to know if Voldemort," Harry ignored Malfoy's hiss when he said the name, "has shown any particular care in guarding certain places recently – meaning in the past year. He would have asked for these places to be under surveillance, but he wouldn't have given any reason why. Does this sound at all familiar?"

Malfoy's eyes showed a spark of recognition although he tried to cover it. "Why is it important?" he asked.

Harry shrugged indifferently. "It might not be, but call me curious."

Some of Malfoy's haughty bravado returned as he said dismissively, "I don't think it could possibly be significant."

"What's not significant?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing, the hair on his arms suddenly standing on end.

"Whatever is being guarded isn't important, or he would have other, more important people guarding it. People that matter," Malfoy replied.

"Like you?" Harry asked, rolling his eyes.

Malfoy flushed. "He gave me the greatest task of all, and I fulfilled it," he said pompously.

Reminded of Malfoy's role in Dumbledore's death, Harry felt his skin burn with indignation. "You didn't; Snape did. In the end, you couldn't do it. You're not a killer, Malfoy. Someday you might even be proud of that."

"What do you know about it?" Malfoy asked, his eyes widening with alarm.

"I know plenty. I know you were lowering your wand when Snape and the others burst through that door. Professor Dumbledore offered you a chance, and you were going to take it," Harry said, shuddering as he remembered.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes shrewdly. "How do you-"

"Let's get back on track here, boys. What do you know about whatever is being guarded, Draco?" Moody asked, using the correct name for the first time.

"I don't know what or where it is, but he assigned Pettigrew, Crabbe, Goyle and Simmons each to do something and report directly to him. None of them is the brightest or most loyal of followers, so whatever it is can't be very significant," Malfoy replied, shrugging.

Harry's mind was racing. Wormtail was watching the Burrow, which of course meant watching him. That would leave the cup and the unknown Horcrux. So, what could the fourth person be watching? Assigning Death Eaters who weren't particularly smart was exactly Voldemort's style. They wouldn't question why or look any deeper into what they were doing, and if the other Death Eaters had attitudes like Malfoy's, they wouldn't believe whatever was being done was significant.

Wormtail was Wormtail, and if Crabbe and Goyle were anything like their offspring, they wouldn't be very bright. He didn't know anything about Simmons, but imagined he would fall into the same category. Why four of them, though?

Of course! The locket. If Voldemort never knew that RAB had gone to the cave and stolen it, he wouldn't have been aware that Harry and Dumbledore made it there, either. Dumbledore had said Lucius Malfoy told his master about the diary, and Harry imagined that Snape would have told Voldemort about the ring, but no one knew about the locket. He'd still have someone watching the cave. Their orders would be to report anything suspicious or any visitors immediately so Voldemort could descend upon the place himself.

This was a start. If they could find these people, they'd know they were in the right place.

"Does that mean anything to you, Potter?" Moody asked, watching Harry carefully.

"It might," Harry said absently. "Who really knows what Voldemort is thinking?"

Malfoy dropped his head in his hands, rubbing his forehead wearily. "Look, Potter, I don't know if this Chosen One business is true or just more of your hype, and I don't really care. The Malfoy name is as old and respected as any pureblood wizarding family today, and we are being hunted like animals. Neither my mother nor I deserve to live this way. If you're going to try and end this madness, I'll do what I can to help you. It doesn't mean we're friends, and it doesn't mean I'll want anything to do with you once this is all over. If you're still around, that is."

"Fair enough," Harry said, nodding. "I'm certain I won't want anything to do with you once it's all over, either."

Turning his back on Malfoy and nodding slightly at Moody, Harry strode from the room with his head held high. He had a place to start.

Far from London, in a dark stone manor-house set apart from all others, the Dark Lord had summoned his minions. He sat behind a massive oak desk in a high-backed chair resembling a throne. His serpentine features studied the masked, robed figures standing before him, their heads bowed in submission. His long, thin fingers stroked his wand almost lovingly as his fierce red eyes bored into the group.

"Which of you can tell me where Potter and the blood traitor clan have gone?" Voldemort hissed softly. His voice was calm, yet still it caused a shudder to pass through most of the Death Eaters.

"Might I suggest," a smooth, oily voice volunteered from the back of the room, "that they've taken shelter inside the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix? As I've reported, the entire Weasley family is in it, and Potter is prone to protect them."

"Yes, Severus," Voldemort said, his eyes briefly flashing with an eerie red glow. "You've been quite helpful in supplying me with the names of those in this Order, but you haven't been able to tell me where their headquarters is located."

Snape bowed even lower to the ground. "My humble apologies, Master, but you are aware of how the Fidelius Charm works. Without the Secret Keeper, the location cannot be revealed."

Voldemort's irritation showed as he tightly wrapped his emaciated fingers around his wand. "And who would that Secret Keeper be?" he asked.

"As you know, after killing Albus Dumbledore, I am no longer privy to the happenings in the Order," Snape said silkily.

"Yes, we all know you were the one to kill Dumbledore, Snape," Bellatrix Lestrange sneered, unable to maintain her silence any longer. "You appear overly fond of reminding us. What he asked was who their new Secret Keeper is."

"Thank you, Bella," Voldemort hissed dangerously. "While I appreciate your loyalty, I do not appreciate your speaking out of turn."

Bellatrix's eyes widened behind her mask, as she had finally realized she'd overstepped her bounds. "Of course, Master," she said, bowing her head. "My apologies."

"Do not let it happen again, Bella," he said calmly. As she took a step backwards to take her place in the line of Death Eaters, he raised his wand and hissed, "Crucio."

Bellatrix dropped to the floor, screaming and writhing in agony. The other Death Eaters kept their gazes focused straight ahead, never moving. After an inordinate amount of time, Voldemort lifted the curse and turned to address Snape once again, leaving Bellatrix whimpering on the ground. No one moved to assist her.

"You know these people better than the rest of us, Severus. Whom do you suggest they would have chosen as their Secret Keeper?" he asked.

Snape moved his finger across his chin slowly, deliberating. "My instincts would say either Minerva McGonagall or Alastor Moody, but there is always the enigma of Potter to consider," he said, his upper lip curling.

"What does Potter have to do with it?" Voldemort asked.

"If the brat has any say in the matter, he is most likely the Secret Keeper himself. He's exceedingly arrogant, and his opinion of himself is exceptionally high. His foolish Gryffindor streak wouldn't allow anyone else to be at risk, therefore, he'd take on the role himself," Snape replied, grimacing as if he had an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

Voldemort shook his head dismissively. "The Order would never allow a sixteen-year-old boy to be Secret Keeper."

"Ordinarily, I would agree with you, however all rules tend to be bent to Potter's whim. Dumbledore himself entrusted the boy with far too much information," Snape said, clenching his fists.

"Dumbledore was a fool, and his fondness for the boy was one of his greatest weaknesses. I don't want any of you to concern yourself with Potter. Leave him to me. I have very specific plans for the boy. He needs to learn what it means to defy me, but he is by no means a threat to our plans," Voldemort said.

Snape looked as if he would argue, but lowered his head and backed away. "Yes, Master."

"Have any of you incompetent fools learned how it was that the blood traitors managed to repel the Dementors from the wedding reception?" Voldemort asked in a low voice.

"Potter and the eldest Weasley, the one I marked as one of my den, managed to strengthen the wards, my Lord," Fenrir Greyback said.

"I see," Voldemort hissed. "I expect, Fenrir, that you will want to be the one to see that this Weasley is punished?"

"Yes, my Lord. I've marked him, and I am certain he is now feeling the frustration over how the Ministry regards our kind. He'll be ripe to turn to our side once I make him a full werewolf," Greyback said, grinning maniacally.

"Excellent. What of our missing Malfoys? Have they been apprehended?" Voldemort asked.

The Death Eaters shifted uncomfortably, but no one spoke.

"I asked a question, and I expect an answer," Voldemort said without raising his voice. Still, the threat in his tone was unmistakable.

"No, my Lord. They appear to have vanished," said a woman's voice.

"How is this possible?" Voldemort asked.

Again, he was met with silence.

"Answer me," he bellowed, green sparks flashing from his wand.

"They could not have done it without aid," Bellatrix replied, still huddled on the floor. She gasped in pain as she rose on her knees. "My sister doesn't have any contacts who would aid her against you, my Lord. An acquaintance of Draco's must be offering them sanctuary."

Snape's face remained impassive.

"I want them found and brought before me, along with whomever it was who facilitated their escape. Whichever of you finds them will, of course, earn my favor and a small measure of my gratitude," Voldemort said.

"What about Wormtail?" Bellatrix asked. "He's not here. Perhaps he allowed my sister to escape."

"Wormtail lacks the courage to do anything so bold. I am aware of his location, as I am aware of each of your assignments. Never forget that, Bella," he said menacingly.

"Yes, Master," Bellatrix said, wincing.

"You all have your orders; don't disappoint me again. I will be far less gracious the next time we meet if you again have nothing to report but utter failure," he said, his cold, snakelike gaze raking over all of them. "Severus, please remain behind. I have something I need to discuss."

"Yes, my Lord," Snape said, bowing stiffly.

The remaining Death Eaters Disapparated as quickly as they could, eager both to do their master's bidding and to be away from his wrath.

"It has been over a month since Albus Dumbledore's death, Severus, and there has not been a single sign of movement towards any of my Horcruxes. I believe you were mistaken that Dumbledore would have made someone else aware of what he was doing," Voldemort said, his voice a low hiss.

Snape bowed his head and moved slowly toward the desk. "Of course you may be right, Master. However, I feel I knew the Headmaster very well after rendering my services to him for so very long. He always had contingency plans."

"Yet you've said that you'd lost some of his trust towards the end. You said you thought he was keeping something from you," Voldemort replied, his scarlet eyes narrowing into slits.

"Yes," Snape said, shifting uncomfortably. "He didn't feel I was doing enough to learn what the Malfoy boy was planning. I was unable to reveal what I knew and without Draco's cooperation, the stories I fabricated were proven false. As you know, Dumbledore always believed everyone could be saved. He'd hoped that I could offer the boy the chance to reform."

"Yes. His compassion was one of his greatest faults. He could never understand that there are those of us who never wanted to be saved," Voldemort said, a hideous smile twisting his face.

Snape grimaced as if swallowing something slimy and unpleasant. "He also refused to reveal what he was discussing with Potter on their many evenings together."

Voldemort waved his hand carelessly. "You said you'd ensured that Potter was unable to learn Occlumency the previous year. Perhaps Dumbledore attempted to teach the boy himself and caught on to your deceit."

Snape bristled, an ugly sneer crossing his sallow features. "The boy is incapable of using the simplest of techniques. Saying he was unable to learn was not far from the truth."

"Still, Dumbledore was fond of the boy," Voldemort said, apparently amused by Snape's naked hatred of Harry.

"Yes," Snape replied through gritted teeth. "He was so fond of him that he often allowed the boy to interfere in matters that should have been left to those more capable. I fear that Potter might actually be the one Dumbledore confided in about the Horcruxes. The boy's ego is certainly large enough that he would believe it was something he could handle."

"Ridiculous. Dumbledore always had a weakness for his favorites, but he would never share the information that could destroy me with a sixteen-year-old boy. Be careful, Severus, your jealousy is showing," Voldemort said, amused.

Snape cocked his head slightly. "If I may respectfully point out, my Lord, you assigned a sixteen-year-old a similar task."

Voldemort's smile faded and his eyes narrowed again. "I assigned the Malfoy boy his job as a punishment to his father. I knew he'd be unable to complete his task, and I was right. It was you, Severus, who destroyed my enemy. I never expected the Malfoy boy to survive. Dumbledore was far too noble to ever willingly place anyone he considered a child in such danger. His love for the Potter boy would never have allowed it."

Snape scowled. "My Lord-"

"Enough! I do not want to hear any more of this, Severus. I have plans for Harry Potter. I believe the prophecy referred to him as a threat because he is a Horcrux, not because he is anything special on his own. Once I realized what had happened, it became clear to me. I can handle Harry Potter. He is no longer a threat to me. My plans to dismantle the Ministry can now begin. There is no one who can stop me," Voldemort said, his eyes glowing.

"Yes, Master," Snape replied, an uneasy frown upon his face. It was no secret that Snape believed that Harry's reputation was highly overrated, but he also had to know that it wasn't wise to underestimate the boy. He had a nasty habit of being in the right place at the right time.

Chapter Nine

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Harry awoke early on the morning of his birthday after a night mercifully unmarred by dreams. Lying in bed and luxuriating in the feel of the warm sunlight streaming through a crack in the curtains, he breathed deeply.

He was finally of age, finally a man.

The Dursleys briefly crossed his mind. The magic his mother invoked by giving her life for his would have ended at midnight. He wondered idly what that would mean for the Dursleys, if anything. He knew the Order was still keeping an eye on Privet Drive, and he also knew the Dursleys

would never accept an offer to go into hiding. As far as they were concerned, they were done with him and his world. For their sake, Harry hoped that was true.

He suspected that before they had departed, Ron and Hermione had done something to let the Dursleys know they were unhappy with the treatment Harry had received through the years. He purposefully hadn't asked them, however. If he didn't know what they'd done, there was no way he could feel guilty about it. Besides, it wasn't as if the Dursleys didn't deserve a bit of torment, anyway.

Shaking his head, he tried to steer his thoughts away from his relatives. He never had to go back, and that felt good. He had a busy day ahead, and tomorrow...tomorrow his adventure would begin. Remus had supplied him with a magical tent, and it was now tucked away inside his rucksack. The four teens had packed lightly, uncertain how long they would be gone and not wanting to have to lug heavy bags with them.

He and Ron had an appointment at the Ministry at nine o'clock to take their Apparation tests. Mr. Weasley had agreed to accompany them to the testing center on his way to work. Harry was looking forward to it, although slightly apprehensive that Rufus Scrimgeour would try to take advantage of his appearance at the Ministry.

Harry glanced over at Ron's bed and was surprised to find it empty. It was a rare occasion that Ron was up before Harry. He knew that Ron was feeling extremely nervous about the test, and he hoped that his friend wouldn't let his nerves unhinge him. They had to be able to Apparate once they began their quest. Harry was nervous about the fact that Ginny would have to SideAlong for another year before she was of age, although she'd hinted at the fact that she already knew how to do it.

His door opened with a creak, startling him, and he squinted his unfocused eyes at the blur of red streaking towards him.

"Good morning, Harry! Happy Birthday," Ginny squealed, kissing him soundly as she sat on the edge of his bed.

Harry grinned widely, feeling inexplicably giddy all of a sudden. "Thanks, Ginny. I'd have turned seventeen sooner if I'd known I'd get a greeting like that," he said, smiling cheekily.

Ginny grinned and gently ran her hand along the side of his face. "Mum's making an enormous birthday breakfast, so I hope you're hungry."

"I am," he said, turning to kiss her hand. "I hope this test goes all right for both of us. I'll be happy when it's done and over with. Where is Ron? Have you seen him?"

"He's in the kitchen. Mum's trying to coax him to eat something, but he looks really nervous. When will the prat ever learn that he only mucks it up because he convinces himself that he's going to do so?" she asked in exasperation.

"I know," Harry said, grimacing. "He's not a prat though; he's just nervous."

"He's a prat," Ginny said firmly. "Everything is all set to go tomorrow. I hope Mum won't be too upset."

"I know," Harry replied worriedly. He really didn't want to hurt Mrs. Weasley, but he also knew that she'd never allow them to leave without knowing where they were going. Even if they'd come up with a plausible excuse, she'd most likely resist the idea of their leaving the safety of headquarters.

Hermione's mum had found the name and address of the orphanage fairly quickly. Luckily, it was still open and hadn't been torn down or converted into anything else. Its location wasn't all that far from the Leaky Cauldron, although they'd decided it was safer to avoid the pub and travel as Muggles.

They planned to sneak out of Grimmauld Place at dawn, before the rest of the household had arisen. He was certain that they'd have to deal with the fallout upon their return, but he hoped by then to have one more Horcrux recovered. It would put him on firmer ground while holding off the Order.

"Hopefully, this little battle of wills she's been having with Narcissa Malfoy will keep her occupied so she won't fret too much," Ginny said, biting her lip.

Narcissa Malfoy had yet to make an appearance since they'd all arrived at Grimmauld Place. She'd remained sequestered in her rooms, requesting that meals be sent up to her. Mrs. Weasley had prepared the trays nicely enough, but she'd refused to deliver them to her, forcing Narcissa to either get them herself or have someone else do it. Mrs. Malfoy had also refused to return any of the trays to the kitchen after using them, and Mrs. Weasley was determined not to collect the growing pile that stood in the hallway. She wanted Mrs. Malfoy to return and clean them herself.

"I'll be sorry to miss that row when it happens," Harry said, grinning.

"Yeah. I've noticed Fred and George have been hanging around a lot recently. I think they're just hoping to be here when everything blows," Ginny replied.

"I hope your mum and dad won't be too angry with me when they realize we've left," Harry said. "They've done a lot for me." Although he didn't say it, the idea of the Weasleys' disapproval troubled him greatly. They meant a lot to him.

"Don't fret now, Harry. We'll deal with things as they come, together. Actually, I think Dad might suspect we're up to something. He's not as unaware of what's happening around him as he sometimes appears," Ginny said, smiling fondly. "He'll help with Mum. He's not having as hard a time admitting we've all grown up as she is."

Harry wondered if that were true for Ginny as well as her brothers. Somehow, he suspected that Mr. Weasley might have a much harder time accepting the idea that his little girl had grown up enough to run off with a boy in order to face an insane Dark wizard and a bunch of Death Eaters than the fact that one of his sons had done it.

When Harry remained silent, she reached out and gently caressed the side of his face. He leaned his head into her palm, relishing the comfort.

"How are you doing?" she asked, her expression grave. He knew at once exactly what she meant.

None of them had discussed the Seventh Horcrux with him since his startling revelation. It was as if the subject had become taboo, and they all tiptoed around it carefully while discussing anything to do with the search. On several occasions, he'd discovered Ginny, Ron and Hermione with their heads huddled together and whispering frantically, although they always broke apart when he'd entered the room.

He suspected they'd spent a lot of time discussing him and seeking a possible escape from his situation. The fact none of them had approached him didn't bode well, and Harry didn't have the heart to ask. He was only holding it all together by moving forward and keeping his eye on the prize.

One Horcrux at a time had become his mantra.

"I'm okay," he whispered, shrugging. "Have to be, don't I?"

"Not with me," she whispered gently. "I promised myself to be the one to prop you back up if you falter. You might be determined to save the wizarding world, but I'm determined to save you."

A lump rose in Harry's throat as he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. Speaking into her shoulder he said, "That might not be possible, Ginny."

Ginny's grip tightened around him. "It is possible. Anything's possible if you've got enough nerve. I've told you that before, don't you remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Harry said, smiling. "You came to my rescue then, too."

"That's me, Ginny Weasley: hero rescuer," she said, still clutching him tightly. He could feel rather than see her grin.

"I'm no hero," he said gruffly. "I don't even know what I'm doing."

"It'll be all right, Harry. I know it seems insurmountable when you look at what we've got to do as a whole, but if we take it a little at a time, sooner or later the puzzle pieces will come together and everything will fit," Ginny said. He couldn't see her face, but her voice sounded confident, and it soothed him.

"You make me feel like I can do anything," he whispered.

"You can."

"I saw my mum and dad's graves when I was in Godric's Hollow," he said. He'd left that part of the story out when he'd told them all about

Wormtail. He didn't know why, but he suddenly had the urge to talk about it with her.

"That must have been hard for you," she said, running her fingers through his hair.

Harry shrugged, enjoying the sensation her fingers were creating. "It was strange. I've always wondered about them, but I thought when I finally saw their resting place that I'd feel some sort of connection to them or something. I dunno. It's stupid really."

"It isn't stupid, Harry."

"It was hard to be there; it made me think of how different things should have been, but I didn't feel like they were there. I didn't feel any different about them then I always had. Does that make any sense?" Harry asked.

"I suppose," Ginny said carefully, "that maybe it's not the place where they are buried that connects us to the people we've lost, but the feelings we have inside for them. I've never lost anyone really close to me, so it's not like I know what I'm talking about, but Mum lost a couple of her brothers in the last war. I never knew them because they died before I was born, but I know she still talks to them sometimes, particularly when she's feeling stressed. Fred and George were named for them, well, their initials anyway."

"I don't remember Mum ever going to their graves, but it doesn't mean she loved them any less. Maybe some people need a grave as a place to grieve and others don't. You never had a gravesite to go to, right? You've always just known they died, so you've found other ways to feel connected to them."

"I suppose," Harry said, burrowing his face into her hair and smelling that sweet floral scent he loved so much. Until he was eleven, he'd believed his parents had died in a car accident. He could remember lying in his cupboard and having imaginary conversations with them. He'd never considered that it was a form of grieving.

"So, what do you want to do for your birthday?" Ginny asked, and he knew she was trying to cheer him up. Feeling in the mood to actually celebrate his birthday for a change, he let her.

"I know exactly what I want to do," he said, nibbling on her ear, "but I think your mum might object if we spend the day up here – not to mention your army of brothers."

Ginny giggled, moving her head to give him better access to her neck. She moaned softly as he continued to plant kisses along the slender column of her throat, and he thought the sound might drive him mad.

Harry had just managed to relax and begin to enjoy himself when he heard Mrs. Weasley hollering to them that breakfast was ready. Harry and Ginny broke apart reluctantly, both panting and looking rather ruffled.

"Well," Ginny said, standing up and straightening her clothing. "It's nice to see that my mum's timing is as impeccable as always."

"Yeah," Harry replied grumpily, attempting unsuccessfully to flatten his extremely mussed up hair. "It's just brilliant."

"Don't worry, Harry. We'll have plenty of opportunities to continue our activities once we're out from under her eye," Ginny said with an impish wink. Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she turned and left the room, leaving a gaping Harry to follow in her wake. Her words had sent his mind into overdrive, and he was suddenly very keen to begin their quest for reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with Horcruxes.

When they entered the kitchen, they found it already crowded. Everyone turned to stare, causing both of them to blush brightly. Harry was surprised to see Ginny coloring; she was usually better at not letting her family get to her than he was.

"Appears as if our birthday boy might have already received one of his presents," Fred said innocently.

Harry felt heat flame in his face and neck and knew that he'd turned even redder, if that were possible.

"Shut it, you," Ginny said in a low voice, piling a scoop of scrambled eggs onto a plate. She handed the plate to Harry and filled another for herself.

"Yes, Ginny," George said, grinning mischievously. "What took you so long? Was it hard to get Harry to rise this morning?"

Harry choked on his eggs, looking around wildly to make certain Mrs. Weasley was still busy at the stove and hadn't overheard their conversation.

Ginny appeared to have regained her composure. She casually cast her eyes downward at Harry and muttered, "Not really."

Fred and George sat motionless except for their eyes, which darted back and forth between Harry and Ginny. They wore identical stunned expressions before both broke out in hearty laughter.

Harry wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole. He was certain any one of her many brothers was about to curse him from existence. He was glad he'd at least come of age, so he could defend himself when they chose to attack. He glanced warily at Ron only to find that his friend wasn't even paying attention to them. He was pushing food around on his plate and glancing at his watch every few seconds. Ron was impatient to leave.

Sensing Harry's stare, Ron looked up. "Get moving, Harry. You don't have time to eat. Dad's ready to take us to the Ministry; he just went to grab his cloak."

"Ron," Ginny said, grabbing Harry's arm as he went to stand. "This is his birthday breakfast; he should get to enjoy some of it."

"And he needs to have something in his stomach to do well on his test," Mrs. Weasley said, moving over to the table and placing a few more slices of toast on Harry's plate. "Harry, you look flushed, dear. Are you feeling all right?"

Mrs. Weasley put the back of her hand on Harry's forehead to check if it was warm.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley," Harry murmured, feeling anything but fine. He'd completely lost his appetite and felt as eager as Ron to leave the kitchen and the dangerously smirking twins.

"Don't let the test worry you, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, misinterpreting his unease. "I'm certain you'll do fine. And even if you don't, you can always take it again later."

"If Harry's feeling peckish, Mum, I'm certain Ginny will be able to take care of him," Fred said with an evil grin. "She seems to know a lot about his needs these days."

Not wanting to hear anything more, Harry jumped from his chair and managed to spill his coffee all over the table in the process. Mrs. Weasley hurriedly grabbed a towel and began to sop up the mess.

"Sorry, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, flustered. This only caused Fred and George to laugh harder.

Ginny glared at her brothers. "Ignore them, Harry," she whispered, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "Good luck. You too, Ron."

"Yeah," Ron said, barely acknowledging any of them as he dragged Harry from the kitchen.

They had to use the visitor's entrance when they arrived at the Ministry, causing Harry's stomach to churn unpleasantly. Mr. Weasley placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze while they were inside the telephone box. Harry was grateful for the support but was even more appreciative of Mr. Weasley's silence. He couldn't bear right then to talk about what had happened the last time he'd been there. The memories were all too close to the surface.

When the telephone box sprang open, they stepped out and into the atrium. Harry had only a moment to notice that the fountain in the center of the room had been replaced before a throng of reporters rushed forward towards them.

"There he is," one of them shouted. "Mr. Potter, could you look this way."

Flashbulbs began going off in all directions while so many questions were fired at Harry that he couldn't hear any of them.

Surprised, he remained motionless for a moment, staring blankly at the number of reporters. Mr. Weasley grabbed his arm and began pushing him

towards a glass doorway. Ron walked on his other side, attempting to shield him from view.

The doorway opened suddenly, and Percy Weasley stood motioning them inside. They sprinted through just as Percy slammed the door shut and sealed it with his wand. Harry could see the reporters banging on the glass while still shouting their questions and snapping pictures.

"This way," Percy said, leading them down a corridor and out of sight.

"What the devil was that all about?" Mr. Weasley asked, straightening his robes.

"That," Percy replied grimly, "was the Minister's idea. He informed the press that you'd be arriving here this morning, Harry."

"Did he bother telling them I'm only here to get my Apparation license?" Harry asked, firing up at once.

"No. Although he never said you were meeting with him, he left the reason for your appearance very ambiguous," Percy replied, not meeting Harry's eyes.

"What else aren't you saying?" Harry asked instinctively.

"I was sent to get you away from the reporters and take you through security before you had time to answer any questions," Percy said, two bright spots of color appearing on his cheeks.

"You did what you had to do to keep your job," Harry said, waving his hand. "Besides, I didn't really want to talk to those reporters, anyway."

Percy started for a moment, blinking behind his horn-rimmed spectacles. Finally, swallowing heavily, he said, "Thank you, Harry."

Harry again waved his hand in the air, "Bygones. We have more important worries at the moment."

"Still, I treated you very badly. I can see that now," Percy said, shifting uncomfortably. Harry could tell that apologizing was something Percy found very difficult to do.

"Percy, the best thing you can do now is to make things right with your family. These are dangerous times, and you don't want to leave anything undone or unsaid until it's too late. Take it from someone who knows," Harry said seriously.

Percy nodded gravely, his eyes shifted for a moment towards Ron who stood with his arms crossed across his chest and a scowl on his face.

"Your mother will be pleased to hear we spoke, Percy," Mr. Weasley said, his voice sounding slightly choked.

"I'll visit her soon. You'd best head up to the testing center. They're expecting you," he said before turning on his heel and hurrying down the corridor.

"I can't believe you let him off that easily," Ron said, shaking his head.

"He's your brother, Ron," Harry replied.

"All the more reason he shouldn't have acted like such a git," Ron said, scowling. "It'll take a bit more than that for me to forgive him."

Harry glanced at Mr. Weasley, expecting him to reprimand Ron. The older man didn't, however, apparently accepting that Percy would have to mend his relationship with his siblings on his own.

"We'd best go upstairs," Mr. Weasley said brightly, pressing the button for the lift and wearing a wide grin that made him appear younger than he had in months.

When they reached the testing center, they found it empty except for a young witch who was sitting at the reception desk. She smiled engagingly and lowered her lashes, telling them to take a seat. They sat in comfortable chairs while the witch cast flirtatious smiles across the desk. Harry shifted uncomfortably while Ron perked up straightly in his chair. After several moments, the witch began to pout, sticking her heavily painted lip out dramatically. She obviously was seeking Harry's attention, but he wasn't heeding her advances.

Ron scowled when he realized the witch wasn't paying any attention to him, and he began to fidget. His leg quickly bounced up and down as he shifted in his seat.

"Don't worry about it," Harry finally hissed. "You'll do fine. You've done it before."

"I hate tests," Ron hissed back.

Mr. Weasley sat with his face behind a magazine pretending not to pay attention, although Harry could see his body twitching with suppressed chuckles. Thankfully, Harry's name was called first, and he followed the stern-looking witch down the corridor and away from the receptionist and Ron's nerves.

He emerged twenty minutes later sporting a huge grin with his Apparation license in his hand.

"Well done," Mr. Weasley said, patting him on the back. "Well done, indeed. Why don't you have a seat while we wait for Ron?"

Harry had the distinct impression that Mr. Weasley had something particular that he wanted to discuss, and Harry's stomach twisted with nerves.

"Now you've come of age, I imagine some things will change," Mr. Weasley said a bit too casually, while picking at a stray thread on the sleeve of his robes.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, resisting the urge to tug at his collar. His neck suddenly felt very hot and prickly.

"I'm aware that you were working on something with Albus before he died, and I can only assume you intend to finish what you've started," Mr. Weasley said.

Harry forced himself not to fidget and to control his urge to blurt out everything. It was much harder to keep the truth from Mr. Weasley than it had been from Moody or Remus. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley, but I really can't--"

"I'm not asking you to tell me anything that you're not comfortable in telling me, Harry. I do want you to know, however, that you can always come to me, or to anyone in the Order, for assistance if you feel you need it," Mr. Weasley said solemnly. "You can come to me at any time, Harry."

"Thank you," Harry said, surprised. He knew that Mrs. Weasley wouldn't like his involvement in anything to do with the Order, but he'd never considered the possibility that Mr. Weasley might see things differently, more objectively.

"I'm not promising that everyone in the Order will feel this way," Mr. Weasley said, shifting his position. "I suspect there will be several people quite angry with you, actually. But I've watched you over the years as you've grown, Harry, and I know you are a more-than-capable wizard. You and Ron are adults now, and I can no longer expect to make decisions for you."

"And Mrs. Weasley?" Harry asked, fearing the answer. Harry dreaded her disapproval almost as much as he had Dumbledore's.

"Molly will be angry, but I think you know that. You and Ron will always be her little boys. She doesn't want to let go. She's a strong witch, though; she'll be all right. She loves you, Harry; she'll forgive you," Mr. Weasley replied, his expression softening.

Harry noticed that although Mr. Weasley suspected that Ron would be leaving with Harry, he had no idea about Ginny. He wondered if his feelings would change when his daughter disappeared, as well. Somehow, he suspected it was easier for Mr. Weasley to see his sons as men than it was to see Ginny as a woman.

"I hope so," Harry replied earnestly.

"Might I suggest that you make a very public trip through Diagon Alley after you leave here?" Mr. Weasley asked cagily. His eyes gleamed slightly with mischief, reminding Harry of Fred and George.

"But...won't that draw a lot of attention?" Harry asked, confused. The Order had always made such a point of keeping his movements secret and hidden.

"Precisely. And if every so often you're seen publicly, those half-wits downstairs will be more than happy to report it. It would serve you

well if You-Know-Who doesn't suspect that you're missing," Mr. Weasley replied.

"That's a brilliant idea, Mr. Weasley," Harry said, grinning.

"I can use some contacts at the Ministry to ensure the press is alerted to where you're going to be when you want them there. I think Percy might also be able to help us with that endeavor," Mr. Weasley said, smiling.

"Thank you," Harry replied, his throat feeling suddenly tight.

They were interrupted when Ron came through the door, beaming and carrying his own Apparition license.

"Eyebrows and everything," he said, grinning.

"Well done," Harry said, clapping him on the back.

"Congratulations, son. I knew you had it in you," Mr. Weasley said.

"Thanks, Dad," Ron replied, his ears turning bright red.

The receptionist rose from her chair and opened a door to the right of her desk. "Congratulations to both of you. There is an Apparation point located right outside this door you can use," she said, looking hopefully at Harry once again.

Mr. Weasley put an arm around each of the boys and began ushering them towards the door. Harry took a few steps before stopping.

"Isn't there an Apparation point in the main lobby, Mr. Weasley?" he asked.

"Yes, there is," the witch answered before Mr. Weasley could open his mouth. She appeared suddenly nervous and unsure of herself. "We have this separate location since our testees are usually so anxious to use their new license. Right through this door."

She attempted to steer them through the exit, still smiling, but Harry detected a panicky look in her eyes.

"Thanks, but I think I'd like to take the walk," he said, stopping despite the pressure of her hand on his shoulder.

She grabbed his arm, trying to halt his progress. "Mr. Potter...Harry, there really is no need-"

"Oh, but I think there is," Harry said, pulling his arm free and leaving through the same door they'd arrived.

"What are you on about, Harry?" Ron asked, following him towards the lift.

Mr. Weasley smiled knowingly. "Boys, I need to get up to my office. I trust you can make it back on your own?"

"Yes, Mr. Weasley. We're right as rain...and thank you," Harry replied.

"Think nothing of it," Mr. Weasley replied, heading in the opposite direction.

When Ron and Harry reached the main lobby there were a number of reporters still mulling around hoping to catch Harry's exit. They spotted him almost instantly and began to move towards him. Harry raised his hand in the air, flashing his new license for all of them to see. Several flashbulbs snapped the pose.

"I did it," he cried jubilantly, knowing there would no longer be any questions as to why he was there.

He and Ron shared a smile as they sprinted to the Apparation point and Disapparated in time to escape the questioning reporters.

When they returned to Grimmauld Place, after a long and very public walk through Diagon Alley, they found a birthday feast fit for a king awaiting them. They'd made several stops along the way, including a visit to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Fred and George had gifted Harry with his birthday present while they were there, claiming it was better opened away from Mrs. Weasley's prying eyes.

Harry opened the package to reveal two bottles of Ogden's Firewhiskey.

"Those are Everlasting Party bottles," Fred said.

"Guaranteed to last for the length of any single party," replied George.

"Or at least until you pass out," said Fred with a grin.

As they traveled along the busy street, they'd run into several classmates and had their photographs taken several times. All in all, Harry thought it was a very successful outing.

Upon their return, he was overwhelmed by the amount of food Mrs. Weasley had prepared. A knot of guilt twisted in his stomach over his planned deception, and he attempted to impress upon Mrs. Weasley how grateful he was for her kindness.

She brushed him off as if it was nothing, but Harry thought he saw a look of understanding in Mr. Weasley's eyes.

"Mmm, roasted lamb," Ron said, sitting down and pulling a plate towards him.

"Never mind the food, Ron. How did you do?" Hermione asked, biting her lip anxiously.

"How'd I do with what?" Ron asked through a mouthful of potatoes.

Hermione was flabbergasted. "With what? With your test, of course. Honestly, Ron. Where have you been all this time?" Hermione asked.

"Oh. Passed," Ron said, shoveling another forkful into his mouth.

"I knew you could do it," Hermione exclaimed, throwing her arms around him.

Ron's eyes flew open wide before a very self-satisfied smile crossed his face, causing Fred and George to snigger.

"And you, Harry? How did you do?" Ginny asked, sidling up next to him and taking the chair next to his.

"Got my license," Harry said, grinning.

"I knew you'd do it," she replied, leaning over and pecking him on the cheek. Harry felt his face burn.

"They did it despite Rufus Scrimgeour's attempts to distract them," Mr. Weasley said, serving himself some of the dinner.

"What do you mean?" Remus Lupin asked, looking up in alarm.

"It was nothing," Harry said, shaking his head.

"What was nothing?" Remus asked.

"Scrimgeour had a bunch of reporters waiting to ambush Harry," Ron replied. "You know how he's been after Harry to make appearances at the Ministry. He wanted them all to see him there. They tried to shoo us out after we finished our tests, too, but Harry wouldn't let them do it. He strode right through the lobby flashing his new Apparation license so they'd all know why he was there. I'd love to see Scrimgeour's face when he hears about it."

"He already did," Mr. Weasley said grimly.

"What happened?" Harry asked, alarmed by Mr. Weasley's expression.

"He wasn't happy. The evening edition of the Daily Prophet is already out and filled with your picture and several stories. Absolutely nothing about your support for the Ministry as he hoped, however. He sacked the witch who worked in reception at the testing center," Mr. Weasley replied.

Harry felt dreadful. He'd wanted to upset Scrimgeour's plans, but he hadn't meant to get the receptionist in trouble.

"Not your fault, Harry," Ginny said firmly, correctly reading his expression. "You can't control what everyone else does. What you did was right, and you can't help that Scrimgeour acted like a prat."

Mr. Weasley smiled fondly. "Although I won't go so far as calling the Minister for Magic a prat," he said, his lips twitching, "Ginny's right. It wasn't your fault so don't let him make you feel guilty."

"Enough of this," Mrs. Weasley said, frowning. "This is Harry's birthday dinner. Let's talk about something pleasant."

Harry remembered how upset she'd been the previous year when news of the war interrupted his birthday celebration. He knew she meant well, but she still wasn't accepting the fact that he was part of this war, whether she liked it or not.

He was startled from his thoughts when Tonks entered the room looking pale and exhausted. Her mint green hair hung limply on her shoulders. "Sorry I'm late," she said, sinking wearily into the chair Remus had pulled out for her.

"You look terrible, Tonks," Mrs. Weasley said, alarmed.

"Rough day," Tonks replied with an attempt at a smile.

"Did they have you out at Azkaban again?" Remus asked, handing her a glass of wine and fixing her a plate of food.

Tonks nodded, sipping the wine gratefully. "That place is horrible."

"Azkaban?" Harry asked. "What are you doing at Azkaban?"

"The Ministry has had Aurors guarding the prisoners there since most of the Dementors fled," Tonks replied.

"Most of them?" Harry asked. "There are still some there?"

"A few of the older, more infirm ones," Tonks replied heavily.

"Miserable creatures. I suspect some of the ones that stayed did so simply for the easy prey. They didn't want to have to go and look for their own food. Doesn't matter that there aren't many left, however. The walls of Azkaban are nearly alive with their scent because they've been there so long. It's a horrid place."

Mrs. Weasley shuddered. "I can't believe they send you there. I remember when Arthur had to go out there once. It took him days to recover," she said tearfully.

Mr. Weasley comfortingly squeezed her hand. "Now, Molly. Someone has to guard the prisoners, don't they? There really isn't another option."

"I think the Ministry should consider building an entirely new prison, away from the effect the Dementors have had on Azkaban," Bill said. He and Fleur had recently returned from their honeymoon and both were tanned and appeared well-rested. "We could use charms to keep them incarcerated and house-elves to supply the food."

"Zat is what we do in France," Fleur said, staring at Bill adoringly. "Eet eez a much better way, I zink."

"Maybe after the war, something like that will be done here. Right now, all the Ministry's resources are focused on You-Know-Who and the destruction he's causing," Mr. Weasley said heavily.

The paper had reported new Dementor attacks almost daily while the Dark Mark had been seen more and more often in Muggle areas. During the past week, several buildings had caught fire in Birmingham and despite their

best efforts, Ministry officials had been unable to extinguish the flames.

"When we're finished with dinner, I've made a treacle tart for pudding. That one is your favorite, isn't it, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked, glaring at both Bill and Mr. Weasley.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," Harry replied. Despite wanting to hear more about what was happening at Azkaban, he couldn't help but be pleased with the prospect of Mrs. Weasley's treacle tart.

Conceding to Mrs. Weasley's desire for a happier subject, the rest of the guests let talk of the war rest for the moment. The remainder of the dinner was spent pleasantly with laughter and the twins' teasing of Ron about his first failed attempt at gaining an Apparation license.

All of them were so immersed in the festivities that no one noticed the kitchen door opening once again. Narcissa Malfoy stepped into the kitchen with a wary expression, carrying a stack of empty trays. She walked towards the sink and placed them next to it, glancing with distaste at the countertop.

"Narcissa," Mrs. Weasley said pleasantly. "Would you care for something to eat?" Harry noticed that Mrs. Weasley didn't jump up to serve her as she usually did when someone entered the kitchen.

Ginny leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear. "I don't believe it. She brought the trays down. She must be hungry; she hasn't eaten all day."

Mrs. Malfoy appeared affronted by the invitation. "I'd prefer to take a tray upstairs," she said stiffly.

"Well, there's plenty of food, and I see you've brought down some trays. You'll just have to clean them up since there aren't any clean ones left, and then you can help yourself," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling. She turned towards her own dinner without a backward glance.

Mrs. Malfoy stood slack jawed, staring with revulsion at Mrs. Weasley. Her long, bony white fingers gripped a tray in shock. "Certainly, there are house-elves to do such things," she said, aghast.

Mrs. Weasley smiled and shook her head. "Oh, not since Kreacher left for Hogwarts. Not that he was ever much help anyway. No, we all have to pitch in with the chores around here if we want anything to get done."

"Malfoy Manor has a full staff of house-elves. Certainly it won't cause any difficulties if I have one of them come to work here," Mrs. Malfoy said haughtily.

"No," Remus said harshly, sounding angry. "We discussed this when you arrived. You proved it yourself that a house-elf's loyalty cannot be guaranteed."

Harry's stomach clenched as Narcissa raised her nose in the air without apology.

Hermione folded her arms across her chest and scowled at the mention of the house-elves. Harry knew it was taking all her self-restraint not to start arguing over elfish welfare. She had to know her pleas would fall on deaf ears. Still, he knew Hermione well enough to realize she'd be unable to stay silent for long.

"I'm expected to prepare my own food?" Mrs. Malfoy asked incredulously, her pale blue eyes widening in disbelief.

"Only if you want to eat," Mrs. Weasley said, still smiling although her tone had turned frosty.

Harry leaned back in his chair and grinned, feeling this was one of the best birthday gifts he could have received. Still stung over the reminder of Kreacher's betrayal, Harry didn't think Mrs. Weasley was making the Malfoys' stay nearly as unpleasant as it should be. Narcissa Malfoy had met her match in Molly Weasley, however, and Harry didn't think the arrogant woman had any idea with whom she was dealing.

He glanced over at Fred and George, who were leaning back in their chairs sipping wine and swinging their heads back and forth as if watching a net ball tournament. Ginny was biting her lip to keep from laughing. No one said a word.

Narcissa was furious. She glared daggers at the entire party. Harry thought she would turn on her heel and storm from the kitchen, but her hunger must have overridden her pride. She grabbed a tray and slammed it into the sink, disdainfully wiping it off.

Walking stiffly towards the table with her head held high, Narcissa's cold gaze roamed over the many delectable items, finally resting on the cake with the words Happy Birthday, Harry written on top.

Her ice blue eyes locked on Harry. "This is your birthday dinner," she said arrogantly. It wasn't a question.

"It is," Harry said, smirking.

Narcissa put the tray back on the counter. "I've lost my appetite," she said, her gaze sweeping over the Weasleys and the other guests. "I'm surprised there are so many willing to get so close to you. The people who do have a nasty habit of ending up dead."

Harry gritted his teeth and forced himself not to flinch. His face must have paled, however, for Ginny immediately grabbed his hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

She turned towards Narcissa and said, "While those nearest you have the nasty habit of ending up in prison."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed, but before she could retort Mrs. Weasley sharply said, "That's enough."

Narcissa turned on her heel and left the room with her nose in the air.

Harry let a breath out through his nose.

The kitchen was silent for a moment after her departure. Finally, Ron leaned across the table and whispered dramatically, "I wonder if she keeps her nose stuck so high in the air after living with Lucius and Draco for so many years? She started looking up just so she wouldn't have to look at them."

Ginny snorted and angrily blew a stray piece of hair from her face. "Never mind her, Harry. Don't let her spoil your party."

Conversations resumed around the table, and Narcissa's presence was soon forgotten. Despite his best efforts, Harry's mood was dampened, however. Said in anger or not, Narcissa's words were true, and they renewed Harry's worries for those closest to him. He pasted a smile on his face as he opened his gifts, but was eager to escape and clear his head.

When the dinner was finished, Mrs. Weasley shooed them all from the kitchen and insisted that she would clear the dishes. Harry tried to break away and sprint up to the room he shared with Ron, but his friends apparently knew he was feeling low, and they all followed him.

Ginny sat on his bed beside him, while Ron and Hermione sat on Ron's bed. Fred and George plopped down on the floor and began rummaging through Harry's pile of birthday presents.

"Here it is," Fred exclaimed at last, pulling out one of the bottles of Firewhiskey that he and George had given him earlier that day.

"Harry, mate, I think you're in need of this," George said, handing the open bottle to Harry.

Harry looked at it silently for a moment before tossing it back and taking a long swig.

"Harry!" Hermione cried, scandalized.

"What? He's of age," Ron said, taking the bottle from Harry, and downing his own swig. Ron handed the bottle to Fred. Each of the twins took a drink before passing the bottle to Ginny.

"Ginny's not of age," Hermione said, warily watching the bottle. Harry suspected she was more nervous about the fact that her turn would be next rather than Ginny's age.

Ginny rolled her eyes and took a deep swallow. She looked at them all triumphantly for a moment before her eyes began to water, and she started to cough and splutter.

Harry patted her on the back, grinning. "Have you had Firewhiskey before, Ginny?" he asked.

Still unable to speak, Ginny shook her head, her eyes streaming.

"I had it for the first time on Bill's stag night. Speaking of which...I felt bloody awful the next morning," Harry said, still rubbing Ginny's back.

"Ahh, yes, we've taken care of everything," George said, rummaging in the box that still held another bottle of Firewhiskey. He removed a phial of murky gray liquid and took a sip.

"Guaranteed to avoid a hangover," Fred said, taking his own sip and handing the phial to Harry.

Ginny handed the bottle to Hermione, who glanced warily at them all. "I really don't think this is a very good idea. Your mother could be up here at any minute," Hermione said.

Fred lazily waved his hand at the open door. "We'll hear her on the stairs if she comes this way. She won't anyway. Tonks is here, and Mum was making tea. Once those two get chatting, it'll be hours before they're done. Bottoms up, Hermione," he said, grinning.

Hermione set her shoulders, breathed deeply and took a very dainty sip of the Firewhiskey.

"You can do better than that," Ron said when Hermione had finished coughing. "Think of it as an experiment. You can't truly tell Harry and me off for drinking if you don't have first hand knowledge of the full effects."

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she glared at Ron. Without breaking eye contact, she tipped the bottle back again, this time taking a long draught and making the twins whoop with glee.

"You show him, Hermione," Fred said, delighted.

"I always thought there was more to you than that prim and proper exterior," George said, taking the bottle from her.

Hermione frowned and Ron wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Lay off," he said to George in a low voice.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, little bro," Fred said, taking the bottle from Harry. "No one is picking on your Hermione."

Ron's ears turned red, matching the color in Hermione's cheeks.

As they passed the bottle around and listened to the twins' amusing stories of events from their shop, Harry tried to shake his unease. The Firewhiskey felt warm in his belly, but he wasn't as relaxed and carefree as he had the last time he'd drunk it. Narcissa's words kept ringing in his head.

The people that get close to you have a nasty habit of ending up dead...

Harry angrily took the bottle from Ginny and took another drink, desperately trying to block the implication of the words.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny are the people closest to me now...

Ron had begun slurring his words, while Ginny had developed an uncontrollable case of the giggles. Despite his morose thoughts, Harry

couldn't help but be amused seeing her this way. At first, she'd laugh at any nonsensical thing the twins' would say but gradually would giggle if anyone so much as looked at her.

Surprisingly, Hermione appeared to hold it better than either of the Weasleys. She kept right up with the others, but hadn't started acting silly. She had grown much quieter than usual, however.

Ginny turned towards Harry, frowning slightly as she studied him intently.

"What?" he demanded finally, slightly unnerved by her intense gaze.

"I don't know where I came up with fresh pickled toad; they're really more emerald in color. I suppose it was harder to rhyme emerald," she said, giggling so hard she couldn't catch her breath.

The others roared with laughter, as Harry felt color flame to his cheeks, remembering that horribly embarrassing Valentine from second year.

"Er...right," he said, shifting his position so he could lean back against the wall. "Maybe you've had enough of that Ginny." He'd begun to worry what else she might blurt out in her drunken state. He was sitting in a small room with three of her brothers.

"Bloody Hell, Harry, lighten up," Hermione said, shocking them all. Ron's mouth gaped open.

"Hermione," he said. "You just cursed."

"I've spent the last six years practically living with you, Ron. Did you think I hadn't picked up some of your ruddy habits?" Hermione asked, taking another drink.

Fred and George forgot all about Harry's Valentine as they turned towards Hermione with calculating expressions.

"Which of his other habits have you picked up on, Hermione?" Fred asked eagerly.

"Well, I haven't learned how he stuffs an entire potato into his mouth at one time, but I really don't think I want to know that," she said seriously causing the others to laugh. "But I have picked up a load of curse words and can make my face appear as if I'm listening to you intently when I'm really plotting out an entire assignment in my head. Of course, I don't think Ron's really thinking about assignments when he does that, more like a Quidditch roster. I've never seen anyone so obsessed with ruddy Quidditch. Back when we were younger - before he was on the team - he used to quote facts and records about every match in history while we watched Harry play."

"I never thought you were really listening," Ron said, stunned.

"Oh, I wasn't paying attention, but I did like to listen to your voice. You have a very pleasant-sounding voice when it's not cursing or

shouting about something. You do tend to shout a lot," she said seriously.

The gleeful expressions on the faces of Fred and George told Harry that they would never let Ron live this down.

The people that get close to you have a nasty habit of ending up dead... If they're going to insist upon following me, it was more than likely that one or all could...

Harry shuddered, knowing he'd never survive their loss. Voldemort could never know that the surest way to destroy Harry would be to hurt any of them. He couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't.

"Harry," Ginny said softly, taking his hand. Her eyes were glazed and slightly vacant, but she still appeared to sense his inner turmoil.

His head was spinning, and he suddenly felt very old and tired. He may have only just turned seventeen, but he felt as if he'd already lived several lifetimes.

"Everything will be okay," Ginny whispered, shifting so she could burrow her head under his arm. "Try not to worry so much."

"Oh, isn't this a sight," a drawling voice said from the doorway.

Harry looked up to see Draco Malfoy leaning against the doorframe, an undecipherable expression upon his pale face. His blond hair was unkempt, hanging over his eyes in a very un-Malfoyish way.

"What do you want?" Ron asked, jumping to his feet and wavering slightly.

"I came to investigate the cause of all the noise. I hadn't realized I was interrupting your pathetic little party," Malfoy sneered.

Ginny started to laugh, wrapping her arms around her waist to try and control her giggles.

Harry smiled at her, amused, while she caught her breath.

"He really does look like a ferret," she said, gasping.

"Shut it, Weaslette," Malfoy said, his gray eyes flashing. "You pathetic little blood traitor. Consorting with Potter and the Mudblood – you're a disgrace to your heritage. Of course, you always had a thing for Potty anyway, didn't you?"

"Watch your mouth," Ron snarled, clenching his fists.

"Leave her out of it, Malfoy," Harry snarled, jumping off the bed and raising his wand. He'd been looking for an outlet for his tension all evening, and the blonde represented the perfect opportunity. "Don't let me ever hear you speak to her that way again."

Ginny had stopped giggling and was desperately trying to focus on what was happening.

"Leave her out of it? She's already at the center of it, Potter. God, you really are naïve, aren't you? Snape already told the Dark Lord all about your little girlfriend. It's no more likely she'll survive this war than you will," Malfoy said.

The people that get close to you have a nasty habit of ending up dead...

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Harry demanded through clenched teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing that his words had any effect on Harry. "I'm certain you were only too happy to confirm that before Voldemort turned on you."

"I was just wondering why the Light's precious Chosen One is holed up in a bedroom getting pissed with his little band of cronies while everyone is waiting for him to save the world. I don't think their faith would be that strong if they could see you now, Potter."

"Why not?" Ron asked belligerently, moving to stand in front of Harry. "I think it would do everyone some good to see that Harry isn't letting V-Voldemort interfere with him living his life."

Malfoy flinched at the name, his eyes widening slightly that Ron had said it. Harry thought it was the first time he'd ever heard Ron actually say it, and wondered how much of that was the Firewhiskey talking.

"In these dark times, everyone needs a few laughs," Fred said, standing up next to Harry.

"Harry told us that a few years back, and he was right. He will win, and he'll survive. And we're all going to be right there alongside him making certain he does," George said, flanking Harry's other side.

Harry's heart swelled with pride. Looking over at Malfoy, he could see the uncertainty on the blonde's face. It occurred to Harry how similar his and Malfoy's situations were. Each was assigned the impossible task of destroying the powerful leader of an opposing force. But their choices had differed greatly. Now, Harry was surrounded by a fiercely loyal group of friends prepared to die with him if they had to, while Malfoy was alone and in hiding from the very people to whom he had sworn his allegiance. Their choices and consequences were so very different.

"Then you're all going to die," Malfoy spat. "You prats have no idea what you're getting into. The Dark Lord doesn't fool around, he won't tolerate your little jokes."

"Maybe that's his problem," Fred said.

"Everyone needs a good joke," said George.

Harry spied Ginny out of the corner of his eye. Scowling, she'd stood up on the bed and wavered precariously while holding her wand on Malfoy.

"Ginny, don't," he said, reaching toward her. He was afraid that in her inebriated state, she'd only end up cursing herself. She fell back, and he managed to catch her before she landed. In the distraction, Harry heard the distinctive whoosh of a spell being cast, although he knew it hadn't come from Ginny's wand.

He turned around to see Ron, Fred and George staring in shock at the doorway where a white ferret squealed and scurried up the hallway.

They looked at each other, stunned speechless before turning as one to face Hermione. She sat on Ron's bed, calmly polishing her wand. "Ginny was right," she said simply. "The bloody wanker does look like a ferret."

The twins roared with laughter, as Ron dropped to his knees in front of her. "I love you, Hermione," he said.

"It'd be nice if you could say that once in awhile when I hadn't done your homework for you or performed a brilliant piece of Transfiguration," Hermione said primly.

Ron's ears burned. "I'll work on it," he said in a low voice.

"On that note, brother dear, I think it's time we bade them farewell," George said.

"Yeah. Mum should be up here any minute now, and I don't want her to think we had anything to do with the condition this lot is in," Fred said.

They wished Harry a Happy Birthday and bade them all farewell.

Harry turned to see Ginny curled up on his bed like a cat, sleeping soundly. He covered her with a blanket and softly kissed her head.

"Come on, Ron. Let the girls sleep in here, and we'll bunk in their room. We've got to get an early start," Harry said.

"Right," Ron replied, still staring at Hermione with a curious expression.

Harry snuggled into Ginny's bed that night, taking a deep breath and smelling that intoxicating floral smell that was all Ginny. Their quest would begin tomorrow, but lying here now, he felt strangely comforted.

Chapter Ten

Delays, Disappointment, and Dating

Harry awoke with a start, momentarily panicked because he didn't recognize his surroundings. Slipping his glasses on his nose, he stared wildly at the bright yellow walls and abundance of flowers and cosmetics and well...girly stuff. Then he remembered switching rooms with Ginny and Hermione the night before. He'd set an alarm to wake him at dawn, then had cast a silencing charm around the bed so no one else would be alerted.

He could hear Ron snoring heavily, and he had to bite back a laugh seeing his tall friend's feet sticking off the end of the other bed while the rest of his body was wrapped in a fluffy pink-flowered blanket. He wished he had a camera; Fred and George would pay a huge sum for that picture.

Harry lay back for a moment and stretched, breathing in the scent on his pillow...Ginny's pillow. He let his eyes wander across the room, now alert and able to focus on his surroundings. It was easy to distinguish Ginny's side of the room from Hermione's. One half was neatly organized with everything in its place, large stacks of books precisely tucked in both corners. The floor on the other half was covered with clothing, gum wrappers, stray quills and several copies of Witch Weekly. Harry was disgruntled to see his own likeness winking from a picture in the top corner of one of the magazines.

He shifted uncomfortably, feeling something lumpy underneath his back. He reached down under the covers and pulled out a ragged stuffed animal. It looked as if it had once been a bear, but was now a sorry sight indeed. He grinned, knowing he'd have something to use to take the mickey out of Ginny later.

Yanking back the covers, he put his feet on the floor and immediately stepped on something. He reached down to lift it off the floor. His face flushed brilliantly when he realized he was holding Ginny's bra.

"What's that?" Ron mumbled, squinting at him across the room.

"Nothing," Harry squeaked, his voice sounding very high. He guiltily shoved the bra behind his back and tried to change the subject. "You've got to get up. We need to move quickly."

"What are you on about, Harry? What's that behind your back?" Ron asked, fully rousing at the sight of a flustered Harry.

Harry tried to inconspicuously tuck the offending garment beneath Ginny's covers. Despite his embarrassment, he couldn't help but notice how soft and silky the material felt, and he rubbed his thumb along the edge as he tried to hide it.

Ron leaped out of bed and reached around to grab the bra from Harry. "What are you trying to hide?" he demanded.

"It's nothing," Harry said, panicked and trying to get the evidence away from him.

At that moment, the bedroom door swung open revealing Hermione and Ginny. The two girls stood there, their faces a mixture of surprise and amusement, staring at Ron and Harry who were facing each other in the middle of the floor, Ginny's bra stretched between them.

"Well," Ginny said at last. "I hadn't realized you two had such pervy tendencies. I do have other bras, you know. You don't have to fight over that one."

Hermione roared with laughter. "Do you have any of our knickers on, as well?" she asked, doubling over at the scarlet hues that suffused Ron and Harry's faces.

"I- What- He- What are you doing with my sister's bra?" Ron bellowed, glaring at Harry.

Harry's eyes widened as all three of them turned to look at him. "Nothing," he stammered. "I stepped on it when I got up, and I tried to put it back, and that's when you woke up."

"Will you two be quiet," Hermione hissed. "Do you want to wake up the whole house?"

Laughing, Ginny walked over and took her bra from Harry and Ron. She lightly pecked Harry on the nose. "You're cute when you're embarrassed," she said.

Suddenly realizing he was standing there in his boxers, Ron grabbed the pink flowery blanket and wrapped it around himself. "What are you two doing in here?" he asked. "We're not dressed yet."

"I can see that," Ginny said dryly. "I wouldn't suggest wearing that color though, Ron. It clashes with your hair. That's why I gave it to Hermione."

Hermione giggled, her cheeks very pink. "We've got the stuff all ready. We'll meet you downstairs in five minutes. Hurry up," she said, staring pointedly at Ron. "Your mother is usually the first one awake."

The girls went downstairs while Ron and Harry quickly dressed. They met Hermione and Ginny in the entrance hall.

"Are we ready to do this?" Hermione asked. Now that the time had come, she looked wary and uncertain.

"Yeah," Harry said, infusing his voice with a confidence he didn't really feel. Hunting the Horcruxes would feel better than waiting to do it, he was certain. Putting his hand on the door, he took a deep breath, and the four of them stole quietly into the gray pre-dawn light.

They soon reached the address that Mrs. Granger had given them for the orphanage, but it was still too early to enter. They bought some muffins at a nearby café and sat down at a table on the sidewalk with a clear view of the orphanage. Harry narrowed his eyes, studying it. There was a vague resemblance to the building he remembered seeing in the Pensieve, but there was something different that he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was.

"It's definitely the right address," he said slowly, "those steps going in are the same, but--"

"It's been renovated," Hermione said. "The article my mother forwarded to me said it was completely redone in 1972. They kept some of the old building and added that section over there." Hermione pointed to the

other side of the building that stretched further down the block than Harry had realized.

"They've renovated it? How do we know they even kept the section where Riddle lived?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"We don't," Hermione said, shrugging. "But we have to check anyway, don't we? It's not like there's anything we can do about the fact they renovated, Harry. After all, it's been ages since Riddle was here. There would have to be some changes for it still to be open."

"Yeah, well, even the renovations were done before we were all born. They're probably due for more," Ron said around a mouthful of muffin.

Harry shrugged. Hermione was right; he didn't know why he hadn't even considered the possibility. Riddle would have first been here over sixty years ago, everything couldn't stay the same."

"How are we going to get in?" Ginny asked. "They're Muggles, but they must have security."

"Yeah, but I think I can get past it," Harry said. "Dumbledore used a blank piece of paper to convince the headmistress that Tom Riddle was supposed to go to Hogwarts. I think I can do the same charm. Once I'm inside, I just need to find a secluded spot where we can Apparate later. I think it'll be better if we go back tonight with the Invisibility Cloak."

"That's a good idea," Hermione said. "We'll go rent a couple of rooms for the night. It'll give us a place to wait."

"All right," Harry said. "I'll meet you back here in two hours, and you can show me where to go. I want to walk around the building and see if I can recognize anything before I go inside."

Hermione, Ron and Ginny departed, and Harry walked up and down the street in front of the orphanage. He had a strange sense of déjà vu as he passed the stone entrance. This was definitely the same place, and the brick front remained intact. He waited to enter the building until there was some activity on the street.

It had obviously been updated, but Harry found it recognizable. He could see the stone steps that led up to the offices behind a comfortable sitting area decorated in calming blues. A large wooden desk guarded the stairs, and a gray-haired receptionist sat flipping through some papers. She pursed her lips and lifted her reading glasses onto her nose. Something on the paper she held displeased her for she scowled as she pulled the page from the stack and placed it to the side.

Something in the woman's face reminded Harry of his Aunt Petunia. She had the same disapproving look he remembered seeing so many times while growing up on Privet Drive. His aunt always assumed that everyone was out to take advantage of her.

Harry strode confidently up to the desk. Going with his instincts, he approached her as he would his aunt.

"Good morning, Mrs...Hatcher," Harry said, pretending to read from the paper he carried. He'd actually simply glanced at the nametag she wore affixed to her jacket. "I was sent to look at a problem you're having with one of your computers. I understand you've been having a lot of trouble with it lately."

Mrs. Hatcher, who had looked at Harry with extreme suspicion when he first approached her, puffed out her chest. "Why, yes, we have, young man. Those infernal contraptions are always breaking down and making us lose all our data. I don't know how you people get away with selling such inferior equipment."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Harry said, nodding his head stiffly. "If you'll just direct me to where the malfunctioning equipment is, I'll be on my way without disturbing your work further."

Mrs. Hatcher appeared mollified that he considered her work important. "We have a family coming in for an adoption later today, and Mrs. Thompson will be quite upset if there is a problem getting all the paperwork ready. Now, which machine is it? Who put in the service call?" Mrs. Hatcher asked.

"I believe the name was Mrs. Thompson," Harry lied smoothly.

Mrs. Hatcher picked up one of the papers in front of her, frowning slightly. "You're not on the Visitor List," she said, reading it again.

Harry schooled his features into a look of confusion. "I'm not?" he asked, leaning over the paper. Keeping his wand hidden beneath his hand, he wordlessly cast a spell.

"Oh! Here it is. It is Mrs. Thompson; you'd best hurry then. Her office is right up the stairs and to the right. I believe she's here already," Mrs. Hatcher said, waving him through.

"Thank you," Harry replied, quickly hurrying up the stairs.

As he moved away, he heard Mrs. Hatcher mutter in a very disapproving voice, "They get younger every time."

He quickly walked down the corridor, taking in the sterile walls and worn carpeting. He could see some classrooms down one corridor, and assumed the living quarters were on the other side of the facility. The children inside the classroom again looked well cared for, but Harry thought the sadness and loneliness of the place was palpable.

Uncle Vernon had regularly threatened to send him to an orphanage, and he'd often thought he'd have been better off. Now, he knew he wouldn't have enjoyed this life, either. He might have been better off physically, but he would have hated the forced conformity. He was certain he would have ended up in loads of trouble, and he shivered at the strange similarity he once again felt with a young Tom Riddle.

He didn't like the place and wanted to get out as soon as possible. He needed to find a quiet spot that was likely to be unoccupied in the

evening hours. Peering into one office, he saw a janitor fixing a broken shelf on a bookcase.

"You here to fix the computer?" the man asked, glancing only briefly at Harry. He was old and grizzled, reminding Harry slightly of Mad Eye Moody.

"Er...yeah," Harry said uncertainly.

"Ruth said she'd sent you along. This one just mucked up as well," the man said, banging on the bookcase. "Can you take a look at it, too?"

"That looks like a really old bookcase," Harry said, sitting at the desk and pretending to examine the computer. "I imagine they don't get new furniture here very often."

"Nah, we make do with what we have. They stored a bunch of the old furniture from before they renovated the place downstairs in the storeroom. We bring it up whenever some of the new stuff breaks. They just don't make furniture the way they used to. The old stuff might look rough, but it's much sturdier than the crap they make nowadays," the man said.

Harry nodded in what he hoped was a sympathetic manner. "Do they keep any old computers down in that storeroom? Ones that could be used for spare parts?" Harry asked, thinking fast. "It might save you something on the invoice."

The man shrugged. "I dunno. You can check. The door at the end of the corridor leads down there. Can you fix that one?" he asked.

Harry looked at the computer, having no idea what was wrong with it or how to repair it. He glanced over at the janitor, whose back was to him. He discreetly waved his wand and wordlessly cast a Reparo spell.

The computer hummed almost happily.

"It's all set," Harry said. "Nice to meet you."

The man nodded gruffly but didn't reply. Harry hurried down the corridor and slipped inside the door to the storeroom. Thankfully, it was unlocked.

Harry was overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of the underground storage space. Rows and rows of metal-framed beds and wardrobes were stacked over every bit of available space. Searching them would likely take all night.

Harry slipped the Spell Detectors out of his pocket and placed them on the end of his nose. He got lucky getting down here; maybe he'd be lucky again. He quickly perused the room, but could see no trace of red that would indicate Dark spells. They'd have to return tonight and look more carefully. For now, he had to get back to the others.

That night, Harry side-along Apparated with Hermione into the dusty storeroom, giving her a chance to look around and get familiar with the layout. Then they Apparated back to the small inn where they'd rented a couple of rooms and brought Ron and Ginny back with them.

"This place is kind of creepy," Ron said, glancing warily at all the old furniture stored in piles. The air was dank and musty, and the dim light from their wands cast long shadows on the walls. "I wonder why this room is so deep underground."

"I think it might have been used as a bomb shelter during the war," Hermione said absently, looking around.

"This is a Muggle building, Hermione. They didn't know about the war," Ron said, puzzled.

"Not with Voldemort. Honestly, Ron, you should have been the one to take Muggle studies. Around the time Grindelwald was terrorizing wizarding Britain, the Muggles were involved in a huge war, as well. During the Blitz, when London was being heavily bombed, people used bomb shelters to try and protect themselves."

"They hid the children down here?" Ron asked, shuddering.

"I'd imagine," Hermione said.

"This place is kind of creepy," Ron said again.

"There's a lot of sadness here," Harry said quietly. "Come on, I noticed some wardrobes over here."

He saw Hermione lock eyes with Ron for a moment before following him.

"You really think that if there is a Horcrux here, he would have hidden it in the wardrobe, Harry?" Hermione asked. "How can you be certain he would have been able to find the same one he used when he was here?"

Harry shrugged, feeling daunted by the large number of places to look. "If he came back to hide one here, I'm certain that's where he would have put it. It's just a hunch, but it's all we've got. He would have been able to find the right wardrobe – I'm certain of it. But, the longer I've been here today, the less likely I think he would have left a Horcrux."

"Why?" Hermione asked, startled.

Her brows had knit at his words. Hermione always wanted solid reasons for doing things. Harry suspected much of this quest would involve simply going on gut instincts, and he wondered how she would cope. He knew she wouldn't like his answer to this question, either.

"It doesn't feel right; I can't explain it," Harry said.

"Harry, you're going to have to do better than that. We can't base our entire search on your instincts," Hermione said.

"His instincts have got him out of sticky situations in the past," Ginny said, weakly smiling at Harry.

"His instincts have also got him into plenty of sticky situations," Hermione snapped. "We can't afford any mistakes. We can't simply act on gut feelings."

"We're going to have to, Hermione," Harry said. "It's exactly what Dumbledore did that night in the cave. It was more sensing something than knowing it."

"How did he know it, though?" Hermione demanded, stamping her foot.

Harry ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Look, this place would hold bad memories for Riddle, not powerful ones. He was helpless here. That memory we saw in the Pensieve – where he stored the first tokens he took in that wardrobe, that's what made me think he might put one back in there. But, I don't think so. He likes power and the feeling of control. When he first learned he was a wizard...it was Dumbledore who held all the power. Dumbledore had all the answers, and Tom was at his mercy. Voldemort wouldn't have liked that memory. He wouldn't have liked feeling that way."

"So, you don't think there's anything here? Then what are we looking for?" Ron asked, unable to hide his eagerness at not having to search all the wardrobes.

"Just because that's what I think doesn't mean it's true," Harry replied. "It's certainly possible that he hid something here. Even if we don't find anything, I'm certain it won't be the last dead end we chase before this is over."

"It'll give us some practice," Ginny said brightly. "Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky."

"You said you didn't feel anything, Harry. What do you mean by that?" Hermione asked.

Harry sighed. "I can't explain it exactly. With the diary and again when I was at the cave with Dumbledore... I could sense something. I hadn't really given it much thought until Moody told me how to sense magic with these," Harry said, holding up the Spell Detectors. "I'm hoping that when we do manage to locate a Horcrux, it'll happen again, and I'll be able to explain it better."

Hermione frowned, obviously not satisfied with his answer, but she let it drop for the moment.

Standing in front of row after row of broken-down old wardrobes, Ron looked overwhelmed. "Are we supposed to go through every one of these? It'll take ages. They're all empty, anyway."

"Well, he's not going to leave anything right where you can see it," Hermione said scathingly.

"Here, use these," Harry said, handing the Spell Detectors to Ron. "I don't know if they'll still be able to pick up any magic after sixty

years, but look for a glowing color on any of them. If it's red, it means Dark Magic."

"What are you going to do?" Ron asked

"I'm going to walk through the dormitories under the Cloak and see if I see any of the older-style wardrobes are still in use up there," he replied.

"I'll go with you," Ginny said. "It'll be quicker with two sets of eyes in each place."

Harry nodded and raised his arm so she could slip under the Cloak with him. All of his senses suddenly went on high alert once she was pressed so close to him. It was all he could do to focus on simply walking toward the stairs.

"Just looking for wardrobes," Ron said, disgruntled. "No snogging while you're up there."

"Leave them alone, Ron," Hermione said. "Come on, let's get started."

Harry and Ginny climbed the stairs and walked quietly towards the wing where the orphans slept. With a massive effort, Harry forced his body to calm down and his mind away from the thought of how nicely his hand fit in the curve of Ginny's hip as they searched the rooms.

Several times they saw staff workers patrolling the corridors, but the Cloak kept them hidden, and they simply froze until the person had passed. It was during these 'frozen' spells that Harry's mind would once again become overly aware of Ginny's closeness. He'd have to drag his thoughts back to the present each time they began moving again.

It took a long time to search all the rooms, and they found no trace of any of the old wardrobes still in use. Several of the orphans were still awake and only pretending to sleep when the workers entered the rooms. Harry smiled, remembering doing the same thing to Aunt Petunia when he was younger. He'd frequently sneak out of his cupboard and prowl the house once the Dursleys went to bed, occasionally sneaking food from the kitchen.

"I don't think there's anything up here, Harry," Ginny said when they reached the end of the wing.

"No. It was unlikely anyway, but worth checking," Harry replied, feeling slightly discouraged.

Ginny stopped walking, turned around and pressed him against the wall. There was a determined glint in her eyes that he'd never seen before, and a slow smile spread across her features. Harry became instantly aware of every part of her body that was pressed against his, and he wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her in place.

"What was it Ron said about snogging?" she asked huskily, her lips so close to his that he could feel her warm breath. The temperature in the corridor must have risen ten degrees, and he didn't understand how his body could be so warm and yet still shivering.

"That we couldn't do it," Harry whispered before crushing his lips to hers and kissing her thoroughly.

His hands moved up and down the length of her back, the need to touch every part of her was all consuming, and Harry lost himself in the passion of the kiss. Ginny wound her fingers through his hair, and her body seemed to mould against his as if she were liquid. His heart thrummed in his chest, and he felt his knees growing weak. Thankfully, he was still pressed against the wall. He thought it would be entirely unmanly if he collapsed from the intensity of her kisses.

He had no idea how long they kissed – morning could have dawned for all he knew – before Ginny pulled back, panting. She put her arm against the wall for support, resting her head on his chest. It took several minutes for both of them to calm down and catch their breath.

"I don't think I've ever been kissed like that," Ginny said, raising her head and looking slightly dazed.

"Like what?" Harry asked, beginning to feel nervous. Didn't she enjoy it? Because I certainly did...

"Like...like a woman," Ginny said, averting her eyes. Even in the limited light from their wands, he could see a pretty blush staining her cheeks.

Harry's chest swelled with pride. "You should be kissed that way," he said. After a moment thinking about it, he frowned and clarified, "But only by me."

"Possessive now, are we?" she asked, grinning.

"Absolutely," Harry replied, beaming. Suddenly his heart lightened, and he was unworried about the fruitlessness of their search so far.

Threading his fingers with hers, he tugged slightly, and they began walking back towards the storeroom. Ginny caressed his hand with her thumb the whole way. He could smell her sweet floral scent, and it reminded him of something.

"Sorry to deprive you of your bed partner last night," he said, smirking.

Ginny's brow furrowed. "My what?" she asked, peering up at him.

"I woke up this morning and felt a lump under the covers. I pulled out what I think was your teddy bear," he said, laughing at her confused expression.

"Oh! You found Snot," Ginny said, giggling.

"Snot? Your teddy bear is named Snot?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Do you have a problem with that?" Ginny asked, grinning.

"I may have never had one of my own, but I think the general idea behind a teddy bear is that you like them," Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

"But I love Snot," Ginny said, slapping him on the arm.

"Then why would you call him Snot?" he asked, laughing at her scandalized expression.

"I got him when I was really small, and he didn't have a name. The boys used to tease me about him, saying he was babyish and such, and I would always say 'he's not'. Fred and George could make me so mad with their teasing, and I'd screech it at them. They picked right up on it and twisted it so they called him Snot. He's been called that ever since," Ginny said, laughing. "Even though I was angry with them, it is a funny name, and it fits."

Harry laughed, imagining the scene of a younger group of Weasleys teasing each other. They all had the life every child who lived in this place would give anything to have, and he didn't think they really had any idea how lucky they were.

"You didn't pack him though. How come you left Snot behind?" Harry asked as they reached the door that led to the storeroom.

"I'll just have to find something else to wrap my arms around and snuggle close," she said, impishly kissing him on the nose before she pulled out from under the Cloak and sprinted down the stairs.

Harry was left on the landing, gaping like a fish. Heat rose to his face and neck, and he had to take several deep, calming breaths before following her.

Ron and Hermione were still searching each of the old wardrobes with the Spell Detectors. Stray pieces of Hermione's hair had pulled loose from her ponytail and hung limply around her face. Ron was sweating and had a smudge of dirt on his cheekbone.

"Where have you two been?" Ron asked grumpily. "You've been gone for ages."

"It's a big place, Ron," Ginny said dryly.

"Did you find anything?" Hermione asked. Harry thought she sounded a bit desperate.

"No. We didn't see any of the old wardrobes upstairs," Ginny said sighing. "How about you? Did you find anything?"

"No. Nothing," Ron said shortly. "It would be easier if we had more than one of these Spell Detectors. We could have cut our time in half."

"I'll start at the other end of the room," Harry said. "I don't know if I can sense anything, but it wouldn't hurt to try."

They spent the next several hours painstakingly searching each row. Harry felt discouraged. He hadn't sensed anything, but wasn't confident

enough that he actually could do it to consider the wardrobes he'd searched clean. Ron would have to continue with the Spell Detectors through the whole room.

"Harry!" Ron shouted suddenly, startling him. "I think I've got something. It's faint, but I can definitely see red." Ron's voice, which had sounded so exhausted only moments earlier, was suddenly filled with excitement.

Harry quickly moved to the wardrobe Ron had indicated. He shut his eyes and ran his hands over it, concentrating intently. He felt something, but he couldn't quite name what it was. There was a very distant humming, and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end, almost like the wardrobe was electrically charged.

"Can you sense anything?" Ginny asked after several moments.

"Yeah...I can," Harry said, feeling slightly amazed.

"What do you mean? What do you feel?" Hermione demanded. She'd followed Harry's example and was running her hands along the wardrobe just as he had.

"Can't you feel an energy?" Harry asked. "It almost makes me shiver. I think if the traces were stronger, it would."

Hermione appeared extremely frustrated. "I don't know what you're talking about, Harry. I don't feel anything."

"But he's right, Hermione," Ron said, shoving the Spell Detector toward her. "Look."

Hermione put them on and gasped. "I can see faint red lines. They're nearly transparent, but they are there."

Harry nodded. "I think they're transparent because the magical energy is so old. There hasn't been any magic done here recently, but I'd bet you galleons this was once Tom Riddle's wardrobe."

Ginny involuntarily took a step away from the wardrobe.

"It's not here," Harry said, running a hand through his hair and mussing it up further. "We're not on the right trail."

"But how did you feel it without the Spell Detectors, Harry? I don't understand how you're doing that," Hermione said, stamping her foot in frustration.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I just can."

"So what's next?" Ron asked, stifling a yawn.

"We should go back to the inn and get some sleep," Harry said. "Tomorrow we'll see if we can find Hepzibah Smith's former address. I bet it's on file at Borgin and Burkes."

"How do you propose getting them to give it to us?" Hermione asked.

"A distraction and the Invisibility Cloak ought to work," Harry said with a grin. "Let's get some sleep."

A sudden noise at the far end of the storeroom startled them all.

"Who's there?" a child's voice called into the darkness.

They extinguished their wands, and Harry raised the cloak in front of them like a curtain just as the boy flicked a switch. Ron flinched when the bright florescent lights lit the room.

"I know there's someone in here," the child said shakily. Harry could see him now. He was young – eight or nine – and wearing pajamas two sizes too small. He strode through the storeroom with a confidence that hinted, despite the waver in his voice, this wasn't his first time out of bounds after hours.

The boy began walking up the row, peering underneath some of the furniture. If he got too close, he'd be certain to see them.

Harry raised his wand and sent a spell in the other direction. A scurrying sound clearly emitted from a crack in the wall.

"Just rats," the boy mumbled. "Someone's probably been sneaking food down here." He turned and quickly hurried up the stairs, dousing the lights as he left.

"That was close," Ron said. "Nice distraction, Harry."

"We can't just leave him," Hermione said. "He's wandering around on his own, and he could get hurt. I'm certain that's against the rules."

"He's not hurting anyone, Hermione. I don't think this was the first time he's done this. Didn't you ever do some midnight prowling when you were younger?" Harry asked, again remembering the countless times he'd done the same thing. Sometimes, it was the only bit of freedom he'd managed to get.

"I still think we should ensure someone finds him," Hermione said, worriedly twisting her hands. "He was really young to be all alone."

"He's fine; we're not turning him in," Harry said, feeling a kinship with the rebellious boy. He Apparated out of the storeroom before anyone could argue with him about it.

The four returned to the inn and slept well into the afternoon the next day. Once they'd risen, they plotted how to discover the location of Hepzibah Smith's former address. Harry and Ron went into Diagon Alley under the Invisibility Cloak, barely getting through the crowded streets without being seen. It wasn't as easy for the two of them to fit beneath the Cloak as it had once been.

Harry felt a guilty pang when they passed Fred and George's shop. There was quite a crowd gathered around it, but he didn't spot either

identical red head. He hoped the rest of the Weasleys weren't in too much of a panic over their disappearance. Ron walked past the shop, keeping his eyes focused directly ahead, and Harry knew he was worried too.

When they reached Knockturn Alley, Ron slipped out from under the Cloak and entered Borgin and Burkes, holding the door open long enough for Harry to enter unnoticed. Ron poked around inside for several moments while Harry edged towards the desk. The shop had only one other customer, and the clerk kept a wary eye on Ron the entire time he was there.

When the other customer asked a question of the clerk, Ron took advantage of the distraction and knocked over a display of biting coins. The clerk hurried over, scowling at Ron and the two of them tried to pick up the coins without getting their fingers chomped off in the process.

Hidden beneath the Cloak, Harry easily slipped behind the desk and opened a file drawer. Quickly locating several files marked 'Smith', he perused each until he found the information he sought. There had been several executors of the Smith fortune since Hepzibah's death. The current name on the file was a Sebastian Smith. Harry memorized the address and quickly returned the file.

He lightly tapped Ron on the shoulder before moving towards the door, distracting Ron from the biting coins for a moment. Ron immediately got bit and dropped the coin he was holding

"Err...sorry about that," Ron mumbled to the disgruntled clerk.

"Just take your business elsewhere and get out," the man snarled.

Ron didn't need to be told twice. He hurried to the door and held it open wide so Harry could slip out before following him onto Knockturn Alley. They ducked into a side street so Ron could cover himself with the cloak.

"Did you get it?" Ron hissed once they were both concealed and moving.

"Yeah. I did. It's here in London. We can go there in the morning - it's too late now. Ginny and Hermione are probably wondering what's keeping us," Harry said. They'd left the girls at the inn reckoning it would be easier with just two of them beneath the Cloak.

Ron suddenly slapped Harry on the shoulder. "Over there, look," he hissed.

Harry turned his head to see Dean Thomas and Parvati Patil strolling hand in hand and looking in the windows across the street.

"I thought Parvati's parents pulled her and Padma out of Hogwarts because it was too dangerous. How come they're letting her stroll through Diagon Alley, then?" Harry asked, shaking his head.

"Dunno. I want to know when she and Dean became an item. How come all of Ginny's old boyfriends end up dating your old girlfriends?" Ron asked, smirking.

"Shut it," Harry said, disconcerted. "Parvati was never my girlfriend. We only went to the Yule Ball, and that wasn't exactly a raving success as far as dates go."

Ron chuckled. "Yeah but, Harry, you didn't exactly have a passionate relationship with Cho, either. She cried through most of it, remember? You had what, one decent snogging session? As I recall, she even cried through that. A smooth operator you obviously are not. Why else do you think I didn't mind your dating my sister?" Ron asked, nearly doubling over in glee.

Harry knew Ron was winding him up, but he felt cross nonetheless. He shoved Ron's shoulder with his own, nearly causing the red head to stumble out from under the Cloak. "If you don't want to hear any details about your sister's love life, I'd back off if I was you," Harry said irritably.

"Hit a sensitive spot, have I?" Ron asked, chuckling.

Harry wanted to hit him. He suddenly felt rather nervous about the idea of his kisses being compared to other kisses Ginny had received. What if she found him lacking and hadn't wanted to say anything? He discarded this notion almost instantly; Ginny was never one to keep her opinion to herself. Never mind the searing kiss they'd shared the previous night. She'd responded with as much passion as he felt. His confidence slightly restored, he still couldn't let Ron off without some comeuppance.

"I've got no worries, mate," Harry said, elbowing Ron in the ribs for good measure. "It's not like Ginny has ever dated anyone older or more experienced, anyway. Both Michael and Dean were only Hogwarts students, too."

Harry slyly glanced at Ron out of the corner of his eye. His friend had paled slightly as the implication of Harry's words hit him. Harry smirked, feeling vindicated.

"Shut it," Ron said, grumbling. He shoved Harry forward a bit more roughly than necessary.

The next morning, they arrived at the address Harry had seen on the card at Borgin and Burkes. At some point in the last decade, the Smith family had converted the house into a museum. According to the card, part of the house had been kept as living accommodations, while another portion was open to the wizarding public.

The sign on the door read 'open', so the four simply walked inside.

It no longer resembled anything Harry remembered in the Pensieve. Gone were all the fussy old lady furnishings, replaced by display cases and slick leather chairs.

"Potter! What in blazes are you doing here?" cried an annoyingly familiar voice.

Harry turned to see a tall, skinny blonde boy striding towards him. Zacharias Smith was a fellow Hogwarts student who made a habit of being an annoying thorn in Harry's side.

"Smith," he said, nodding.

"I would have thought you'd have gone into hiding somewhere. It can't be hard to find you if you're out strolling in public. If You-Know-Who really is trying to kill you, that is," Smith said, sounding as if it didn't really matter either way.

Harry shrugged, refusing to be baited. "I've had things to do."

"Yes. I saw your picture in the Prophet the other day after you got your License to Apparate. It must have been a slow news day," Smith replied.

"What do you want?" Ginny asked angrily. She'd never forgiven Smith for his derogatory commentary during their Quidditch match against Slytherin the previous year.

"What do I want?" Smith asked incredulously. "I think you're confused. You're the ones who came in here, remember, dear?" he asked condescendingly.

Harry saw Ginny reach for her wand, and he quickly stood in front of her.

"Zacharias Smith, of course," Hermione said. "Your family runs the museum. I don't know why I didn't make the connection."

Smith stared at her, blinking. "You mean you didn't come in here to see me? You're here to see the artifacts. I can understand your interest, Granger. You always were an over-achiever, but the rest of you lot never appeared overly interested in the Hufflepuff lineage. What are you on about?"

"Nothing," Harry said, shaking his head. "It was Hermione's idea to come, and we didn't have anything better to do. We didn't know you'd be here."

Smith nodded, although he still appeared slightly suspicious. "Well, take a look around then, but don't touch anything. You're lucky you came when you did; we'll be shutting down for a fortnight in September."

"Really? Why?" Hermione asked.

"I assume you've heard that Hogwarts isn't reopening. I'm spending my last year at Beauxbatons. My parents are traveling with me until I'm settled. I'm surprised you're not doing the same, Granger. How are you going to complete your studies?" Smith demanded.

"My mum is home schooling all of us," Ron said, his ears turning only slightly pink.

"I see," Smith said disdainfully, looking down his upturned nose at them. "I'm certain that will be adequate if you can't afford to go to France. I'll leave you to admire the treasures."

"I'll leave you to admire the treasures,'" Ron mimicked, prancing after Smith. "Why the little-"

"Ron," Hermione said reproachfully. "Just be quiet and look around a bit so we can Apparate back when we're ready."

They spent a little time looking over some of the antiques and reading a bit about the known information on Helga Hufflepuff so they wouldn't further arouse Zacharias' suspicions. When they gathered back outside, Harry made a decision.

"Okay. If the museum will be empty after September the first, we'll have to come back then for our search," Harry said.

"Did you feel anything while we were inside, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"No, but I was kind of distracted. We'll have to do a thorough search when we return," he replied.

"So, where do we look in the meantime?" Ron asked.

"The only other place I know for certain Voldemort spent some time. Albania," Harry replied grimly.

"Albania?" Ron repeated, wide-eyed.

"I know that in fourth year, Wormtail went to look for Voldemort and found him living in the forest in Albania. I can only assume that's where he went after he lost his powers because he felt safe there for some reason. Dumbledore said that he disappeared for awhile after leaving Borgin and Burkes, so I thought maybe he spent some time there," Harry said.

"I suppose it's as logical a choice as anywhere," Ginny replied, her eyes betraying the fact she felt overwhelmed.

"What about Borgin and Burkes though?" Ron said. "You just said he worked there. Maybe he hid one there. We should have looked while we were there yesterday."

"I don't think so," Harry replied, shaking his head. "He was only a clerk, and he likes being the one in control. Besides, there would be too much chance of a hidden object being found and sold. I think he didn't choose the orphanage because he didn't feel powerful there. By the same token, he hid the ring right in the Gaunt house after he killed Morphin. I think the killing makes him feel powerful. He killed Hepzibah right in the Smith House, that's why I think he would have hidden the Horcrux right inside."

"So, we go to Albania. Any idea where we should Apparate?" Ron asked. "I assume Albania is a big place."

"Well," Hermione said, adopting the tone she always used when she was about to spout a mind-numbing amount of facts on them. "About thirty percent of Albania is covered by forest. The Black Pines are mostly centrally located. I think we should start there since it seems like the kind of place Voldemort might hide. There's an Apparation checkpoint in Elbasan. We could start there, and then move into less populated areas."

"What are you, a walking atlas?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Did you think Ginny and I spent yesterday skiving off while you were in Diagon Alley? I suppose that's what you would have done. We went to the Muggle library. I assumed our next location would be Albania," Hermione sniffed.

"So you think Elbasan is the best place to start?" Harry asked quickly, trying to head off the brewing row.

"Well, I assume Voldemort would have chosen an area that was sparsely populated, but we know Wormtail ran into Bertha Jorkins at a nearby inn, so he couldn't have been completely secluded," Hermione said.

"Good point. It looks like we're heading on a road trip," Harry said, sniggering. He remembered Uncle Vernon cursing about the riff raff youth backpacking across the continent and took pleasure in the idea he was adding one more thing to the list of things his uncle disliked about him.

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After nearly a fortnight in Albania, they had no more to show for it then when they'd arrived. They were all feeling discouraged and had grown short-tempered with one another.

They'd traveled through village after village asking questions and seeking anything they thought might be related to Voldemort's presence. All they'd gained was the growing suspicion of the local Muggles. They used the tent for shelter along the way, and although the weather had cooperated, they were growing restless from being cooped up together.

The tent had two rooms, one a sitting area with a small kitchen, the other a bedroom equipped with two sets of bunk beds. The first night, Ron and Harry took the bottom bunks, but Hermione, who'd never cared much for heights, didn't like being on top so she switched with Harry. Ron was simply too tall to fit on the top bunk, he'd hit his head on the ceiling.

Ron and Hermione's bickering had resumed with new vigor as the days passed. Harry decided he and Ginny needed a break from them, if just for a little while. On August eleventh, Ginny's sixteenth birthday, Harry told Ron and Hermione he was taking her out on a proper date. He told them to go out and enjoy themselves, too, just go to a different restaurant. They needed to lighten the mood and this seemed the perfect opportunity.

Ginny, who'd been feeling a little homesick about being away on her birthday, was delighted. She'd squealed with delight, throwing her arms around Harry's neck when he made his announcement and kissed him repeatedly.

"Oi," Ron shouted. "I don't want to see that."

"Then don't look," Harry said, grinning and accepting more of Ginny's kisses.

Hermione smacked Ron on the arm, frowning in disapproval. "Honestly, Ron. Leave them alone; it's her birthday."

"Just be sure not to let the celebrating get out of hand," Ron said darkly.

"Yes, Mum," Ginny replied, rolling her eyes.

Neither of them brought any clothes suitable for an evening out, so they decided to do a little Transfiguration. Harry dressed in black trousers and a white button-down shirt, while Ginny wore a sage green sundress that flared out from her waist and fluttered around her legs as she walked.

Harry decided he liked watching her walk.

"You look amazing," he said when he'd finally regained the ability to speak.

"Oh, Ginny. You do look really nice," Hermione said, quickly Transfiguring Ginny's jacket into a light shawl.

Ginny blushed; her eyes still locked on Harry's as she took the shawl. "Thanks, Hermione."

"You do look nice when you decide to dress like a girl for a change, Ginny," Ron said. "Better than what you wore to Bill's wedding."

Hermione rolled her eyes in annoyance. "Ron! Can't you even say something nice on her birthday?"

Ron blinked incredulously. "I just did. I said-"

"I know what you said. You'd do better to keep your mouth shut once in a while," Hermione said, turning her back in a huff.

Harry decided to make their escape while they could. Grabbing Ginny's hand, he pulled her away from Ron and Hermione. "We're leaving. Have a good night," he called after them.

"Don't wait up," Ginny shouted, giggling at Harry's raised eyebrows.

There was a small pub in the center of the village, the kind of pub every village seemed to have, Harry had noticed. They'd spent some time there on their first evening in town. Those kinds of places were always

good for striking up a conversation with the locals and getting small details it would be otherwise hard to find.

Harry purposely didn't choose this spot for his date with Ginny. He'd noticed a small inn not too far from it, however, that had a nice restaurant and a quieter atmosphere. When they arrived, Harry was pleased with his choice. The restaurant was dimly lit with candles glowing on each table. Soft music played in the background, and a small portion of the floor space was set aside for dancing.

Harry swallowed hard when he saw the dance floor. He hadn't considered that and didn't know if Ginny liked to dance. He remembered her complaining about Neville stepping on her feet during the Yule Ball and didn't expect that he could do much better. Maybe Ginny didn't like to dance.

"Oh, Harry. This is lovely," Ginny said, her eyes sparkling brightly.

Harry thought the way the candlelight made her eyes glow was breathtaking, and he decided that birthday or not, he could put up with dancing if that was what she wanted to do.

The waiter sat them at a quiet, romantic table in the corner with a gorgeous view of the mountains. They'd been conjuring most of their food back in the tent, so they hadn't sampled much of the local fare.

Ginny perused the menu thoughtfully before making her selection. Harry had never been very picky with food; he usually had just been happy to get some, so he was a bit more adventurous than she was.

When a waitress who repeatedly beamed at them served the food, they shared the selections off each other's plates. Mostly, however, they had eyes only for each other. If asked later what he'd had for dinner that night, Harry couldn't have answered, but he could describe exactly how her dress clung to her form and the way the firelight streaked her hair with gold.

Ginny was obviously conscious of his stare, for a pretty blush stained her cheeks and the column of her neck. Harry's traitorous mind wondered if she blushed like that all over, and he was exceedingly glad she couldn't do Legilimency to hear that thought. The more time they spent together, the less he'd been able to control the direction his mind wanted to take.

Over dessert – a decadent chocolate creation that made his mouth water merely looking at it – Harry handed Ginny a small box wrapped in gold paper with a green bow perched on top. Ginny squealed in delight and immediately began tearing off the paper. Harry laughed, reminded of Ron on every Christmas morning since he'd known his red-haired friend.

Ginny's smile faltered slightly when she pulled out a long velvet jewelry box. Her eyes sought out Harry uncertainly, biting her lip in what Harry thought was an extremely kissable way.

"Harry," she said hesitantly.

"Just open it," he said, knowing she was worried about the cost. He felt slightly nervous about giving it to her now.

Ginny flipped open the lid and pulled out a bracelet comprised of a delicate gold chain with a thick charm of a golden heart. The heart appeared to almost float on the chain. Ginny's small fingers played with the heart, examining it closely.

Harry swallowed. "You told me that it was my responsibility to protect everyone from Voldemort, but that it was your job to protect me," Harry whispered. "I just wanted you to know – no matter what happens – that you've done that. You'll always have my heart, Ginny."

He had seen the bracelet in a local shop after he'd realized how close it was to her birthday, and the saleslady had insisted that Ginny would love it. Sitting with her now, he suddenly thought the words sounded stupid and very corny – like something Bill would say to Fleur. He wished he'd chosen something else.

Ginny looked up at him with tears sparkling in her eyes. "Oh, Harry," she said, reaching across the table to take his hand. "It's beautiful. It's the most beautiful thing I've owned. Would you put it on for me?"

She reached her arm across the table so he could fasten the clasp around her wrist, both sniffing and beaming at him at the same time.

Harry's heart swelled as he realized how much Ginny truly liked the gift. He suddenly thought that Bill might be onto something about girls, after all.

His world came crashing back down to earth when Ginny asked, "Do you want to dance?"

The expression on his face must have shown his true feeling before he could hide them because she laughed, rising from her chair and tugging on his arm. "Come on. You danced at the wedding and it was fine, remember? It was the dance that actually set everything to rights for us," she said.

Harry followed her to the dance floor and wrapped his arms around her, swaying to the music. Every few minutes, Ginny would stretch her arm out straight so she could admire the sparkle of her birthday present. Her appreciation made Harry feel as if he could do anything. He had to admit, dancing had its advantages. He liked the freedom of being able to hold her close and run his fingers along the fabric of her dress without censure.

Later that evening, after more dancing than Harry had ever done in his life, Ginny whispered, "This has been the best birthday I've ever had. Thank you, Harry."

"It's not over yet," he replied, grinning cheekily. "What say we head back to our tent?"

When they reached the tent, Harry was pleased to note that Ron and Hermione still hadn't returned from their date. He sat on the couch and

pulled Ginny onto his lap. She curled her legs over his and rested her head on his shoulder.

He leaned his cheek onto the top of her head, enjoying the softness of her hair. "We'll have to have nights like this more often," he said, closing his eyes. "Doing something fun and enjoyable takes the tension away and brings everything back into clear focus."

Ginny shifted so she could start trailing kisses along his neck and ear. "Harry," she whispered huskily. "It's still my birthday for another hour, so Voldemort and his Horcruxes can just sod off until it's over."

Harry grinned, leaning his head to the side to give her better access. He groaned at the sensations she was creating. It suddenly didn't matter where or who he was. All that mattered was this slip of a girl in his arms and what she was doing to him. His stomach was fluttering madly as he shifted their position so he could capture her lips.

Time lost all meaning to them, but Harry had somehow ended up sprawled on top of Ginny as they lay back on the couch, their hands moving and exploring as if all on their own. Harry's breathing caught in his throat as his hand touched the bare skin on Ginny's well-muscled leg. Voices outside the door snapped them back into reality and they jumped off the couch, desperately straightening their rumpled hair and clothing.

Ron and Hermione had returned.

Harry and Ginny dashed into the bedroom they all shared just as the flap to the tent opened. Ginny sprinted inside the bathroom to change into her nightclothes while Harry used the bedroom. He was already lying in his bunk when Ginny returned. She quickly climbed into her own bunk across from him, and the two of them lay still waiting for Ron and Hermione to enter.

They each lay quietly, prepared to feign sleep when the door opened. Harry's heart hammered in his chest, his adrenaline pumping. He could see Ginny's profile in the darkness, and he grinned at her. She returned the smile, lying on her side and facing him across the gap between the two beds. Several long minutes passed, but the door never opened.

"Reckon they're not coming right to bed?" Harry finally whispered.

"I suppose they're probably doing exactly what we were doing," Ginny said, giggling.

Harry's eyes widened. "Do you think?"

He listened closely, but couldn't hear any sounds coming from the main room.

"I think," Ginny whispered, giggling again.

"About that, Harry," she said, biting her lip.

"What?" Harry asked, feeling the temperature in the room drop alarmingly.

"Uhm...I had a really good time tonight. It was the best birthday I ever had," she said.

"But?" Harry asked, knowing there was more.

Ginny swallowed. "But...I think it was a good thing Ron and Hermione came back when they did. We were getting a bit...carried away," she said haltingly.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, feeling deflated. He hadn't meant to scare her, but she was right. He hadn't felt in control.

"No! It's not your fault. I was just as involved as you were. When my head is clear like this, I know I'm not ready for the next step yet. But when I'm in your arms and kissing you, all I want is more," Ginny said, her eyes pleading with him to understand.

Harry knew exactly what she meant. She made him reckless. "You take away my thinking ability," he said, nodding.

"Good," Ginny replied, smirking. "I'm glad it's not just me who feels that way. We'll just have to try to take things slow."

"But we don't have to stop kissing, do we?" Harry asked, a shiver of apprehension running down his spine.

"Absolutely not... Just try and get rid of me, Potter," Ginny said, grinning impishly. "Besides, I like the kissing."

"Good," Harry mumbled.

It was quite some time later when Ron stormed into the bedroom, fuming and determined to go out looking for Harry and his little sister in order to pound Harry to a pulp. He pulled up short when he found the two of them sound asleep in their beds, both wearing contented smiles across their faces.

Chapter Eleven

Lions and Tigers and...Dragons?

The first of September dawned hot and sunny over the Albanian forest. The search for clues as to where Voldemort had hidden his Horcruxes had thus far proved futile. While they had found what Harry suspected was Voldemort's hideout during his years in exile, it hadn't contained a trace of a Horcrux, nor a hint as to why Voldemort had felt safe there.

As they'd searched the hovel tucked deep in the forest; Hermione had stumbled upon a shallow grave containing several human bones. Harry suspected they were the remains of Bertha Jorkins. The foursome had hated the idea of leaving her there - unmarked and alone for eternity -

but couldn't draw attention to themselves by alerting anyone at the moment.

So, they had carved a small headstone and placed it on Bertha's grave. They'd bowed their heads while Hermione said a few words in remembrance. Before they left, they placed a locator spell on the grave, so they could later alert the Order of the location of Bertha's remains. It was the best they could do, but Harry's conscience still nagged at him. He knew very well that his remains could be left lying on the ground in the not-so-distant future. If that was to be his fate, he at least wanted to be treated with dignity.

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione had allowed themselves the luxury of a lie-in on the morning of the first. They'd planned to Apparate back to London late in the afternoon and make a few public stops in Diagon Alley before visiting the Smith Museum. Harry thought that Mr. Weasley's suggestion of being seen in public on occasion was valid, but he wasn't certain if the elder man would still want to help him accomplish this after his daughter had disappeared with Harry.

Harry's eyes opened slowly as he lazily stretched and rolled over on his side. He could hear Ron's snores drifting from the bunk beneath him. The room appeared fuzzy without his glasses. He squinted as he peered at Ginny's bed, but didn't see the familiar cascade of red that usually covered her pillow. He felt that familiar twinge of disappointment at her absence, but squelched it.

Sitting up and cracking his back, he put on his glasses and blearily looked around. Both of the girls' beds were empty, and he thought he could smell the aroma of bacon coming from the other room. Harry swung his legs over the side of his bunk and jumped to the floor. Ron never twitched, so Harry left him to his slumber.

He found Ginny and Hermione in the kitchen. Ginny was frying some bacon on the stove while Hermione hunched over a cup of coffee. Harry had been surprised to learn how grumpy Hermione could be first thing in the morning. At Hogwarts, she always came downstairs bright and eager to start classes. While on this journey together, however, he'd discovered that until she had a shower, Hermione's morning demeanor rather resembled Ron's.

Ginny had told him that Hermione had always been that way; she usually didn't come downstairs until she'd managed to fully wake herself. Hermione liked her routine, and part of that routine involved avoiding all human contact when she first awoke. Ginny said that on days when Hermione appeared at breakfast already very cross, Parvati and Lavender had insisted on speaking to her first thing.

"Morning, Harry," Ginny said, greeting him with a warm smile.

The creature that resided inside Harry's chest purred. "Morning," he replied, unable to suppress the goofy smile that crossed his face.

"The breakfast isn't quite ready, but there's coffee in the pot if Hermione is willing to share," Ginny said, poking Hermione in the ribs with her spatula.

Hermione jerked away from Ginny's prodding and silently pushed the coffeepot towards Harry.

"Good morning, Hermione," Harry said, pouring a cup and breathing in the freshly brewed scent.

"How did you sleep?" Ginny asked, gently ruffling his hair as she walked back towards the stove.

"Never better," Harry replied, watching her crack some eggs on the counter.

"I've been thinking about our plans to be seen in Diagon Alley, Harry," Hermione said, sitting up a bit straighter in her chair. She'd managed to open her eyes about halfway.

"What about it?" Harry asked warily. He felt a row brewing, and he knew disagreeing with Hermione in the morning was a bad idea all around.

"Do you really think it's wise to be seen by anyone before we search for the Horcrux? I mean, what if we run into one of the Order or get detained by the Ministry? I think we ought to go straight to the museum and then go to Diagon Alley tomorrow," Hermionesaid.

Harry shook his head. "We've already discussed this, Hermione. I don't know what will happen if we find a Horcrux. I'm not certain how we'll destroy it, or...or if we'll be injured in the process," Harry said, swallowing heavily. The image of Dumbledore's withered hand arose unbidden in Harry's mind, followed by the sound of Dumbledore's pleading as Harry had forced him to continue drinking that foul liquid. Harry shuddered as he forced the memories to the back of his mind. He couldn't dwell on them now.

"I realize it'll be dangerous," Hermione said as if reading his mind, "but we're all entering this willingly. We know what we're doing, Harry."

Harry nodded, swallowing heavily. He knew he'd never be able to live with himself if something happened to any of them, no matter what Hermione said. He couldn't lose anyone else...

"I still think it would be a good idea to postpone your appearance in the papers," Hermione said, apparently unwilling to drop her point. Now that she'd finished her first cup of coffee and was working on her second, she was acting more like the Hermione he knew.

"No," Harry said firmly. "I have another reason for wanting to do it today. It's the first of September, and I suspect a lot of students might be doing the same thing Zacharias Smith is doing and going to school elsewhere. I want to show everyone that I'm still in England. It should keep Voldemort's attention away from the other schools."

Hermione averted her eyes, staring intently into her coffee cup. Harry thought he'd seen the beginning of tears before she'd looked away. He knew that not returning to school would be hardest on Hermione. She'd always been so dedicated to her academic pursuits, and Harry had to marvel at the depth of her sacrifice for him.

He reached over and gently squeezed her hand. "I'm going to miss it, too," he whispered.

Hermione raised her eyes and smiled tremulously. "I still can't believe there won't be any classes at Hogwarts this term."

"I know," Ginny said, placing the bacon and eggs on the table and sitting down with them. "I keep wondering what all the teachers are going to do. I mean, they live there during the school year, don't they? Where will they go? Will they come back when Hogwarts finally reopens, because it will." Ginny stared at them fiercely, as if daring them to disagree with her.

"Of course it will," Harry said with a confidence he didn't feel. "It has to."

"What happens if we run into Fred and George...or Mum while we're in Diagon Alley?" Ginny asked, biting her lower lip.

"We can't let that happen," Harry said firmly, knowing Ginny half wanted to run into her family. "After we get the Horcrux – if there's one there – then we'll go back to Grimmauld Place. We'll deal with the repercussions of our disappearance when we get there, but we can't risk anyone getting in the way of our visit to the Smith Museum."

"What if we don't find a Horcrux?" Ginny asked, her gaze direct and unwavering.

Harry swallowed. He'd been thinking about that possibility for several days, although something kept telling him that they would find something there.

"I don't know," he said, sighing. "I don't want to go back to headquarters without having made some progress – without having something to have made the trip worthwhile."

"But you're still not planning on telling them about the Horcruxes?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry said. "I have a feeling we're in for a lot of shouting when we go back, but we are doing the right thing. Having found one will simply make me feel better while stonewalling them."

"Mum is probably going spare. She'll likely try and lock us up in chains," Ginny said, groaning.

"I know," Harry said, squeezing her hand. "But we've been gone all this time and we've done all right. It's you that she's going to be the hardest on. We're all of age, so there really isn't anything she can do, but you-"

"It doesn't matter," Ginny said, raising her chin in the air. "I'm not a little girl anymore, and I won't go back to being treated like one. I love my mother dearly, but I'm her daughter through and through. I can be as stubborn as she can."

Harry smiled fondly, rubbing his finger along her forearm. Lately, he'd felt the constant need to touch her whenever she was near. He'd noticed that she'd been doing the same to him, too. Just small caresses, holding hands, a light touch whenever they spoke. He'd never been one to crave much physical contact, so he wasn't certain what was happening or why he found her touch so soothing, but he did.

"I don't think Mum will be too bad about my accompanying you once she's had the chance to calm down," Ginny said, stirring some sugar into her coffee.

The other two looked at her doubtfully, and Hermione's eyebrows rose so high they disappeared into her hairline.

"Ginny, we are talking about your mum here, right?" Hermione asked. "The same woman who refused to allow the Order to discuss so much as the weather within our hearing distance?"

Ginny shook her head. "She's not as uptight as she was the last time we stayed at Grimmauld Place. After what happened at the Ministry, she...I dunno...she changed. She resigned herself to the fact she couldn't keep us out of the war no matter what she did. It was right after that when she allowed the twins to fully join the Order. She might not like it, but she's accepting it. She'll blow up at first, mind, but then she calms down. Trust me."

"If you say so," Harry said, still feeling doubtful. He vividly remembered Mrs. Weasley's despair the night Sirius allowed him to question what the Order was doing. She had even dragged Ginny out of the room and sent her off to bed so she wouldn't hear anything she deemed inappropriate.

"You must have noticed the change in her," Ginny said. "In the hospital wing the night Dumbledore died, she didn't try to send any of us out of the room. She didn't even act surprised that we'd all been involved in the fighting."

Hermione's eyes widened. "You're right," she said. "Ron told me she'd sent him outside to use his Patronus the night the Burrow was attacked, too."

"Exactly. I've been thinking about her a lot since we've been here," Ginny said, her eyes dipping to the table.

Harry took her hand, knowing that despite her bravado, she was missing her mum. Harry didn't blame her; Mrs. Weasley was the best mum he knew.

"And I came to the realization that my mum is a tough lady," Ginny said, her lip trembling slightly. "I've been rather hard on her, I think. She may not be the one getting involved in any battles with Death Eaters, but she didn't hesitate when Professor Dumbledore asked her to join the Order. She got her whole family involved because it was the right thing to do. I should have given her credit for that."

Hermione sniffed and suddenly threw her arms around Ginny. "I miss everyone, too, Ginny. You're right. It's going to be fine. We're not

the same people we were when we left, and I think everyone will see it."

"See what?" Ron asked groggily, stumbling into the kitchen and plopping down on the only empty chair.

"That we're not children, and we made the right decision in hunting Voldemort alone," Harry replied, grinning.

"Right," Ron said, stuffing a piece an entire piece of bacon in his mouth. "Mum won't have any problem with it. She'll welcome us home with open arms right after she owls Percy to call him a git and gives the Burrow to the twins to wager on a Quidditch match."

The others burst into laughter as they enjoyed their breakfast on their last day in Albania. They were going home.

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They Apparated into Diagon Alley near the Apothecary, reckoning it was far enough from the spots frequented by Fred, George, and the rest of the Weasleys to avoid detection.

"Mmm, it even smells like home," Ron said, breathing deeply. The day was cloudy and not nearly as hot as it had been in Albania.

"I never thought I'd miss seeing robes so much, but I did," Ginny said, spinning around and smiling widely.

Despite feeling the same joy as the others in returning to London, Harry also felt apprehensive. He hoped luck would be on their side and a reporter would spot them quickly. Now that he was this close to searching the museum, he could barely contain his eagerness.

"Let's keep moving. Keep your eyes open for any familiar faces that we want to avoid," he said.

They nodded and moved onto the main street. It didn't take long for the familiar click of a flashbulb to mark their presence. Harry looked up to see a reporter hurrying towards him, a bloke with a camera following in her wake.

"That was quick," Ron muttered as they turned and moved in the other direction.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter, stop. Just a few questions, Harry," the reporter shouted, alerting the shoppers on the street to his presence.

"Mum! It's Harry Potter," a small boy said, pointing.

"Run!" Harry said. It always amazed him how his mere presence could create such a mob.

"I wonder what's been happening while we've been gone," Hermione panted, struggling to keep up with them.

They dashed into an alley and thought they'd made an escape when another flash went off right in their faces.

"Harry, can you tell me what you think about the Inferi attacks? What are you planning to do about them?" a male reporter asked, his notebook and quill scribbling furiously as they hovered beside him.

Harry blinked uncomprehendingly.

Inferi? What Inferi attacks? Oh, no.

"Er," Harry said, searching his mind for what Dumbledore had told him about the Inferi. If the Ministry wasn't going to warn people how to defend themselves against an Inferius, then he would. "An Inferius, like most creatures that dwell in the darkness, fear the warmth and the light, so use fire against it. It's your best protection."

"Harry!" the first reporter shouted again, interrupting as she finally caught up with him.

Harry felt as if he'd been thrust into the lion's den – and the lions were hungry.

"Move," he hissed to the others, shoving Ron's shoulder in the one direction where a reporter hadn't yet appeared. They reached the end of the alley and quickly turned right, immersing themselves into a crowd of shoppers.

"We need to split up," Harry said, panting. He kept his head low so as not to be recognized. "You three keep moving this way. I'm going to go in the opposite direction and slip under the Invisibility Cloak as soon as I find somewhere to do it inconspicuously. We'll meet back where we first Apparated."

Ron and Hermione nodded, but Ginny stubbornly shook her head. "I think we should go in pairs. I'll double back with Harry."

"Ginny-"

"Stop trying to protect us, Harry. We're wasting time," Ginny said, grabbing his hand and tugging him along.

Ron smirked and Hermione shrugged helplessly before turning and sprinting off in the opposite direction.

"Let's go," Harry said, disgruntled.

"Don't be grumpy, Harry. How many times do we have to tell you that you aren't in this alone? Besides, it's only giving chase to some reporters. You must know I can handle this?" Ginny asked, arching her eyebrow.

Harry knew there was no way to answer that question that wouldn't get him into trouble, so he kept his lips firmly sealed. They ducked around a corner as soon as they heard pounding feet. Harry pulled his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and swung it over both of them.

They remained still as the second reporter – the wizard – and his cameraman stopped directly in front of them.

"Which way did he go? I thought I saw him run this way with the red-haired girl," the reporter demanded.

The cameraman shrugged. "I thought so, too."

"Damn! I got a direct quote, though. That ought to be worth something," the reporter said, reading over his notes.

"He said to use fire to fight the Inferi," the cameraman said. "Is that true?"

"No idea," the reporter replied, shrugging. "It doesn't matter, though; it'll make a great headline, and the public will eat it up. Come on. I'm certain he was headed in this direction."

Harry swore violently as the two moved away. "Did you hear them? Fire is the way to fight an Inferius, but they didn't even care," Harry said, fuming.

"I know, Harry. They just wanted their story. Still, since it is the truth, they might be able to save themselves one day, and if they quote you directly, you've just done more than Scrimgeour has during his whole stint as Minister," Ginny replied, patting him on the arm consolingly.

Harry sighed. There was no use getting frustrated. It wouldn't help, and he had too many other things to accomplish this day.

"Let's go back and rejoin Ron and Hermione," he said, leading Ginny back towards the Apothecary.

"We should go around through that street there," Ginny said, pointing. "It's less crowded and no one will brush against the Cloak."

Harry nodded and they began to move through the crowded streets, finding it very difficult not to jostle the many passersby. Several people turned with a start on more than one occasion when either Harry or Ginny brushed against them.

"I wish we could just Apparate," Ginny whispered.

"I know. I thought the same thing when the reporters were chasing us. It's too crowded though, and no telling if we'd appear in front of your family or the Order. I suspect word is out that we're here by now, and I'm certain the area is crawling with Weasleys," Harry replied.

"Hey! I resemble that remark," she said, elbowing him in the ribs.

Harry grinned, rubbing his abdomen. "I never said the Weasleys weren't some of my favorite people, I just don't want to see most of them right now."

"Smooth, Potter," Ginny replied with a grin. "I see that living with Hermione and me for the past month has taught you a few things."

"More than you could possibly imagine," Harry replied, grinning as his mind traveled over the many scraps of information he'd learned from living in such close proximity with the girls.

Ginny cursed suddenly, shocking Harry out of his musings. He expected that kind of language from Ron, but hearing it from Ginny caught him off guard, and he desperately tried to control his urge to laugh.

"Ginny," he admonished, failing to keep his face stern.

"Shhh," Ginny hissed, tugging on his arm until they were backed against a brick wall. "There."

He looked in the direction she was pointing and felt his breath hitch in his chest. On the other side of the street stood Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. They were obviously searching for something...or someone. They were asking questions of various witches and wizards on the street. Shacklebolt flashed his Auror badge several times, and appeared rather put-out.

It was the expression on Mrs. Weasley's face that made Harry's stomach churn uncomfortably. She had that determined Weasley glint in her eye that Harry had come to know so well, but she looked tired and thin – as if she hadn't been eating or sleeping well for the past month.

"Oh, Mum," Ginny said, clutching Harry's chest tightly. He forced himself not to wince as her nails dug into his flesh.

Kingsley said something that caused Mrs. Weasley to snarl at him, her words carrying across the street. "I'm not leaving until I find my babies. They're here somewhere, and I will find them."

She reminded Harry of a mother tiger protecting her young as she prowled up and down the street, her eyes absorbing every detail.

Bill placed his hands on his mother's shoulders and whispered something soothing in her ear. Mrs. Weasley began to cry and buried her head in Bill's shoulder.

Ginny stiffened in Harry's arms and quickly turned her face away.

"We'd better hurry and find Ron and Hermione to warn them," Harry said gruffly.

Ginny swallowed and they moved away, obscured beneath the Cloak. They fiercely clutched one another's hands as they hurried along the street.

"We'll be able to see her soon, Ginny," Harry whispered, his throat raw. "I promise."

Ginny nodded woodenly, her eyes remaining fixed in front of her, but her grip tightened.

As they reached the Apothecary, Harry momentarily panicked when he didn't see Ron or Hermione. A mere second later, the two poked their heads around the corner. Harry and Ginny sprinted over to them.

"We're here," Harry whispered. "We have to get out of here quickly, though."

"Where have you been?" Ron asked loudly. His eyes looked slightly wild.

"Be quiet, Ron," Ginny hissed. "We saw Mum and Bill. The Order is here looking for us. Apparate to the Smith Museum, and we'll tell you all about it."

Harry and Ginny waited for Ron and Hermione to disappear before following. Right before he side-along Apparated Ginny to the museum, he saw Bill and Mrs. Weasley run around the corner, heading straight for the Apothecary.

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As nightfall finally blanketed the city, and insects began buzzing around the street lamps, Harry sat staring at the entrance of the Smith Museum. The late summer evening was warm, and many people roamed the street, choosing to walk rather than ride the tube. One Muggle in particular appeared to be simply out for an evening stroll, passing them every few minutes while on the opposite side of the street, as if he was circling the block.

They'd conjured sandwiches for supper – thank goodness Ron and Ginny were Weasleys and knew all the best food-conjuring spells – and eaten them on a bench across the street from the museum. Harry could hardly believe they'd finally reached this point. Tonight he'd know for certain if they'd managed to locate another Horcrux...With any luck, after tonight they'd be one step closer to the final confrontation and ending this thing. He shivered slightly, and Ginny put her arm around him and rubbed his arm, thinking he was cold.

Having her next to him felt nice, but the thought nagged at him that by letting her stay so close, it would make it all the harder to let her go and do what he had to do in the end. At night, when sleep wouldn't come no matter how exhausting the day had been, Harry's thoughts always turned to the fact that he didn't think he would survive the final confrontation.

He still hoped that Hermione would come up with some brilliant plan, but as of yet they'd found nothing to change his mind. He found it profoundly ironic that now – at what was most likely the end of his life – he finally had such an intense desire to live. In the past, although he'd certainly never wanted to die, he'd never had any great passion for living. It had never mattered much either way to him.

Now, it mattered.

As he grew closer to Ginny, the more he thought that having to say goodbye to her would do him in without Voldemort ever getting involved. Still, he wouldn't trade this time he'd spent with her. If he couldn't give her forever, he could at least give her now, and he wanted to make every moment worth the memory.

"I don't see why we didn't just Apparate inside and wait there," Ron moaned for about the hundredth time.

"Honestly, Ron," said Ginny, exasperated. "For the last time, we don't know if there is anyone still working inside. If there is, they should be going home now."

"Besides, there are Anti-Apparation wards in place," Harry said, running a hand through his hair.

"How do you know?" Hermione asked, suddenly looking up from her sandwich.

Harry stared at her, feeling slightly confused. "That humming sound, don't you hear it? It's the same sound I always heard at Privet Drive. I can hear it near the gates at Hogwarts, too. I reckon it's the wards, right?"

All three pairs of eyes stared at him in astonishment.

"You...you can hear the wards?" Ron asked, finally.

A wave of apprehension went down Harry's spine. Not again. "Can't you?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

All three shook their heads, Hermione frowning.

"Look, we can discuss this later," Ginny said finally, taking charge. "If there are anti-apparation wards in place, how do you propose we get inside?"

"Are you the sister of Fred and George Weasley or what?" Harry asked, grinning as he pulled a hairpin from his pocket. "They showed me how to do this after you lot rescued me from the Dursleys before second year."

"Figures they'd show you and not me," Ron grumbled.

The twins had done their job well, and it took Harry only a moment to pick the lock on the front door. The four quickly and quietly slipped inside the museum, closing the heavy door behind them.

"Well, here we are," Ron whispered, staring around the room at all the old artifacts. The light from the street lamps cast long shadows on the walls, and the air was thick with tension.

Harry could understand Ron's urge to whisper, he felt it, too and had to force himself to overcome it. A prickle of apprehension ran down his spine as he moved further into the room.

"Come on. Let's spread out and start looking. Ron, you wear the Spell Detector again," Harry said. "Hermione and Ginny, just keep your eyes open for anything out of the ordinary, and we can double check it with the Spell Detector."

They all nodded and fanned out, although Hermione appeared doubtful. Harry shut his eyes, envisioning the scene from the Pensieve. Riddle had met Hepzibah Smith in a sitting room, and it couldn't have been too

close to the entry hall since the little house-elf, Hokey, had taken a few minutes to retrieve Riddle when the doorbell had rung.

Harry wandered away from the other three, peeking into several rooms until finally entering a small room located off the main hallway. The hairs on the back of his neck rose the moment he entered. The room was much neater than in the Pensieve memory, but it was unmistakably the same. In fact, several of the polished display cases contained some of the orbs and celestial globes he remembered, and in one sat the jeweled mirror that Hepzibah had used repeatedly to check her appearance. Harry suspected the mirror didn't reflect the whole truth, which is probably what had appealed to Hepzibah.

"Ron," Harry called. "Bring that Spell Detector in here, would you?"

He stared around the room, an odd feeling of *déjà vu* overpowering him as he listened to Ron's clomping footsteps moving closer toward the sitting room. Every instinct in Harry's body told him there was something here. He was tense and alert, and he had the uncomfortable feeling of being watched.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, following Ron into the room. "Oh, this is the same room, isn't it?"

"You can feel it too, then?" Harry asked, relieved.

"Feel what?" Hermione asked.

Harry furrowed his brow. "You knew this was the same room. I thought..." Harry mumbled, his words trailing.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I remember it. The architecture is the same even if it's been painted. I recognize those windows, and the fireplace is slightly off-center."

Harry blinked looking around the room. She was right; the fireplace was off-center. He was again amazed at Hermione's ability to pick up obvious details that he somehow always overlooked.

"Where's Ginny?" he asked.

"She said there was no point in all of us searching the same room, so she kept looking in the entry hall. She said to call her if we find anything," Hermione replied.

"There is loads of magical energy here," Ron said, looking around with the Spell Detectors, "but I don't see anything Dark."

"Keep looking," Harry said grimly. "It's here." He knew it; he could feel it as certainly as if Felix Felicis was telling him.

Harry moved towards the center of the room, imagining the scene in his mind. He could see Hepzibah sitting at her table; Riddle moving towards the locket, drawing his wand. Hepzibah's eyes widened in fear, perhaps realizing too late that she was in trouble. She tried to grab the cup and the locket, but Voldemort would have Banished them from her grasp. They would have flown off the table and landed...here.

Harry opened his eyes, the vision in his mind's eye vanishing as he found himself standing in the corner of the room. A section of the wall was covered with a large, intricately carved wardrobe. He began to shiver, as if a strong, frigid gust of air had blown through him. He could hear Ron and Hermione speaking in the background, but he'd completely tuned out their words and was focused instead on the distinct hum he could hear around the wardrobe.

Using his wand, he moved the large piece of furniture away from the wall and began inspecting it, running his hands all along the rough, painted surface. Muttering to himself, talking through the same movements he'd seen Dumbledore make several months ago.

It was no use; the wall didn't have that same energy. It had vanished the moment he'd moved the wardrobe. Again using his wand, he levitated the wardrobe back in place. Immediately, his shivering returned as his senses heightened.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked, moving next to him.

Harry didn't answer. He began running his hands along the outside of the wardrobe. The vibrations shook him to the core.

"Is there something inside?" Ron asked, putting his hand to the knob and trying to pull it open.

"Watch it," Harry hissed, shoving Ron back.

"What did you do that for?" Ron asked, sounding irritated.

"Don't just go putting your hands on it, Ron," Harry said, firing up. "We have no idea what kinds of protective spells are here."

"We don't even know if it's there," Ron fired back. "Besides, nothing happened. It didn't even open." As if making his point, Ron tugged on the handle again. It still wouldn't open.

Hermione and Harry each tried to tug on it, but it didn't budge.

"Why would they keep an old wardrobe if they couldn't even use it?" Ron asked, looking around the room at all the family artifacts.

"It's really old and probably valuable, Ron. It has the Smith family crest engraved at the top. I assume it's a family heirloom," Hermione said, scowling. "They're obviously are very proud of their heritage, and Riddle would have known this. If he hid something here, they'd keep it here forever."

"How do you know that's the Smith crest?" Ron asked, staring at the top of the wardrobe.

"Look around. It's everywhere here," Hermione replied, exasperated.

Harry ignored them. He ran his hand along the front of the wardrobe, feeling the heat emanating from it.

"It's in here," he whispered. "I bet he used a spell similar to the one Dumbledore used on the Mirror of Erised in our first year. I think that if someone wanted to open this door simply to use the wardrobe, it would open, no problem. But it somehow knows we want what's hidden inside."

Hermione withdrew her wand. "Should we try an unlocking charm?" she asked.

Harry didn't think it could be that simple, but he remembered Dumbledore letting him try a Summoning charm before he tried anything trickier.

"Give it a try," he said shrugging.

"Alohomora," Hermione said firmly.

Something sparked, but the wardrobe remained firmly closed.

"Didn't you say the entrance to the cave demanded payment in blood?" Ron asked, swallowing hard.

"Yeah, but I don't think Voldemort would use the same protections twice. It's something different," Harry said, absently.

"The doorknob is off center, just like the fireplace," Hermione said, twisting her lips from side to side.

"I wonder..." Harry said.

"What..." Ron asked.

Harry moved his wand to the center of the wardrobe, where he thought a knob should logically be.

"Aparecium," he said.

Slowly, the blurry outline of a doorknob became visible. It was distorted and it shimmered, almost as if they were looking at it through intense heat.

"Whoa," Ron said, breathing deeply. He put the Spell Detector back on his nose. "It's covered in red, Harry. Loads of Dark Magic all over it."

"We'd better not touch it directly then," Hermione said. "I'll use my wand to open it." She waved her wand without using an incantation.

"Hermione!" Ron shouted, grabbing her arm as a jet of white-hot flames shot out from the knob. The blast hit Hermione on the side of her head, knocking her backwards as her hair ignited in a ball of flame. Hermione screamed and moved away, batting at the flames with her hands.

"Hermione!" Ron shouted again, panicked. His shoulder and arm had also been hit with some of the blast, and the flames quickly destroyed the sleeve of his shirt and began to spread. He waved his wand helplessly, as if he couldn't remember the spell to douse the flames.

Harry's primary school lessons popped into his head as he thought to push them to the ground and roll them to smother the flames, but his wand would be faster.

"Aguamenti," he shouted. A spray of water issued from his wand, covering both Ron and Hermione.

Hermione lay on the floor, moaning and only half-conscious. The hair on the entire left side of her head was singed, and her scalp was covered with angry red burns that oozed painfully. Ron sat on the floor beside her, dazed and blinking slowly. The skin on his upper arm and shoulder was blackened and raw. He had inched toward Hermione before collapsing and sat gently stroking the uninjured side of her head.

"Hermione," he whispered, his voice cracking.

Harry felt nausea rise within his chest as he stared back and forth between his two friends. He ran a hand through his mussed hair. He'd known this would happen. He hadn't wanted them to come because he'd known they would end up getting hurt, but he was weak and allowed them to come because he'd wanted company.

He'd seen the terrible damage to Professor Dumbledore's hand, and he'd let them walk in here anyway. He felt frozen on the spot, his hands shaking and his breath coming in painful gasps.

"Ron? Hermione?" he said, sinking to his knees beside them.

Pull it together. What's wrong with me? I've never fallen apart under pressure like this.

"Episky," he said, holding his wand to the burns on Ron's arm. He knew it wasn't the best choice of spells. There must be a healing spell specifically for burns, but this was the only one he knew. The wounds on Ron's arm did heal slightly, enough to hold him until they could get help, anyway.

He was more concerned about trying it on Hermione, whose burns looked much worse.

"Harry, Ron," Ginny's voice sounded from the hallway. "Where are you?"

"Ginny!" Harry called desperately.

"Merlin's Beard! What happened?" Ginny asked, rushing over to her brother and staring at his arm in horror.

"I'm okay," Ron mumbled, brushing away her hands. "Hermione's hurt."

Harry held his wand next to one of the smaller burns on Hermione's neck.

"Episky," he whispered, grimacing when Hermione moaned. He felt a stinging behind his eyes and blinked rapidly. The wound healed, so he tentatively moved to her head. He continued to patch her up as best he could, desperately wishing Madam Pomfrey was here.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered when Hermione cried out as he tried to heal the largest of her burns. "It's the only healing spell I know."

"It's all right, Harry," Ginny whispered, gently rubbing his shoulders. She'd stood behind him the whole time, gently urging him on, and he was grateful for her calming presence.

"That's something we'll have to do later – learn more healing spells. For now, we've just got to do what we can to make them comfortable," she said, her voice trembling slightly.

"There're traces of Dark magic all over the wardrobe. We found the separate knob, but they got hurt when Hermione tried to open it," Harry said gruffly.

Ginny nodded and moved towards the wardrobe before anyone could stop her. She pointed her wand at the strange knob, opening it with ease.

Harry's jaw hung open. "How did you...? Ginny, what in Merlin's name do you think you're doing? That's exactly how Ron and Hermione got hurt. I don't know how you opened it, but we can't keep taking stupid chances."

"It wasn't stupid if it worked," she snapped back. "Professor Dumbledore told you that you were able to go along with him last time because you were underage, right? He said Voldemort was foolish enough to believe that someone underage and not fully qualified could never be a threat. Well, I'm still underage – as you're all so fond of pointing out – so my magic shouldn't register anymore than yours did."

Harry gaped like a fish, knowing she was right and yet wishing she wasn't. He needed help, and she was able to provide it. It should have been a simple choice, but despite the fact his head knew it, a more primitive part of him kept demanding to protect her from it all.

"We don't have time for your caveman heroics, Harry," Ginny said in a bored voice, almost as if she'd read his mind. "I'm going with you. I already told you that we're not letting you do this alone, so just shut it and take all the reasons that are about to explode from your mouth and stick 'em up your arse," Ginny said, her eyes blazing.

"Ginny-

"Are you coming or not?" she asked firmly.

"We can't just go. We have to get some help for Ron and Hermione," Harry said. He knew he was stalling, but she could be so infuriating that it was hard to think straight. "We'll Apparate them back to Grimmauld Place and get Madam Pomfrey."

"After we get the Horcrux," Ginny said, swallowing hard. Her eyes flickered briefly to Ron, whose eyes had closed.

"What? No-" Harry said.

"Yes, Harry," Ron said, opening his eyes and pulling himself up against the wall. "We didn't get this far to turn back now."

Harry stared at the steely determination in his friend's pale face, knowing he was right, yet unable to move.

Ron gasped as he pulled himself closer to Hermione. "Bring back the damn Horcrux, Harry."

"Use your Patronus if you need to call for help," Harry said, looking right into Ron's eyes. "Do you think you can Apparate?"

"Yeah," Ron said, gasping. "If you're not back in an hour, I'll take Hermione back and bring some help. I need to stay with Hermione."

He looked as if it pained him to say it, as if being asked to choose between his two best friends was tearing him apart.

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron. You're hurt, and you can't leave Hermione here alone. We'll be all right, and we'll be back as soon as we can," Harry said, staring intently in Ron's eyes.

The two communicated silently for a moment, each knowing the other would easily give his own life to save his friend.

"Take care of each other," Ron said. "Listen to Harry, Ginny. Don't do anything stupid just to prove yourself."

Ginny scowled, but nodded resolutely. She turned her back to him and stepped into the wardrobe, her hands splayed out in front of her as if she were blind.

Harry hurriedly joined her inside the wardrobe. It was pitch black and cavernous. He took several shuffling steps before realizing there was no way there should have been this much room inside.

"Ginny," he whispered, knowing she was only a step ahead of him but unable to see her.

How am I supposed to protect her when I can't even see her?

"Yeah?" she replied, sounding frightened for the first time.

He didn't blame her. Although he'd never admit it, he was scared, too. The pitch dark was unnerving, and the nagging worry for Ron and Hermione nearly undid him. He reached out until he found her hand.

She clasped his tightly, threading his fingers with hers, and he thought it would take a bigger wizard than Voldemort to make her let go.

They shuffled in silence for what felt like an impossibly long time, although he knew it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. Suddenly, the darkness ended and they stepped out into blazing sunlight.

"Where are we?" Ginny gasped in wonder as she looked around.

Harry's mouth hung open as he spun around in circles. They were inside what looked to Harry like the Parthenon in Ancient Athens, except that it was intact rather than in ruins.

Ginny took a step backwards. "I don't have a good feeling about this, Harry," she whispered.

A sliding sound caused them both to spin around. They were staring at a solid stone wall.

"What happened to the door?" Ginny asked, panicked.

The door had vanished completely, leaving only a small indentation in the shape of a cup.

"Obviously there's no going back without the Horcrux as a key," Harry said grimly. "But where is it?"

"And what's guarding it?" Ginny asked, swallowing

A huge wooden gate at the other end of the Parthenon groaned as it slowly began to rise.

"You had to ask," Harry said tonelessly, taking a step in front of Ginny.

They waited with bated breath as the gate fully opened. For a moment, nothing moved, and Harry and Ginny barely breathed. Suddenly, a great, thunderous roar echoed throughout the arena, shaking the stone and causing both teens to cover their ears.

Their eyes widened as a huge, monstrous beast lumbered from the cavern. It was greenish in color with a yellow head and enormous bluish wings. The claws on its feet were as sharp as knives, and its wings and tail were similarly tipped. The dragon raised its head, the irises in its glowing yellow eyes narrowing dangerously when it saw them. It roared again, emitting a blast of fire so intense it caused a fireball to fly across the Parthenon at them.

Harry and Ginny jumped over a wall and ducked in the stands as the flames soared over their heads and scorched the seats above them.

Harry cursed, breathing heavily. "I swore I'd never battle another dragon again as long as I lived.

"It's a Serbian Scythe-tip," Ginny said, clutching Harry's arm and sounding awed.

"How do you know?" he asked incredulously.

"You couldn't grow up in the same house with Charlie and not know something about dragons. The Serbian Scythe-tip and the Hungarian Horntail are the fiercest dragons, therefore the coolest as far as Charlie's concerned," Ginny said, tentatively peering over the ledge.

"Great," Harry said, grumbling. "He sounds like Hagrid."

"Yeah. Harry, I can see the Horcrux!" Ginny said, her voice rising.

"What? Where?" Harry asked, rising on his knees to peer over the stone next to her.

"There!" she cried, pointing.

Squinting, he could just make out a nest tucked inside the gate where the dragon had fully emerged. The Scythe-tip stalked to and fro in front of the opening as if daring them to try and pass.

"You can do this, Harry," Ginny said. "It's just like the First Task only now the Horcrux is your golden egg."

"But, Ginny, I don't have my Firebolt. It's back in London, and somehow, I don't think a Summoning charm is going to work through that stone wall," he said, pointing to the now-hidden doorway that led back to the wardrobe.

"Harry, you're a wizard with more experience than you had then. Conjure one! You don't need it to last for long, just long enough," Ginny cried, exasperated.

"Right," Harry said, swallowing nervously. His palms were sweating, but he knew he could do this. Picturing his Firebolt in his mind, he conjured a nearly exact duplicate.

"You did it!" Ginny cried.

"Don't get too excited. I still have to get the cup," Harry said.

Ginny smiled tremulously and pulled the ribbon from her hair. She then knotted it around Harry's upper arm.

"What's that for?" he asked, staring at the yellow ribbon.

Ginny shrugged. "Well, I'm not Hermione, so I'm not certain I have my history right, but I think before a tournament battle, the lady is supposed to tie her colors around her Champion of choice to wish him luck."

"Thanks," he mumbled, feeling awkward. He stared at his shoes as he shuffled his feet.

"Don't thank me yet," Ginny said wryly. "For all I know, yellow is the color that will make a dragon charge."

"Thanks, Gin. Your encouragement is overwhelming right now," he replied, but he grinned when he said it. No matter what the circumstances, she could always make him feel better.

"You can do this, Harry," she said earnestly before grabbing his face and pressing her lips to his.

He returned the kiss, enjoying the searing heat that filled his belly until another roar from the dragon grabbed his attention.

"Here goes nothing," he said, before mounting the broom and soaring into the blue sky.

"Be careful, Harry," Ginny called after him.

He rose well above the arena, circling it and trying to find his best angle. It only took a moment for the great beast to spot him. Roaring in fury, it spread its massive wings and took to the sky after him.

Despite his predicament, Harry couldn't help but be awed by the creature. Its wingspan was so large that it nearly shadowed the entire width of the Parthenon. It soared gracefully into the sky before turning its voluminous yellow eyes on Harry.

He maneuvered the Firebolt in a steep dive, attempting to fly underneath the dragon before it could turn. He hadn't counted on its tail, however. The dragon's tail was long and thin, and the beast used it like a whip. It lashed out at Harry and the scythe-like tip ripped his shirt and cut into his chest, drawing blood.

The beast roared, and its nostrils flared at the scent of Harry's blood. Harry dove again, but the tail whipped into his back this time. Twice more Harry attempted the dive, and twice more the dragon's sharp tail sliced into him. His shirt hung in tatters and dripped with blood. His Firebolt was fast, but this dragon was faster.

Harry swung upward, climbing steeply. The dragon was confused and bellowed its ire. It followed Harry's climb, gaining on him. It breathed out heavily, and Harry could feel the heat from the approaching fireball. He turned quickly, ducking low as he felt the hair on the back of his neck singe. He wrapped around the Parthenon wall and dove between two columns.

The dragon shrieked in rage when it realized it couldn't follow Harry through the opening. It had to turn and fly up and over the top. Harry took the opportunity and dove towards the dragon's lair. He had nearly reached it when that whip-like tail lashed out, slicing into him again.

He hissed in pain and had to pull up to avoid another blast of fire. He was growing frustrated and felt slightly lightheaded from the loss of blood. Something had to go his way soon, or he was a goner. He climbed steeply and once again looped over the top to fly back between the columns. He didn't pause to check if the dragon followed, but instead aimed right for the nest as fast as his broom could carry him.

The dragon shrieked, enraged. Instead of turning this time, it crashed right through the columns. The force slowed the beast slightly. Harry sped towards the ground, pulling up just in time and aimed the broom into the entrance of the cavern. As he leaned down to grab the cup, his broom vanished.

He swore violently. He'd never claimed to be an expert on conjuring spells, but damn it, his timing couldn't have been worse.

Before he had time to conjure another, he heard the piercing screech of the dragon, and it sounded as if it was approaching fast. He tucked the cup inside the waistband of his jeans and sprinted outside. He dove for the stands just as a fireball streaked overhead.

The dragon bellowed in fury as it clawed at the low wall separating the arena from Harry's hiding place. He crouched low and tried to move away, but the wall collapsed, leaving him exposed. The dragon's arm struck the wooden gate that had been sealing the entrance to the lair, shattering it effortlessly. Harry cried out as hundreds of sharp splinters rained down upon his back.

The dragon's huge arm crashed down again, this time closer to him, and the scythe-tipped claw lanced his side beneath his ribs. The impact of the blow threw Harry in the air, knocking the wind from him. He crashed onto the dirt, panting and clawing at the ground as he tried to get away from the angry dragon.

Before he could move, before he could utter a sound, the dragon's tail encircled his ankles, hog-tying him, and began to pull him closer. He was certain he could see victory reflected in the sickly yellow eyes. Harry forced himself to stay calm, although he was shaking all over.

The dragon's tail jerked upward, leaving Harry hanging upside down near the dragon's mouth. He could see tendrils of smoke spiraling away from the nostrils.

If that thing breathes a fire ball now...

Bruised and bloodied, Harry waited until he was as close the dragon's face as he dared. He pulled out his wand, aimed it right at those malevolent yellow eyes, and blasted off the most intense Conjunctivitis curse he could manage.

The dragon reared its head and roared, sending out a wave of blistering heat. Harry was released from its hold and he dropped to the ground with a thud. His body ached, but he couldn't find the strength to move away from the rampaging dragon. The beast was howling in pain, its huge arms clawing at its eyes, which were running and covered with a white slime.

If Harry couldn't pull himself up, he'd be crushed under the tail or a massive foot. Panting heavily, he tried again to stand, but it was useless. What would happen to Ginny if Harry were killed here? He at least had to get the cup to her so she could escape. Groaning as he rolled to his side, he pulled the gleaming cup from the waistband of his jeans.

He was surprised to see how the gold shone, despite being unpolished for so long. Helga Hufflepuff's golden crest glinted in the sun. As the dragon sent more flames towards him, Harry instinctively raised the cup like a shield and tossed it into the approaching fire. He rolled to the side to avoid being fried, crying out in pain as he did so.

When the cup made contact with the fire, a blast of bright white light filled the arena. Harry covered his face, feeling as if he'd got a

terrible sunburn. An unearthly scream rent the air, shaking the very foundation of the arena. The dragon howled in misery before crumpling to the ground and dissolving as if it had never been there.

A blaze of fiery red hair suddenly streaked across his face as Ginny landed next to him on a broom.

"What happened? Where did it go?" she shrieked. "Are you all right?"

"The cup," Harry croaked weakly, pointing to where it lay on the ground.

Ginny scooped it up in her hand. The gold was scorched and blackened, but it remained intact.

"Just a cup now," Harry muttered, feeling lightheaded. "Wonder if it still works as the key?"

"Come on, let's get out of here," she said, helping him off the ground and onto her conjured broom.

Harry slumped against her weakly as she rose in the air and flew them to the opposite end of the arena.

"I thought the lady was supposed to stay in the stands and shriek for her Champion to get up," he said, smiling weakly.

"Who says I'm a lady?" Ginny shot back.

Harry grinned, feeling slightly delirious. "I love you, Ginny," he whispered, his eyes failing to stay open.

He felt her body start. "I tried to get to you sooner to help, but it was like some kind of barrier held me in place. I wasn't able to break past it until you were on the ground," she said, sniffing.

"S'okay," he mumbled.

Ginny reached around to shake him fiercely. "Stay with me, Harry. Just a few minutes more. Here's the entrance; fit the cup into the slot."

Harry tried to lift his arm, but it felt like jelly, and he couldn't make it cooperate.

"Here, I'll do it," Ginny said as she grabbed the cup and fit it into the slot. The door slid open, revealing that deep blackness once again.

Ginny flew the broom right into the archway, and moments later they flew right back into the sitting room at the Smith Museum. Ron and Hermione were still huddled together by the wall.

"Did you get it?" Ron asked anxiously.

Harry nodded towards the charred cup. "Found and destroyed," he said weakly, his legs refusing to hold his weight as he stepped off the broom. Ginny grabbed onto him and eased him to the ground.

"Mate, what happened to you?" Ron asked, his eyes wide.

"We'll discuss it back at Grimmauld Place," Ginny said in a take-charge voice. "Ron, do you still think you can Apparate with Hermione?"

Ron nodded. Clutching an unconscious Hermione to his side, they Disapparated with a pop.

Ginny wrapped her arms around Harry. "Hold on tight to me, Harry," she whispered.

"I can take us," Harry said stubbornly.

"Thanks, but no. I don't feel like being splinched today. I've had enough excitement for one day."

With a cheeky grin, she kissed his cheek and brought them both back to headquarters...back to her family.

Chapter Twelve

Repercussions

Ginny opened her eyes, steadied herself and stared at the gloomy outline of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. She had just Apparated onto a small grassy patch of land shadowed by a large tree a short way from the house, and hoped she wouldn't get a reprimand from the Ministry about underage magic since she was in the company of several of-age wizards.

The sun had set long ago, and the street was quiet and dark, not even a Muggle vehicle disturbing the stillness. She could see dim candlelight burning in several of the windows of headquarters and was relieved that it was still occupied. Harry slumped against her, finally losing his long battle to stay conscious. She struggled to let him down gently and ended up pinned beneath him. Merlin, for a thin bloke he was heavy. She shuddered at the stark purple bruises covering his pale face.

Ron sat on the ground next to Harry, cradling Hermione in his lap. He was listless and barely had the strength to speak.

"Sorry, Ginny," he said, gasping. "I tried to fire sparks at the door, but I missed."

"It's okay. Everything's going to be fine, Ron. How's Hermione?" Ginny asked. The older girl was frighteningly still, and Ginny couldn't bear to look at the awful wounds on her head.

"She won't wake up, Ginny," Ron said, sounding like the frightened little boy that Fred and George used to tease with spiders.

"She will," Ginny said with a confidence she didn't have. She suddenly didn't feel very grown up, at all. "This isn't finished yet, and

Hermione is way too tenacious to give up in the middle of a project. Stay with them a minute; I'll be right back."

She gently untangled herself from Harry's limbs, wincing at the raw slashes across his chest. Her hands were slick with blood from gripping him so tightly when they Apparated.

He'd been magnificent against the dragon. Ginny had been awed watching him, despite her terror. After the dragon had first whipped him with its tail, she'd begun trying to conjure a broom to help him. Conjuring items was a sixth-year spell, and she'd never attempted it. All she had to go on was the memory of Harry conjuring his own broom. It had taken her several attempts to get it right, and she knew her own panic and frustration hadn't helped. Once she'd finally had the broom, something in the magic of the place wouldn't allow her to leave the stands to help him.

Still, despite knowing all he'd done and how much he'd been through in that arena, she couldn't help the slight twinge of annoyance over being the only one conscious and unhurt and able to deal with the wrath that awaited her on the other side of the door. She knew she was in for a barrage of questions, and she wished she didn't have to face it alone. It might be childish, but that's how she felt.

She'd let the others recover, but once they were well again, she had every intention of pointing out that despite all their protests about her being underage, she was the last one standing. Steeling her resolve with a grim smile, Ginny climbed the steps of number twelve.

She tested the handle of the door and found it unlocked. Her heart gave a slight twinge knowing that her mum would have left it that way in case they returned. Biting her lip, she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

I have to be strong.

Directly inside the entrance hall, Bill, Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody were arguing heatedly, but Ginny was too tired to pay attention to their words. None of them noticed her straightaway. Remus looked up first and caught her standing uncertainly in the doorway.

"Ginny," he said, startled.

Bill and Moody's heads whipped around, but otherwise they were all frozen.

"Uhm...I need some help outside. We've got some injuries," Ginny said finally, biting her lip.

It was as if her words unfroze them. Remus and Moody pushed past her and sprinted outside, but Bill caught her by the arm before she could follow.

"Oh no, squirt, you're not going anywhere," he said, and despite the old familiar nickname, she could tell he was angry.

His anger snapped something inside her and released her courage. There was no way she was going back to being treated like a baby – not by Bill – not by anyone.

"Let go of me, Bill," she demanded, jerking her arm free. "Hermione is really hurt, and I know right where she is. I'll answer your questions later, but I don't have time for this right now."

Ignoring the surprised look on her brother's face, she turned and sprinted out the door, leading Lupin and Moody to the others.

"She's been burned," Ron said as Remus leaned over Hermione. "She needs Madam Pomfrey right now."

"Let me take her inside, Ron," Remus said, gently lifting her from Ron's arms. "I'll Floo Poppy, and she'll be here in no time."

Ron nodded, struggling to stand. Moody pulled him to his feet and grabbed him around his waist when Ron started to sway.

"Easy, lad. I've got you. Just lean on me, and we'll get you inside," the old Auror said, surprisingly gently.

Bill stared down at Harry's crumpled form, an unreadable expression on his face. After waiting a moment, Ginny finally nudged him, and he leaned over to lift Harry. He pulled Harry to his feet and threw him over his shoulder none-too-gently. Ginny bit the inside of her cheeks, breathing through her nose, and followed them inside.

When they arrived in the entrance hall, they followed Remus and Moody into one of the smaller sitting rooms where Bill unceremoniously dropped Harry to the floor in a heap.

Ginny couldn't control her temper any longer. She whirled on her brother in a rage, holding her wand on him.

"That's enough," she snarled.

"Ginny," he said, his own temper rising.

"Not another word from you," she spat. "You have absolutely no idea what's going on here, and if you mishandle Harry one more time, I'm going to make certain you wish you'd never taught me the Bat Bogey Hex."

"That's enough," Remus said sharply. "We're not going to start fighting amongst ourselves. We're going to tend these injuries before we sit down and calmly discuss what's happened. I'm going to Floo Poppy. Bill, I think you should go and get your parents."

Bill frowned at Ginny for a moment before turning on his heel and leaving the room without a word.

"Stay with Harry, Ginny. I'll be right back," Remus said, squeezing her shoulder gently.

Moody sat Ron on a chair, but he immediately moved to the floor next to the couch where Hermione lay. He held her hand tightly, gazing intently at her closed eyelids. Ginny imagined he was willing her to wake up from sheer desire alone.

Moody helped her move Harry to the empty chair, and she gently rested his head to the side. The floor where Bill had dropped him was smeared with his blood, and the fabric on the chair where they placed him was rapidly becoming stained.

"He's going to need a Blood Replenishing Potion, but we'll let Poppy look him over first," Moody said, his good eye fixed on Ginny while his magical eye kept spinning to watch the other three.

A commotion in the doorway caused Ginny to look up to see her parents, Bill, Fred and George all staring back at her. Her mum was pale, although Ginny could see two bright spots of color growing rapidly on her cheeks.

That was never a good sign.

Ginny glanced at her father's face. She could read relief there, but had to look away from the disappointment she saw reflected in his eyes. What was it about parents that could make you feel so small and unsure, no matter how strongly you believed in what you were doing?

She knew she'd been right to go along with Harry and the others. She knew what they were doing was important, and that they were following Professor Dumbledore's instructions. She also knew the great burden Harry carried, and that he was stronger with her by his side. Why, then, could the simplest look from each of her parents make her feel as if she'd done something terribly wrong?

"Ronnie," her mum wailed, finally noticing the burns on Ron's arm. She ran across the room and grabbed his hand, trying to straighten out his arm and inspect the wounds.

Ron jerked his arm away roughly. "M'fine," he slurred, letting them all know he was anything but. "'Erminee's hurt."

"I want to know what in the name of Merlin happened to all of you, and I want to know right now. I'm aware that you were in Diagon Alley earlier today, and now you show up here injured. Where have you been, and what have you been doing?" Molly demanded, drawing herself up to her full height. She glared at Ginny while keeping her hand on Ron's shoulder. Molly Weasley wasn't a tall woman, but when she was angry she appeared to grow before their eyes.

"The questions will keep, Molly," Remus Lupin said mildly as he reentered the room followed closely by Madam Pomfrey. "Let's get their injuries healed first."

Madam Pomfrey's expert gaze swept the room and each of the four teens before moving directly to Hermione. She set her bag on the floor and in a no-nonsense voice told Ron to move aside. Ron shifted back, although admittedly not very far.

"Are you injured, Ginevra?" her mother asked stiffly.

"No," Ginny replied, knowing what was coming and steeling herself for it.

"Then I want you upstairs and in your room. I'll be up to discuss this with you after I'm certain your brother will be all right," her mum said in a shrill voice.

Ginny swallowed, clenching her fists so tightly her fingernails dug into her palms. "No, Mum. I'm staying."

"Don't you dare argue with me, young lady. I'm on my last nerve with you as it is, disappearing in the middle of the night without so much as a note. There's a war going on out there. You could have been killed," her mum shouted.

"Molly," her dad said, placing a restraining arm on her mum's shoulder.

"No, Arthur. I want her upstairs now," her mum insisted, pointing at the door.

"No, Mum. I'm staying here until I know they'll be all right," Ginny said, swallowing hard. "Hermione and Harry are unconscious, and Ron's nearly delirious. I'm the only one who can tell Madam Pomfrey anything she might need to know."

She knew she was using the health of the others as her trump card, but she didn't care. She wasn't leaving the room. She felt this first battle of wills was pivotal in how the rest of the Order was to see them. Besides, she wasn't about to leave Harry defenseless with her brothers in the room. Still, it was terrifying to defy her mother. There had been a time not all that long ago when she'd never have considered doing it.

"She's right, Molly," Remus said, and Ginny could have hugged him. She looked over at him gratefully, but he averted his eyes.

Her mother's lips thinned, and she looked as if she might cry, causing Ginny's heart to pinch again. What she really wanted to do was to fling her arms around her mum and just hang on, but she knew she couldn't do that. If she wanted her family to see her as an adult, she was going to have to act like one. No matter how hard that proved to be.

"This is Dark magic," Madam Pomfrey cried, pulling away from Hermione, her eyes wild. "This child is covered in Dark magic."

"Does that mean you won't be able to heal her?" Ginny asked, panicked. She could hear the tremble in her own voice, but couldn't hide it. All she could remember was Professor Dumbledore's blackened hand and how dead it had looked.

"I don't know. It's going to take me some time to see how bad the damage is," Madam Pomfrey said, obviously shaken. "She's stable for now, but I can't heal these burns without some additional research."

"How did Hermione get these burns, Ginny?" Remus asked. "Can you tell us that?"

"Hermione," Ron said, his voice cracking as he attempted to move closer to her.

"Sit down, young man," Madam Pomfrey demanded. "Let me take a look at you before you go anywhere. You," she said, pointing at Bill and the twins, "begin Transfiguring this furniture into beds and make me an infirmary. I want all four of my patients in the same spot."

"Ginny's not hurt," Bill said, staring at his sister with that same unfathomable expression.

"I'll be the judge of that. Just do as I say," Madam Pomfrey snapped, returning to tending Ron's wounds.

"Ginny, who caused these injuries to the others?" Remus asked, attempting to stop the bleeding on Harry's chest with the sleeve of his robe. "We haven't had any reports of Death Eater activity tonight."

"Voldemort," Ginny said flatly.

There were several gasps, and her mother visibly flinched.

"Ginny!" she cried as if Ginny had cursed. "Don't say the name."

Ginny rolled her eyes. She was tired and stressed and the adrenaline from the night's activities was beginning to wear off. She had no patience for this. "I will say the name. I'm not going to be a hypocrite about it."

"Don't talk to your mother that way, Ginny," her father said sternly. It was so rare that her dad ever reprimanded them that it mollified her instantly.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said. "It's been a stressful night, and I'm worried about them."

Her mother's expression softened slightly, although she still hadn't made a move to touch her. Ginny wished she would; she could use a hug.

Harry groaned slightly and shifted his position. Ginny immediately turned to him and brushed the hair from his eyes. "Harry?" she said.

She could see his eyes moving rapidly beneath his closed lids, but she suspected he was dreaming rather than trying to wake.

"I've healed most of his burns. They weren't as severe as Miss Granger's. Still, I need to do a little research before I can be certain," Madam Pomfrey said. Ron was sleeping peacefully in the bed Fred and George had Transfigured. Ginny suspected that Madam Pomfrey had given him a sleeping draught. She wished she could get one in order to avoid the questions she knew were coming.

"I have some questions I need answered as well, but let me tend to Mr. Potter first," Madam Pomfrey said.

"I think we all have a lot of questions," her dad said, his gaze boring into Ginny and causing her to flinch.

When Madam Pomfrey reached Harry, she waved her wand over him once and jerked back. "These aren't burns," she said, nonplussed.

"No," Ginny replied, swallowing hard. She didn't want to reveal anything she'd promised to keep quiet, but she had to make certain the others' injuries were tended. She found herself wishing these weren't her decisions to make and had a new respect for the burden that had been placed on Harry. No wonder he frequently appeared so on edge.

She desperately wanted to do the right thing, but what happened if what was the right thing wasn't entirely clear? How was she supposed to know, let alone decide? Professor Dumbledore's words from after the Third Task drifted back to her, something about choosing between what was right and what was easy. It would be easy to simply fall on her knees and confess everything to the Order, to place the burden of what to do on their heads. But that wasn't what Harry would do. He'd choose the right path, no matter how much it cost him. Ginny had to choose to do what was right, as well.

"These injuries were caused by a magical creature, a dragon, if I had to hazard a guess," Madam Pomfrey said, staring at Ginny intently.

"A dragon?" Fred and George both asked, speaking for the first time. Ginny thought they looked rather impressed.

"Where on earth did you find a dragon?" her mum shrieked, looking slightly deranged. Her hair had pulled from its bun, and her eyes were wild.

"Can you heal him?" Ginny asked, ignoring everyone else in the room. Nothing was as important as getting Harry well. She needed him well so she could give him hell for leaving her here with all of them.

"Of course I can," Madam Pomfrey said indignantly. "He'll need some Blood Replenishing Potions that will have to be taken in intervals over the next two days. He'll probably sleep through most of it, but he'll be fine. There won't even be any scarring."

Two days? Oh, that's just great.

"I'll help with giving him the potions," Ginny said firmly.

"That won't be necessary, Ginny," her mother said. "We'll make certain Harry gets his potions. You have some questions to answer."

"I'm not going anywhere until I know they're all going to be okay," Ginny said, refusing to back down. "And I don't trust any of you with Harry right now."

"Ginevra Molly Weasley," her mother said, scandalized. "We might be upset with all of you at the moment, but we certainly would never do anything to hinder Harry's recovery."

"Bill's already dropped him on the floor, despite the fact he's injured," Ginny fired back mutinously. She glared at her eldest brother, still feeling unforgiving.

"He what?" her mother bellowed, turning towards Bill.

Despite being a fully qualified wizard, not to mention a grown and married man, Bill Weasley blanched. "I would have done the same to Ron, too, if he were the one I was carrying. They had no business dragging Ginny off on their little adventure."

"'Little adventure,'" Ginny shrieked. "You have absolutely no idea what we've done, or what we've been through."

"How about you enlighten us then," Bill snarled. "Tell us why you nearly broke your mother's heart. Do you have any idea how much you upset her? Madam Pomfrey had to be called to give her a Calming Draught that first morning. But you wouldn't know about that since you never bothered to check or even write a note to let us know you were all right, never mind where you were. I knew Harry was up to something, but I never thought he'd drag the rest of you right into danger with him."

"He didn't drag us anywhere," Ginny spat. "In fact, we had to force him to let us come. Professor Dumbledore left him a job to do. Completing his task is the only way Harry can beat Voldemort in the end. That's exactly what he's going to do, and we're going to help him do it."

Again, the others cringed when Ginny said the name, but she didn't care.

"Ginny," Remus began, but she didn't let him finish.

"Look at you. All of you cringe just hearing the name. How can you possibly believe you can handle this better than us?" Ginny asked incredulously. "Professor Dumbledore trusted him; why can't you?"

"You are just children," her mum said stubbornly.

"We're not children. Harry's never even been allowed to be a child, and I haven't been since I was eleven. I've been touched by this war more than any of you, even you, Bill," she said, nodding towards her brother's scars. "How any of you think you can keep us safe is beyond me. You couldn't do it then, you can't do it now."

"That's enough." Madam Pomfrey said sternly. "Miss Weasley, climb into that bed." She nodded towards the one empty bed left in the impromptu infirmary, the one next to Harry's.

"We need to ask Ginny some questions, Poppy," her dad said.

"Not right now you don't," Madam Pomfrey said indignantly. "Minerva isn't even here, and this is developing into nothing more than a shouting match. These children have obviously been through a shock, and nobody is going to upset them until they have a good night's sleep. I'll return in the morning with more information on Miss Granger."

She handed Ginny a phial of purple liquid that Ginny assumed was a sleep potion. She gratefully gulped it down before anyone could stop her.

"I don't think anyone is going to get any clear answers tonight," Moody said. "Why don't we all get some sleep? We can talk about their return in the morning."

The sleep potion was making Ginny warm and so very drowsy. Fog tinged the edges of her vision, and the voices became oddly distorted. Before the tide of sleep claimed her, however, she thought she saw Alastor Moody give Madam Pomfrey the briefest of winks. Her brain must have been addled, because she thought she saw the stern hospital matron actually blush.

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When Harry opened his eyes, the first thing he noticed was how stiff his body felt. The second thing he noticed was how bright the room was due to the sunlight streaming through the undraped windows.

What time is it? And how long have I been asleep?

His eyes scanned the room, noticing the four beds and bedside tables arranged in the otherwise bare room. He was obviously somewhere in Grimmauld Place, but he didn't remember ever seeing an infirmary while there.

Hermione was sleeping across from him, her head wrapped in heavy white bandages. The other two beds were empty, however, causing Harry's stomach to lurch with dread. He knew Ginny hadn't been hurt, but why were both Weasleys missing? Had Mrs. Weasley spirited them away?

Harry half hoped it was true, half dreaded the idea. He didn't think he had any hope of succeeding without them. Along with Hermione, they each were a part of him now; he needed them.

A small sigh distracted him, and he turned his head. Ginny was asleep on a chair beside his bed, her feet curled beneath her. Her head lolled to the side, and she clutched a tattered old book in her hand.

Harry smiled in relief; she hadn't left him. He immediately noticed that she'd changed her clothes and wondered again how long he'd been unconscious. A tremendous wave of guilt washed over him. He'd left Ginny alone to deal with her parents' wrath. Some boyfriend he made.

Standing up and stretching in an attempt to loosen his stiff muscles and joints, Harry watched Ginny sleep for a moment. A few stray wisps of hair covered her face and moved in and out as she breathed. He smiled, imagining it must tickle. He gently brushed the hair away and she stirred slightly, shifting in her seat and causing her book to fall from her grasp.

Harry leaned over to pick it up, wondering what she was reading and if it would help them with their mission. Turning the book over, he found a full-cover moving picture of a witch and wizard locked in a passionate embrace. The witch's robes were hanging off her in a way

he'd never seen any witch dress, not even Madam Rosmerta. Curious, he flipped it open to a random page and began to read. He managed only a few words that consisted of a heaving bosom and a throbbing...

Harry slammed the book shut and dropped it on his bed, his face coloring brilliantly. He stared at Ginny incredulously. What on Earth was she was reading, and how in Merlin's name had it put her to sleep? Harry shifted uncomfortably, suddenly feeling very worried about what Ginny might think of their private snogging sessions. Living in such close quarters with Ron and Hermione hadn't afforded them the opportunity for much time alone, but they'd taken the opportunity whenever possible.

Harry thought their time together had been nothing short of brilliant, but now he was a bit worried. Exactly what was Ginny expecting? He wished he could talk to Ron about it, but he could just picture the look on his mate's face if he even attempted to bring it up. Ron never shared anything about what was going on with him and Hermione – a fact for which Harry was eternally grateful – but he had been rather proud and forthright about his activities with Lavender.

Shaking his head, Harry decided he'd have to worry about it later. Right now he had to find out what had been happening while he'd slept. He desperately wanted a shower, but decided even that would have to wait. He was going to look for Ron.

He ran up the stairs to the room he and Ron had shared before they'd left but he didn't see anyone. The fact the house appeared so empty left him uneasy. The bedroom was empty, not showing any sign that Ron had been there. Harry decided to try the kitchen but pulled up short in front of the door that led to Ginny and Hermione's room.

Quietly opening the door, he immediately saw what he was seeking. Snot sat perched on Ginny's bed looking sad and forlorn. Scooping up the bear, Harry shut the door behind him and turned, only to find Malfoy standing directly in front of him with a sardonic grin on his face.

"So, finally awake, Potter? What happened, you just couldn't stand to lie there any longer without your teddy bear?" Malfoy asked, sneering.

Harry felt warmth flood his face. He struggled valiantly with the urge to shove the bear behind his back, despite the fact he knew it was too late for that. Of all the people that could have found him walking around with Snot, why did it have to be Malfoy? The only worse choice would have been the twins. Something Malfoy said finally penetrated Harry's embarrassment.

"What do you mean 'finally awake'? How long have I been here?" he demanded.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "Long enough to let your little girlfriend take all the heat for your disappearance. Smooth move, Potter. It's exactly what I would have done, too, but I thought you'd somehow be too noble for that," Malfoy said with a grimace.

Damn!

"Oh, there's that Gryffindor pride. I knew it must be hiding in there somewhere," Malfoy said, scoffing. "Don't worry, Potter. Weaslette apparently can handle her family just fine without your protection. She does a better job than her pitiable brother, anyway. I hear Granger's going hairless these days. I never would have suspected Weasley was harboring a fetish for bald birds."

Harry angrily shoved Malfoy against the wall. The blonde boy's eyes widened in surprise. "Shut it, Malfoy," Harry said through clenched teeth. He was disturbed to realize how much attention Malfoy had been paying to his friends. If he were double crossing them somehow...

"Let go of me, Potter," Malfoy said, angrily pushing Harry back a step and straightening his clothing. "Don't take out your frustration on me simply because you're unhappy you let your girlfriend down."

"I said shut it. You don't know what you're saying," Harry replied.

"Oh, yeah. I wouldn't know a thing about leaving my girlfriend high and dry, would I, Potter?" Malfoy asked, sneering hatefully. "I'm certain Pansy is perfectly content sitting around wondering if I'm dead or alive. Only thing is, she's smart enough not to expect me to put myself in any danger simply for her comfort."

Harry blinked, surprised. It sounded almost as if Malfoy actually cared about Parkinson. Who'd have thought? Harry didn't know why anything had the ability to surprise him anymore. Before he had a chance to contemplate it, or even respond, Ron's voice echoed loudly in the deserted hallway.

"Harry! You're awake. What's going on here? What are you doing with him, Malfoy?"

"Relax, Weasel. If you keep making your face that color it's going to stay that way," Malfoy replied, lazily leaning against the wall.

"I'm fine, Ron," Harry said, interrupting the other two before they could come to blows. "Are you all right?"

Ron shrugged. "I'm fine; Madam Pomfrey patched me up. What are you waiting on, Malfoy? Go on and scurry away like a good little ferret."

Two bright spots of pink colored Malfoy's cheeks, but otherwise he didn't respond to Ron's taunts. Instead, he turned towards Harry and asked, "So, I take it from all your injuries that you found whatever the Dark Lord is guarding? The only way you'd still be alive is if you came up against an idiot like Crabbe, Goyle or Simmons. What is it, Potter? What are you looking for, anyway?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Harry responded coolly. "You heard Ron, Malfoy. Shove off. I've got nothing to say to you."

"Not until you need information again, anyway," Malfoy said bitterly. "Fine. Have it your way, but don't expect me to be so hospitable next time."

Harry and Ron watched him walk away in silence until Ron finally muttered, "Git," under his breath.

"How could I have been so stupid?" Harry hissed, slapping his hand to his head.

"Huh?" Ron asked, bewildered.

"The Muggle we saw outside the Smith Museum – the one who kept circling the block. That must have been Simmons. I would have recognized Crabbe or Goyle. He was guarding the museum," Harry said.

"Didn't do a very good job of it, did he?" Ron asked. "We got inside no problem."

"No, but Malfoy did say he was stupid. Don't you see, Ron? It's a way to find the other Horcrux – the one we don't know what it is. Either Crabbe or Goyle is guarding it. If we find them, we at least find where it's hidden," Harry exclaimed excitedly.

Ron's expression brightened considerably. "What's the other one guarding?" he asked.

"I reckon he's probably at the cave where the amulet was hidden. No one besides the four of us knows it's not there anymore. I'll have to check on it," Harry said, running his hand through his hair absently.

"Er, Harry. You do know you're walking around talking to Malfoy with a teddy bear in your hand, right?" Ron asked, amused.

Snot! He'd completely forgotten he was holding Ginny's bear. "Er...it's Ginny's," he said lamely, ducking Ron's gaze.

"I know what it is. What're you doing with it?" Ron asked, obviously amused by Harry's embarrassment.

Dammit! The lengths he'd go for Ginny Weasley.

He mumbled something undistinguishable as he pushed past Ron and headed towards the infirmary. Ron followed behind him, sniggering the entire way. Scowling, Harry pushed open the door to find Ginny still sleeping where he'd left her.

Ignoring Ron's snickering presence, he tucked Snot under her arm and gently pulled the blanket around her. He moved towards Hermione, but Ron's words stopped him in his tracks.

"You're in love with my sister."

Harry's steps faltered. He swallowed heavily and continued towards Hermione, flustered by what Ron had said. It wasn't anything he hadn't considered himself, but hearing Ron say it out loud was intimidating. How was he supposed to know what love felt like? He had vague recollections of admitting to Ginny that he loved her in the Parthenon, but his memory at the end was slightly faulty. Even if he had, he didn't want Ron calling him on it.

"Has Hermione awoken at all?" he asked, clearing his throat.

"I knew you fancied her, but you're actually in love with her. You love my baby sister," Ron repeated gleefully. He was prancing behind Harry and looking like a right pillock.

"Ron! I'm trying to be serious here," Harry said, jerking his shoulder. Ron was really on his nerves.

"You're trying to change the subject," Ron said smugly.

"So let him," a sleepy voice said from behind them.

Harry whirled around to see Ginny sitting up and rubbing her eyes. Finding Snot, she blinked in surprise before looking directly at Harry and flashing that brilliant smile.

Harry's mouth went dry. Bollocks! How much did she overhear?

"It's good to see you up and about," she said, her eyes softening.

"Hi," Harry said, knowing he sounded stupid but unable to think of anything else to say.

Ron had no such problem. "Snap out of it," he said, snapping his fingers beneath Harry's nose. "You can moon over her later."

"As if you haven't been the one sitting by Hermione's bedside mooning for the past three days," Ginny snapped.

"Three days?" Harry bellowed. "We've been here for three days?"

"Yes," Ginny said, turning her attention back to Harry. "Nice of you to join us."

"What's happened while I was out?" he asked, feeling alarmed. "What happened when we got here?"

"Relax, mate," Ron said, taking a seat in the chair next to Hermione's bed. "When I woke up, Madam Pomfrey had already healed us all," he said, wincing as he looked at Hermione. "It took you longer because you lost so much blood. Ginny's been giving you a Blood Replenishing Potion. She wouldn't let anyone else do it - put Mum in a right state, she did."

Ginny shrugged. "I wanted you well, and Bill was a bit angry with you when we first arrived."

Harry cringed. "Sorry to leave you with that, Ginny. What did you tell them?"

"Nothing important, although they have figured a few things out already," Ginny replied.

"Like the fact you went up against another dragon," Ron said.

"Yeah. Madam Pomfrey knew that from your injuries," Ginny said.

"The cup!" Harry exclaimed. "Where is it?"

"Don't worry. I put it in your nightstand along with your wand," Ginny said calmly. "Things have been rather strained around here since we got back."

"That's an understatement," Ron mumbled.

"How do you mean?" asked Harry.

Ginny shrugged. "Mum had her big blow up when we first arrived, but since then she's been...distant. She seems sad, almost like she doesn't know what to say to us," Ginny said, her voice cracking slightly. "It's so unlike her. Sometimes I think she's angry but..."

"All the Order has been in an out. Shackbolt and McGonagall have been the most demanding. They're the ones who are the most put-out, I think. Moody's been the best," Ron said.

"Yeah, well. He knew we were up to something and was okay with it," Harry said, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

"I know, but Remus knew too, and he definitely seems off," Ron said. "And Dad just looks sad."

Harry shifted uneasily.

"Don't you dare start feeling guilty, Harry. We've no time for it, and there was nothing else you could have done," Ginny said firmly.

"Besides, showing up here unconscious was the best thing that could have happened. It put Mum right in the 'poor dear' mode. I think it helped all of us," Ron said, grinning.

"Great. What about Bill? You said he was upset," Harry asked.

"Yeah, he's definitely off," Ron said.

"I think that might have more to do with the fact that we were out doing something important, and he's feeling stifled. We're just coming off the full moon, you know. His wounds have never healed completely, and Gringotts won't let him come back to work until they do," Ginny said.

"What? Why not?" Harry asked indignantly.

"They're afraid," Ginny said, sighing. "Werewolf contamination and all."

"That's rubbish," Harry said.

"Tell it to the Goblins," Ron said bitterly.

"I think I will," Harry said furiously.

Hermione shifted on the bed, most likely disturbed by their loud voices.

"Madam Pomfrey was able to heal all Hermione's burns, but she wasn't able to save her hair," Ginny said quietly. "The spell that hit her was Dark Magic, and the hair cells were completely destroyed. Madam Pomfrey said it would all have to grow back naturally. She's pretty upset."

"No, she's not," Ron said, his expression blank. "It's just hair; it'll grow back."

Ginny shook her head. "I know it's just hair, Ron, but trust me, it matters."

Ron shook his head. "She could have been killed, Harry. Madam Pomfrey said the effects of the curse were most likely lessened because it was split between us. I think the fact we both tried to move away helped, as well. If it's a choice between Hermione and some hair, I'll take Hermione every time."

"Of course you would. We all would, and she knows that, too. It doesn't make the idea of losing all her hair less intimidating. I think you'd be hard put to find a witch that didn't have some vanity about her hair," Ginny replied, patting Hermione's leg.

"How come she's still unconscious, and you've been up for days?" Harry asked Ron.

"She's been awake, too," Ginny said, and Harry could tell she was trying not to laugh. "She found a bunch of medical books in the library, and she's been consulting with Madam Pomfrey about all her options. I've noticed she takes a kip every time Madam Pomfrey gives her a Healing Potion. I think the Madam Pomfrey has been slipping her a Sleeping Draught."

"Wish we had some of that when she starts going off on elf rights," Ron said, whispering despite the fact Hermione was sound asleep.

Harry snickered. "Better not let her hear you say that."

"I won't," Ron said adamantly.

"I suppose we should let everyone know you're awake. They've been waiting to have a meeting," Ginny said quietly.

Harry instinctively reached out and grasped her hand. "I suppose we should get it over with then."

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A full meeting of the Order of the Phoenix was held the following evening. Harry had to force himself not to fidget as he waited for the others to file into the room. Ron and Ginny, naturally, were both attending the meeting, but he noticed Mrs. Weasley giving them furtive glances every few seconds, as if she longed to boot them from the room. She'd been as pleasant as always to Harry, and very concerned over his

health, but he could sense a distance, a barrier, that he'd never felt before. His chest constricted whenever he thought about it too much.

Hermione was also in attendance. She entered the room wearing a navy blue handkerchief on her head to hide the bandages and leaned heavily on Ron. He'd wrapped his arm protectively around her and hadn't removed it even after they'd sat down. Hermione was much more subdued than normal, which disturbed Harry.

Both Bill and Lupin had been scarce since Harry had awoken, but they were here tonight, both casting disapproving looks in his direction. Only Mad-Eye Moody appeared happy to see him, and greeted him almost warmly. Well, as warmly as Mad-Eye ever was, anyway. Tonks sat beside Lupin, her hair a hideous shade of olive green. She winked at Harry and stuck her tongue out at Remus when he frowned.

Of all the Weasleys, only Fred, George, and, surprisingly Fleur had acted as if nothing was wrong. The twins were eager to tell him about business and ask loads of questions about the dragon. They also enjoyed teasing Harry and Ron about living unsupervised with the girls. That teasing had caused many disapproving glares from the elder Weasleys, and made Harry fear for the stability of the tentative truce they'd apparently reached.

Charlie and Percy arrived for the meeting, in addition to many other members Harry had only seen on occasion. Professor McGonagall and Kingsley Shacklebolt both sat at the head of the expanded kitchen table, each wearing a grim expression. Professor McGonagall's lips were compressed so tightly they had lost their color. Harry had seen that expression from her before, and it was usually followed by a particularly foul detention.

He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. He wasn't a kid called to task in front of a professor. He was an adult now with a greater responsibility than any of them knew. He would not be cowed, and he wouldn't allow them to revert to treating him like a child.

"Good evening," Professor McGonagall began. "I think it best if we call this meeting to order and get right to business. Mr. Potter, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Harry returned her stare, forcing his voice to remain calm. "What would you like to know?"

"What I'd like to know is where you've been over the past month," she said sternly.

"And why my children went along with you, despite my express wishes that they not be involved," Mrs. Weasley added, glaring at Ron and Ginny with tears in her eyes.

"Harry," Remus Lupin said. "We'd like to know why you left the way you did, without leaving us any means of contacting you. Do you understand how worried we were? How helpless you made us all feel?"

"The Order was assigned the task of protecting you by Albus Dumbledore, someone you supposedly respected," Shacklebolt said, apparently

impatient with the emotional turn the meeting had taken. "And yet you saw fit to ignore every measure of protection we had in place to go out on your own. I'd like to know why. What could possibly have been so important?"

Harry expected the barrage of questions, but he was slightly stung by the tone in Remus's voice. He cleared his throat before speaking, and when he did, he looked directly at Remus.

"I appreciate your concern, and I'm sorry that you were worried, but I honestly didn't see there being another way. If I'd told you my plans to leave, would you have stood aside and let us walk out that door?" he asked.

"Harry, we're here to help you," Remus said. "We want to help you."

"You can't," Harry snapped.

"What do you mean we 'can't?'" Professor McGonagall demanded. "Of course, we can, Potter. That's the entire purpose of the Order."

"We are aware that you believe Albus left you with a job to do, but we can't believe he meant for you to do this alone, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, resting a hand on his arm.

Harry pulled his arm away. "You still don't get it, do you?" he demanded. "He didn't leave me a job to do. It is my job to do — all of it. Everything the Daily Prophet has said about this 'Chosen One' business — well, it's about the only thing they've ever got right. I know it, and Professor Dumbledore knew it. You all say you trusted him, that what you did came down to whether you trusted his judgment or not. Well, leaving this task to me was his judgment."

"But he's gone now, Harry," Professor McGonagall said. "Things have changed."

"Nothing's changed; what has to be done remains the same," Harry said vehemently. "Dumbledore once said that he will have only truly left when no one here is loyal to him. You have to decide if you still can be, even if what he's asking isn't easy."

"You have to choose between what's right and what's easy," Ginny whispered. "We all do."

"How can we choose what's right when we don't even know what it is you're doing?" Kingsley demanded. "You've obviously told your friends. Why can't you tell us?"

"I told them because Professor Dumbledore told me I could. He thought I'd need some support, and they're the ones I'm closest to," Harry said, leaving out the fact Ginny had only been included later.

"I can't believe Albus would do this," Mrs. Weasley moaned. "Ginny isn't even of age."

"Neither was Ron when Professor Dumbledore told Harry he could share this," Ginny snapped. "You have to stop dwelling on our ages and see

that what we're doing is right. It's working, and it's the only thing that's going to stop Voldemort."

Again, there were several muffled gasps and shifting around the table. Members of the Order had become accustomed to Dumbledore using the name, but it still startled them to hear it from someone else.

"Look," Harry said, making a decision. Something told him it was the right one to make. "I know you're all as dedicated to stopping this war as I am, and I do need some help. If I concede to some stipulations of yours, can you agree to trust the fact that I can't tell you everything?"

"Fair enough. Dumbledore never shared everything with us anyway," Mad-Eye said before anyone else could agree or disagree. Looking around the table, Harry could tell by their expressions that not everyone was happy with Moody's decision. Still, there were more that appeared ready to compromise than there had been at the beginning of the meeting.

"The next time you have to leave, we want to know. No more waking up and finding you missing," Moody said, and Harry knew he was beginning with something Harry wouldn't have a problem agreeing with. It wasn't like sneaking out again would work, anyway.

"Agreed," he said.

"And we want to know where you're going and have a way to contact you should the need arise," Remus said.

Harry shook his head. "I can't tell you where we go. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Harry..." Mr. Weasley began.

"No. Not only would Voldemort kill you for that information, it would jeopardize everything if he finds out what we're doing. I can't tell you where we are, but I do think I have a way for you to contact us that would be safe," Harry said.

"Which is?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry looked towards Remus. "Sirius once gave me a mirror. He said he used to use it to talk with my dad when they were in detention. D'you know what I'm talking about?"

A grin appeared on Remus's face. "I do."

"I— er...I broke the one I had. D'you think you could charm another couple of mirrors to act the same way? We'll keep one, and you can keep another here," Harry said.

Remus nodded. "Yes, I can do that. I think that will work nicely."

"That seems to indicate that you think Ron and Ginny will be going with you again," Bill said, frowning.

"Damn straight, we will," Ron said hotly.

"We're not letting Harry do this alone," Hermione said, speaking for the first time.

"Ginny is not going anywhere," Mrs. Weasley shouted, her face very red. "I won't have it."

"Oh yes I am," Ginny said, firing right back at her mum. "The others never would have got out of there if it weren't for me. They need me."

"You're underage," Mrs. Weasley cried.

"It's because I'm underage that my magic was undetected. Professor Dumbledore discovered it last year when Harry went with him. Voldemort is too arrogant to believe that anyone underage could be a threat to him. Don't make the same mistake, Mum." Ginny said, her eyes flashing.

"That's enough, Ginny," Mr. Weasley said firmly.

"Ginny is your baby sister," Bill said, glaring at Ron. "You never should have allowed her to go along with you."

"She's not a baby anymore, Bill," Ron said, raising his chin.

Ginny flushed with pleasure and cast a grateful smile at Ron.

"'E usually 'az much more common sense except when eet comes to 'iz leetle sister," Fleur said, patting Bill on the back.

Fred, George and even Charlie had to cover their snickers. Bill whirled on them.

"You can't tell me you're all right with Ginny traipsing across the countryside and living with Harry," he said incredulously.

Anger flooded Harry's cheeks. How could they be worried about the impropriety of where Ginny might be sleeping when Voldemort had Inferi on the loose killing people? It was just too much.

"I don't believe this," Harry roared. "I wish the biggest concern in my life was hiding what Ginny and I got up to from all of you, but that's just not the way it is. We're fighting this war, the same as you."

"We know that, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, placating him. She again rested her hand on his arm, and this time he didn't pull it away. "But you have to understand that she's our child. We won't stop being parents simply because there is a war raging."

Harry nodded, chastised. "I understand. You really have nothing to worry about; I'd protect Ginny with my life."

"We know you would, dear. That's partly what we're afraid of," Mrs. Weasley said tearfully.

"Look," Harry said. "You all know the prophecy, or basically what it says. You know what I'm up against. I might not have a lot of time to give her-"

Shouts of disagreement and dismay met this statement, but Harry held his hands in the air, silencing them.

"Let's be realistic, all right? There are no guarantees – for any of us. That's been made painfully clear. This little bit of time might be all I have to give her, so I'm going to take it while it's there," Harry said, amazed by his own cheek.

"And what happens afterwards?" Bill asked. "When the war is finished, and you have managed to survive? What happens between you and Ginny then?"

Harry smiled, looking down into Ginny's warm brown eyes. "Well, that's the plan. If we manage it, anything that comes after is the whipped cream."

Ginny beamed at him.

"All right, back to the Order," Kingsley said, still scowling. "You won't tell us where you go, but you will leave us a method to communicate."

Harry nodded. "And what I could use from you is some information. How do you go about tracking a wizard?"

"There is no way to track You-Know-Who, Harry. Don't you think we've tried?" Mr. Weasley asked softly.

"I'm not talking about him," Harry said. "I want to find the location of the fathers of two of my former classmates. Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle's fathers are both Death Eaters. I bet the guests upstairs know their first names. I need to know where they are, that's all."

Moody nodded. "I can look into that. Does this have something to do with whatever it is they're guarding?"

"Yes," Harry said shortly. He suspected he knew the location of one of them already, but he thought it best not to announce he was leaving again so soon to check it out. It would be better to let them think he was following one of their leads.

"There is something else I want you to do for us," Kingsley Shacklebolt said, staring intently at Harry.

He saw Professor McGonagall shift slightly while Remus looked away. Tonks gripped his shoulder supportively. Harry knew instinctively that he wasn't going to like this.

"What's that?" he asked.

"I would like you to resume Occlumency lessons," Shacklebolt said evenly.

"What?" Harry exploded. "They were a disaster; Professor Dumbledore even agreed on that. Besides, Voldemort hasn't tried to get into my head for over a year."

"The reason they were a disaster could have been that Snape," Shacklebolt fairly spat the name, "wasn't doing his best to teach you. If you are hiding something as critical as you say, we cannot take the chance that You-Know-Who can find it without your knowing."

"He couldn't," Harry said.

"He's done it before," Shacklebolt fired back, causing Harry to flinch.

"Harry," Remus said gently. "I think this is a good idea. Dumbledore did believe it was a good idea before Snape convinced him otherwise. I think it's worth the effort."

Harry's shoulders slumped in defeat. He couldn't deny their words, but something inside him told him Occlumency wasn't the answer. "Fine. Who's to teach me though? You?"

"No. I'm not qualified to instruct you. We do have a couple of people here, however, who are qualified. If you agree to it, that is," Remus said, his eyes shifting again.

"Here? Who? I thought the reason Snape had to teach me was that there wasn't anyone else qualified?" Harry asked.

"They weren't on our side then," Remus replied.

"You can't be serious," Hermione shouted, looking back and forth wildly between Remus and Kingsley. "You can't let them inside Harry's head. No way."

Harry blinked for a moment, trying to figure out what Hermione was saying. The answer hit him like a blow to the gut.

"No way! If you think for one minute I'm going to let Draco Malfoy inside my head-

"He's a capable Occlumens, Harry," Remus said mildly. "Weren't you the one who said he managed to keep Snape out last Christmas?"

"Yeah, but..." Harry stuttered, thunderstruck. "He's Malfoy."

"He learned from his mother and his aunt. Obviously we can't trust them completely, but we can use them while they're here. They're using us for the same reason; it's mutually beneficial to both sides," Kingsley said. "Remus has agreed to monitor the situation at all times, so you won't be alone with them."

"I don't believe this," Ron shouted, unable to contain himself any further. "First you're all over Harry about being too young and not trusting you with the answers to things he absolutely can't tell you, and now you want to let Malfoy and his mother have free reign inside his head? Have you all gone mad?"

"That's enough, Ron," Mrs. Weasley snapped. "Of age or not, I won't have you using that disrespectful tone."

"You're all barking," Ron mumbled mutinously.

"It's your decision, Harry. What do you say?" Remus asked.

Harry sighed, running his hands through his hair. "I told you I'm willing to make some compromises, but this is a big one. I'll give it a try, but I'm not promising to stick with it if I think things are going badly. And I want you all to remember this the next time I have to do something that you're not too happy about."

Ginny clutched his hand beneath the table.

What had he just done?
Chapter Thirteen

Setting Things to Rights

The next few weeks at Grimmauld Place were rather tense. Although the air had been cleared amongst them, everyone still walked on edge. Mrs. Weasley kept the foursome under close watch, as if she was afraid they'd disappear under her very eyes. Harry suspected that although she had resigned herself to their continued involvement in the war, she wasn't happy about it. She appeared to be waiting with extreme apprehension for the announcement of their next departure.

Mr. Weasley had held true to his word and kept them apprised of Scrimgeour's activities. He'd also told them how the press had reported their appearance in Diagon Alley in vivid detail. Harry's instructions on how to fight the Inferi had been front-page news for a fortnight, and the Ministry had taken up the cause as if it had been their idea. There were now regular reminders and updates in each edition of the Daily Prophet.

Percy had returned to work without saying much to any of them, his upturned nose expressing his disapproval. Charlie, however, had remained behind, claiming to need a holiday. Harry suspected he was attempting to snap Bill out of his funk. Bill was the only one who apparently still held a grudge about their disappearance, although Harry still felt uneasy around Mr. Weasley, as well.

He had carefully stored Helga Hufflepuff's charred cup in his trunk along with the diary and the ring. Three down, and he knew what the fourth one was, if not where. That left only himself and one other unknown item. The task still seemed overwhelming, but he was making progress.

Harry's greatest concern at the moment, however, was Hermione. She wasn't taking the loss of her hair well, but Merlin help anyone who tried to point that out to her. She was completely irrational on the subject, and refused to listen to anyone's suggestions. Poor Ron had spent more time trying to dig out of a blunder he'd unwittingly caused than anything else. He'd been desperately trying to be sympathetic, but had only ended up getting on her nerves.

Hermione had virtually barricaded herself in the library, and was rarely seen elsewhere. She'd even skipped most meals, preferring to have a tray sent up to her. At first, this behavior didn't seem out of the ordinary, but as the days passed, the others had become concerned. While it was true that Hermione was scouring the books, Harry suspected she was hiding more than working.

She spent as much time reading medical journals as she did anything related to Voldemort. Hermione was having a lot of trouble realizing that there was no solution to her hair loss other than to wait for nature to fix it. She couldn't stand being let down by the library and apparently took it as a personal insult.

Whenever anyone offered to help her, she declined and retreated further behind her books. Ron's expression waffled between hurt and bewilderment as Hermione most often released her pent-up aggression on him. Harry knew that she tended to act irrationally when she felt overwhelmed, but he was confident she'd pull it together when the logical side of her brain took control. Waiting for that to happen, however, was difficult to endure.

Hermione had kept her navy blue handkerchief wrapped tightly around her head, and she jerked away from anyone who attempted to touch it, particularly Ron. Harry had noticed how often she adjusted it and suspected her fidgeting was due to self-consciousness. He wished he could think of a way to help, but he was at a loss. He knew Ginny was concerned as well, since he'd caught her staring speculatively at the older girl on several occasions.

The one benefit to Hermione's distress had been the thawing of Mrs. Weasley's demeanor. She'd remained distant and aloof for several days after the Order meeting, but she'd obviously noticed Hermione's increasing agitation. Ginny had finally approached her mother for help, and Mrs. Weasley had thrown herself to the task with her typical gusto. It was as if she'd been waiting for the opportunity to swing back into mother mode, and Harry was happy to see her bonding with Ginny again.

Harry was struck by the realization that Mrs. Weasley wanted to be needed. Somehow, he'd always assumed that being an adult meant you grew past that kind of insecurity. It was jarring for him to see otherwise. Still, it felt right to have her bestow warm smiles and fond hugs once again. Harry was startled to realize how much he'd missed it. Ron and Ginny, too – he'd noticed both of them were far more affectionate to their mum since their return. He hoped Mrs. Weasley could help reach Hermione.

Tonks had suggested getting Hermione a wig, and both Weasley women had stared at her blankly. Tonks had to explain how Muggle women sometimes lost their hair after certain medical treatments, and that a variety of stores carried wigs for them to wear in the meantime.

Although she knew exactly what a wig was, Hermione had absolutely refused to accompany them to look for one. She instead burst into tears and accused them of only wanting to make it easier for everyone to look at her. Fleur had joined the conversation, trying to convince Hermione to give it a try and told her not to be ridiculous, but a crying Hermione had fled the room. Surprisingly, Ron had shouted at Fleur –

with whom he'd always been smitten— to leave her alone and went tearing after Hermione.

It was later that evening when Harry and Ginny were sitting in the library — supposedly doing research but actually spending more time studying one another — that Fred and George burst through the door. Harry and Ginny broke apart guiltily and moved to opposite ends of the couch.

"Why, brother, do you have the distinct impression we're interrupting something?" Fred asked, leaping over the back of the couch in order to sit between Harry and Ginny. Disgruntled, Harry straightened the collar of his shirt while Ginny narrowed her eyes at her interfering brothers.

"I do, brother mine, but what could we possibly interrupt while these youngsters are holed up in here diligently working...behind closed doors...all alone...and so far from the prying eyes of our beloved mother, who only has their best interests at heart?" George asked, also wiggling his way onto the couch between the pair.

"What do you two want?" Ginny asked, rolling her eyes dramatically.

"Now, what kind of attitude is that from our wee wayward lass? I would think you'd be groveling at our feet after frightening us so," Fred replied, holding his chest and batting his eyelashes.

Before Harry had the chance to explode, George laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Keep your knickers on, Harry."

"And you keep yours on as well, by the way," Fred added, wagging his eyebrows at Ginny.

She punched him in the shoulder — hard.

"I'm not here to give you a hard time. That's Bill's job," George said.

"He's being impossible," Ginny said, scowling.

"He'll get over it, Gin Gin. He still tends to see you as the spunky little sprite you were when he left for Hogwarts," George said.

"I was only a year old when he left for Hogwarts. Certainly he's noticed a difference," Ginny said, mutinously crossing her arms across her chest.

"Exactly. You were a baby, Ginny, and just a little kid when he came home for summers. He'd already moved out on his own by the time you developed your attitude," George continued as if she hadn't spoken.

"Now, here you are out fighting the war he wants to fight, but he can't because everyone keeps coddling him. He was the one left to console Mum after you disappeared, and she was even more adamant about protecting him after you were gone. He's been unable to go back to work, and even on the Order missions it's Fleur who gets the more dangerous assignments rather than him because no one wanted to upset Mum any more than she already was."

"That's not going to sit well with any self-respecting wizard," Fred replied.

"And we really haven't helped," George admitted grudgingly.

"I suppose we've been taking the mickey out of him a bit," Fred conceded. "But we thought we were helping."

"When you and Ron came back, he'd just reached his breaking point. His baby brother and sister are smack in the middle of it, and it was too much for him," George said. "And, lately, the full moons always seem to make him a bit grouchy."

Ginny's face had softened, but she still appeared unwilling to let it go completely. "Well, he's going to have to get used to the idea, because I'm not a little girl."

"Never said you were," Fred said easily.

"Yeah, we've been on the receiving end of enough of your hexes to know better," George said, sighing. "Maybe you should hex him a few times so he realizes it."

Ginny giggled and lightly shoved George's head.

"So, you're okay with it. With Ginny helping me, I mean?" Harry asked, picking at a stray thread on the couch.

"'Course we are. We just wish you would've let us come with you, as well," Fred said eagerly. When Harry opened his mouth to respond, Fred held up his hands in a defensive posture. "I know you can't, but that doesn't mean I don't wish it was different."

"Or that you would at least let us help you," George said, leaning forward.

"Yeah, but then we remembered that you did ask us for help. You asked us to locate Dung's old flat. Which we did," Fred said, his eyes sparkling.

"You did?" Harry asked, sitting up straight. "When? Where is it?"

"It's in a really dodgy Muggle area of Birmingham. The building owner let us inside. He's really hacked off that he hasn't had any rent from Dung in months. He said he was going to let the place to someone else, but I don't think there's a long line of people who want to take it since it's really close to where those fires burned over the summer," George said.

"We went in and looked around, but there's not much there. It's filthy, and the stench drove us away before we could take a really good look," Fred said, grimacing.

"Can you take us there?" Harry asked.

George shrugged. "Whenever you want to go."

"Now," Harry replied, standing up.

"Harry," Ginny said, grabbing his arm. "Hermione's not in any condition to do this."

"I know," Harry said, sighing. "But I need to check."

"I understand, and she would too, if she was in a reasonable state of mind," Ginny said.

Harry watched as she worried her lower lip, as if struggling with something. "Why don't you and Ron go along with the twins this afternoon while I'm with Hermione?" she said at last.

Harry furrowed his brow. "You're okay with not coming along?"

"Just this time. We have some plans this afternoon, and they're important, too. Besides, it'll be an added bonus to keep Hermione occupied and let Mum ease into letting us go. It might be easier for her if it's just Ron the first time."

"What are you doing with Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Never you mind about that," Ginny said, standing up and kissing him on the cheek. "Fleur had an idea, and I think it's a good one, so we're going to try it."

"You're going along with one of Phlegm's ideas?" Harry asked incredulously. He tried unsuccessfully to control the grin that spread across his face.

"Don't call her that, Harry," Ginny said reproachfully, as if she wasn't the one to come up with the nickname in the first place. "It's for Hermione."

Harry bit the inside of his cheeks and nodded solemnly. After Ginny had left the library, he raised a speculative eye towards the twins.

"What do you reckon?" he asked.

"I reckon she's got you right in her back pocket," Fred said, grinning. "I think you would have agreed no matter what she said, mate."

"Yeah, so when's the wedding? That's certainly a way to cheer up Mum," George replied, his grin matching Fred's.

Harry felt his face burn. "Her back pocket isn't a bad place to be," he said cheekily and quickly left in search of Ron before had they had time to comment – or smack him upside the head.

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Since they'd previously been there, the twins were able to Side-Along-Apparate Ron and Harry right into Dung's old flat. All four of them immediately gagged from the overpowering stench.

"Are you certain Dung doesn't have a dead body in here somewhere?" Ron asked, gasping. He'd been worried about leaving Hermione in her depressed state, but Ginny had promised to stay with her. Ginny had remained very tightlipped about their plans for the afternoon, but both she and Fleur had been giggling like schoolgirls.

Even Hermione's spirits had appeared to improve. That alone had convinced Ron that some time with just the girls would be good for her. At lunch, he'd announced that he and Harry were running an errand with Fred and George.

Mrs. Weasley had fretted over both of them, following them right to the door and insisting the twins swear to protect them. She hugged them both fiercely before they left, but she held true to her word and allowed them to go.

"I think it's coming from the refrigerator," Harry said, attempting to breathe through his mouth while cursing Dung for living in a Muggle flat. He tried to ignore the overwhelming odor, but eventually pointed his wand at the refrigerator and muttered, "Scourgify."

The stench evaporated instantly and was replaced with a fresh, lemony scent.

"Better than Dung deserves," Fred said, taking in a deep breath.

"What about using magic in Muggle areas?" Ron asked, glancing uneasily at the window as if he expected a Ministry owl to appear any moment.

Harry shrugged. "There are no Muggles here now, and I couldn't concentrate with that stench."

"So, what are we looking for?" Fred asked.

"The last time we saw Dung, he had a suitcase full of trinkets that he'd nicked from headquarters. I need to see what's in that suitcase," Harry replied, looking at Ron significantly. They'd brought the Spell Detector, but he hoped to avoid having to explain to Fred and George what they were doing with it. Ron removed it from his pocket and quietly slipped into the bedroom.

Housecleaning spells were certainly something Dung hadn't bothered with, for the flat was a mess. They found an abundance of empty Ogden's Firewhisky bottles in addition to a variety of Muggle alcohol and little else.

When Fred located a stack of magazines stored inside a footstool, he whistled loudly. "Dung, you old dog. These PlayWizards date back to Dad's Hogwarts days."

Ron and George quickly peered over their brother's shoulder as he flipped through the pages. Harry, who had been searching through Dung's closet and had nothing to show for it but a nasty Doxy bite, was irritated. He was about to snap at them to get back to work when he caught a glimpse of the centerfold they were unfolding. Harry felt his skin coloring. He'd heard the blokes in his dormitory talking about that, but to see it...

After a fairly lengthy delay, they finally dragged their attention away from the magazines and went back to work. The four boys searched Dung's flat as thoroughly as teenage boys were able to do. They'd found loads of questionable items, including a folded flying carpet tucked under Dung's mattress, but no suitcase.

Fred and George confiscated the carpet, along with several various odds and ends that they had stuffed inside their pockets.

"It's not like it was really Dung's to begin with," Fred said when Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah, he just nicked it from someone else," Ron added, admiring the carpet that Fred still held. "Besides, Harry, don't tell me you don't want a go on this thing. They've been illegal forever. Dad's never even been able to sneak one home."

Harry grinned. "The way I see it, Dung has a load of rubbish here that's part of my inheritance. The carpet calls us even - he probably found it at headquarters anyway."

"He did," George said, examining the underside of the carpet. "It's got the Black family crest embroidered on it."

"Then I get first go," Harry said, grinning.

Fred and George looked at one another, their facial expressions changing in that odd way of silent communication that Harry had seen them use previously.

"Fair enough," Fred said, "but we get to keep the other stuff. Besides, Dung's landlord is going to chuck it all out before Dung is released, anyway."

"The suitcase isn't here," Harry said dejectedly. As one final idea occurred to him, he said, "Accio suitcase."

Nothing happened.

"Accio locket," he tried again, holding his breath. Still, nothing happened.

"What do we do now?" Ron asked, glancing around the messy apartment. "Where do we look next?"

Harry frowned, considering his options before an idea struck him. "Do any of you know what happens to your stuff when you get arrested? I mean, if Dung was hauled in by the Ministry, and the suitcase was with him, where would it be?"

"Considering they chucked him into Azkaban without benefit of a trial," Fred said bitterly, "I'd expect it'd still be in a holding cell at the prison."

"Then we'll have to go out to Azkaban," Harry said, failing to suppress a shudder. He knew most of the Dementors were gone, but even one was too many as far as he was concerned.

"Er...Harry. How exactly do you propose to do that?" George asked, stunned.

"And what's so bloody important that you'd want to go?" Fred exclaimed incredulously. "Look, Harry, I know it's your stuff that Dung nicked, but...what could be worth a trip to Azkaban? They'll let Dung out eventually and then you can ask him for whatever it is you want back."

Harry shook his head. "It's not that simple. It's...er...it's something of personal significance" Harry said, coloring slightly. He hated lying to the twins. "And I'm not the only one who might be looking for it."

George shrugged. "I still don't see how you're going to get out to Azkaban. It's not like you can just stroll right in. Or maybe you can. Rufus Scrimgeour would love to have you owing him a favor."

Harry shook his head. "I'd prefer to do this without Scrimgeour's input, if possible. I'll talk to Tonks. She's been out there on guard duty, or at least she was before we left."

"Yeah, she's still been going, and looking a right mess whenever she returns. Are you certain about this, Harry? You haven't always had an easy time with the Dementors," Fred asked, ducking his head. His ears were bright red, something that Harry had seen in the past from Ron and various other Weasleys, but never the twins.

"I know. I'll deal with it when I get there," Harry said, nodding.

"We'll deal with it," Ron said, his eyes boring into Harry's. "Don't think you're going out there alone, mate."

"Ron, I don't even know if I can get out there, never mind bring anyone else along," Harry said, running a hand through his hair.

"You'll just have to find a way," Ron said firmly.

Dinner that evening was a quiet affair. Harry had hoped to speak with Tonks about her duties at Azkaban, but neither she nor Remus was in attendance. Mrs. Weasley said they'd gone out on a date. Harry was pleased to hear it; Remus deserved to grab a little happiness when he could find it.

Mr. Weasley was working late, as he frequently did, and since returning from Dung's place, Harry hadn't seen any of the girls. Mrs. Weasley said they'd been holed up in Bill and Fleur's room all day. They'd even kicked Bill out without telling him what they were doing. He and Charlie sat at the kitchen table with a bottle of wine between them.

"Care for some wine, Harry? Ron?" Charlie asked.

With their nods of consent, he poured two additional glasses.

"How did everything go for you lot today?" Charlie asked, and Harry noticed Bill listening intently, though trying to appear disinterested.

"It was a bust," Harry said, sighing. He knew it was too much to hope that he'd find the locket that easily, but he'd still hoped anyway.

"I don't suppose you want to share whatever it is you're looking to find?" Bill asked casually.

"Not really," Harry replied, sipping his wine.

The tension was broken by Mrs. Weasley's startled gasp. Harry looked up quickly to find Ginny standing alone in the doorway. His attention was instantly drawn to her head where her glorious, waist-length hair had been cut so it barely reached her shoulders.

She stood still in the doorway, her eyes avidly searching the room until they rested on him and locked her gaze with his.

"Oh, Ginny! What have you done to your beautiful hair?" Mrs. Weasley moaned, moving toward her daughter and reaching out to pull at the shortened locks.

"What did'ya do that for?" Ron demanded with his mouth full. Bill and Charlie simply stared at her, awaiting her response.

Harry felt as if he'd been hit in the gut, and he swallowed heavily. Ginny's hair had always attracted him, he hadn't fully realized how much until he saw her without it. He felt frozen to the spot and simply stared back at her, blinking.

Everything suddenly became clear to him when a beaming Fleur and a hesitant Hermione followed Ginny into the room. Harry felt a bubble of warmth spread inside his belly. Hermione no longer wore the handkerchief that had become her talisman, but instead sported a short, pixyish haircut in the same shade of Weasley red as everyone else at the table, save Harry.

Hermione shyly watched everyone's expressions, appearing as if she was ready to bolt from the room at the slightest provocation.

"Just what this place needs," Charlie said, grinning. "Another redhead. I didn't think we had enough of them here."

"There could never be enough of them," Bill said, beaming at Fleur with the first genuine smile Harry had seen on him since their return.

"Eezent eet magnifique? Who knew I'd be zo talented with 'air? Eet was Ginny's idea to copy ze Muggles and create a wig, but 'Ermione deeden't want to go shopping. Zat is very strange, no? Anyway, she agreed to let us try eet ourselves. I've never cut anyone's 'air before, but I zought I could do eet," Fleur said, plopping down into Bill's lap and kissing him soundly. "And I can."

"Hermione," Ron said, blinking, his glass of wine still frozen halfway to his mouth.

Hermione smiled tentatively before sitting down next to him. Ron leaned over and whispered something in her ear that caused her to blush and smile widely at the same time.

"What's that, brother mine?" Fred asked. "Did I just hear you tell the fair lass that you knew she'd always wanted to be a Weasley?"

"And why wouldn't she be?" George asked. "Of course, isn't it really up to you to correct that situation?" George said, smiling smugly at the blushes that suffused both Ron's and Hermione's faces.

"Sod off," Ron said, swatting George without ever taking his eyes off Hermione.

"Harry," Ginny said softly. She'd moved from the door to the chair next to him, tentatively looking into his eyes. She worried her lower lip as she waited for his response.

Harry felt a large lump materialize in his throat over what she'd done for Hermione. He didn't think he could ever be more proud. "You are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," he whispered, running his hands through her new, shorter haircut and pulling her close so he could kiss her.

Ginny's eyes filled with tears as she leaned into him. "You really think it's okay? I know you liked it longer, but it'll grow back," she said, sniffing.

"It doesn't matter. What you just did for Hermione makes you more beautiful than any hairdo ever could," he said, kissing her again despite the presence of her family at the table.

"Harry's right," Bill said. Harry and Ginny both looked up to find Bill staring at them, his eyes suspiciously bright. "That was a wonderful thing to do, Ginny. You just reminded me how strong your bond of friendship is with each other. I'd let myself lose sight of that. Hold onto it, embrace it, and don't let anyone – especially older brothers with chips on their shoulder – stand in the way of it. I don't think V-V- Voldemort stands a chance against it."

Ginny pushed back from the table and hurried over to Bill. She threw her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. "Thanks, Bill."

"I'm sorry, Ginny," he whispered into her hair. Releasing her, he looked up and stared intently at Harry, "I owe you an apology, too."

"Never mind," Harry said, waving his hand dismissively. "It's like you said, as long as we stick together, Voldemort can't win."

"Right, even if we sometimes act like prats," Bill said, smiling.

"Don't worry. Harry knows that even Weasleys can act like prats on occasion," Ron said, joining the conversation.

"Well, he must be very well aware of that since he's been stuck living with you for the past seven years," Bill said, chuckling.

"And he's been lucky to have him," Hermione said, beaming at Ron with glistening eyes.

"Yes, I have," Harry said, smiling. That annoying lump in his throat appeared determined to return. "I've been lucky to find all of you."

"Except when we act like prats," Ginny said, plopping a scoop of mashed potatoes on his plate.

"Yes," Harry replied grinning. "Except then."

The dinner resumed with much less tension than there had been on previous evenings. Mr. Weasley had joined them halfway through, and after the initial shock of seeing Ginny's hair, he told her how proud he was of her. Harry felt almost as if they'd never left and thoroughly enjoyed himself in Grimmauld Place for the first time in a very long time. When dinner was over, a giggling Fleur led Ginny and Hermione from the kitchen.

Before he had a chance to follow the girls from the room, Mr. Weasley placed a gentle hand on Harry's arm.

"Harry, could I have a word?" he asked.

His tone was gentle, almost conciliatory, but Harry still felt uneasy. He nodded stiffly and followed Mr. Weasley into the sitting room.

Mr. Weasley lit the fire in the grate and poured two glasses of brandy from a decanter on the desk. He handed one to Harry as he sat beside him on the couch. He swooshed the amber liquid around in his glass for several moments without speaking. Harry forced himself not to fidget, but the collar of his shirt was suddenly very tight.

"Well, Harry. I suppose you know why I wanted to speak with you," Mr. Weasley said, his ears turning as red as Ron's did when he was uncomfortable.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, dribbling a bit of the brandy down his chin.

"I owe you an apology," Mr. Weasley said suddenly, surprising Harry.

"Huh?" he asked. Oh, great. Really eloquent, Harry.

"As you know, I suspected you were going to pull a disappearing act. I also suspected Ron and Hermione would go with you. It was Ginny I was unprepared to find missing," Mr. Weasley said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley. I knew you weren't expecting it, but I couldn't say anything," Harry said, feeling desperate.

"I know that, Harry. And unlike Kingsley or Minerva, I think you're more than capable of handling yourself in most situations. The person I underestimated was Ginny. She's my daughter-"

"And you wanted to keep her safe. I understand that, sir," Harry said earnestly.

"No, Harry. You misunderstood my meaning. Of course, I want her to be safe. I want all of my children to be safe, and I'm including you in that statement," Mr. Weasley said softly, causing Harry to swallow around the lump in his throat. "What I underestimated was my own daughter's determination. I know Ginny. I raised her. I shouldn't have expected anything less from her."

Harry smiled fondly. "She's special."

"She certainly is. I'm not blind, Harry. I can see how much you care for each other, but it's very hard to let go," Mr. Weasley said.

"I understand, sir--"

"Let me finish, Harry. It's very hard to let go, but if I had to chose the wizard who would win my only girl's heart, I know I couldn't have chosen any better than she did when she was ten years old. I can't think of anyone I'd rather her fall in love with than you," Mr. Weasley said, shifting in his seat and taking a long swallow of his brandy.

Harry couldn't control his fidgeting any longer, and he shifted in his seat trying to decide where to look. He ended up taking a long swallow of the brandy, feeling his face burn. Harry didn't understand why he felt like such a little kid sitting in front of Mr. Weasley.

"Thanks, Mr. Weasley," he said, scuffing his feet on the worn carpet. "I want you to know that I'll do everything within my power to keep her safe."

"I know you will, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, clearing his throat. "What say you? Shall we join the others in the drawing room? If my ears don't deceive me, I think I can hear music drifting down from that direction. Merlin's beard I hope Molly hasn't broken out the Celestina Warbeck collection again."

Harry grinned, remembering the previous Christmas, and followed Mr. Weasley from the room. They joined the others in the drawing room where Celestina was crooning from the old victrola in the corner of the room. Mrs. Weasley was sitting in front of it with misty eyes as she swayed to the music. Bill and Fleur sat in a corner, whispering to each other while Fleur mimed crude imitations of Celestina behind Mrs. Weasley's back. Ginny was standing in a corner talking with Hermione and Fred, while Ron watched Charlie play against George in a game of chess.

Harry walked over to Ron and gently nudged him in the ribs.

"Hey. Where've you been?" Ron asked, turning away from the game.

Harry shrugged. "I just had a word with your dad. How's Hermione?"

"Brilliant," Ron said, a wide grin spreading across his face. "She's back to herself."

Harry failed to suppress the grin that spread on his face. "That's good. Obviously things are better between the two of you."

Ron looked at his trainers while he scuffed the floor. "I almost lost her, Harry. She could have died before I ever had the chance to tell her... Well, before I could set things to rights. I don't care about her hair; it'll grow back. Nearly losing her made me see what you meant about grabbing happiness while it's there, that there are no guarantees," Ron said gruffly, his ears turning a brilliant shade of red.

"So...you're dating?" Harry asked, feeling awkward. He and Ron rarely talked about stuff like this, but sometimes he found the only way to get an answer from Ron was to be blunt.

"Yeah, we are. Are you okay with that?" Ron asked, looking suddenly nervous.

Harry watched as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley began dancing in the center of the room. Bill and Fleur quickly joined them, and Harry saw Bill wag his finger warningly at his wife, who laughed musically.

He was okay with Ron and Hermione dating. He'd worried about it in the past, wondering what would happen if things didn't work or, or worse, if they left him behind. Now that he was with Ginny, however, having two couples completed them somehow. Besides, he could never deny their attempts to find some happiness in all this mess. They'd certainly helped him find his.

"Nah, I'm okay. I'm just glad you finally took your head out of your arse and asked her," he said, laughing.

Ron shoved him. "Oh, you're one to talk."

"Hey! Why are you shoving Harry?" Ginny asked as she and Hermione joined them.

"For being a right git," Ron said, taking Hermione's hand.

"You look wonderful, Hermione" Harry said.

Hermione beamed. "Thanks, Harry. Ginny and Fleur really did a nice job. Now we'll have to do something about turning your hair red," she said, laughing and tugging on a lock of his hair.

He ducked, jerking his head away.

"Harry wants red hair?" Fred asked. "I think I have something that would take care of that."

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. Taking Ginny by the hand, he backed away. "That's okay. My hair is fine, thanks."

He quickly wrapped his arms around Ginny and joined the others on the dance floor. Resting his chin on the top of her head as they swayed, he watched Ron and Hermione join them on the floor. The music might not have been his first choice, and their location certainly left a lot to

be desired, but it didn't matter. This, this is why he was fighting. Times like these, being with his friends...his family...this was worth anything Voldemort might throw at him. He'd fight with everything he had to make moments like this one possible.

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As September wound down and the weather turned markedly cooler, the event Harry had been dreading was scheduled. His first Occlumency lesson with the Malfoys had arrived. He met Remus in a small room off the second floor landing and sat down to await the arrival of Narcissa and Draco.

He and Remus greeted each other pleasantly, but an uncomfortable silence had descended upon the room once they sat down. Harry knew the Order felt these Occlumency lessons were important, but he also suspected that some of them might be trying to use the Malfoys in order to learn what Harry was doing. Harry couldn't help but be disappointed in Remus for going along with them. He tried to be reasonable and see Remus's point of view, as Hermione insisted he should, but when he allowed the darkness to enter his thoughts, his mind whispered that Sirius never would have done it.

"I have to say, I was pleasantly surprised you agreed to this, Harry. I didn't think you would," Remus said.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think it's the answer, but I'm willing to give it a go," he said, not meeting Remus's eyes.

"I understand your hesitancy, Harry," Remus said gently.

"Do you really? Do you really understand what you're asking of me, Remus? The same feelings that ran between the Marauders and Snape while you were in school now run between Malfoy and me. Would you have let Snape into your thoughts and memories back then? Would Sirius or my dad? Particularly if you had something specific you wanted to hide from him?" Harry demanded, his anger bubbling to the surface.

Remus sighed heavily, dropping his head. "Professor Dumbledore was certain that Occlumency would help you last year. He only changed his mind based on Severus's opinion. We know now that Severus couldn't be trusted. I don't think he tried to teach you properly. If Severus didn't want you able to do it, then it's more than likely it can help protect you. It's at least worth another effort. I understand your feelings, Harry, but I do believe this is for the best."

"I know you do," Harry said quietly, an uncomfortable churning in his belly. "I'm willing to make some considerations to appease the Order."

"What exactly does that mean?" Remus asked sharply.

Harry finally raised his eyes to meet Remus's gaze. "It means that I've taken some precautions of my own."

Remus frowned, but the door swung open, cutting off their conversation. Draco Malfoy strode into the room confidently, shooting Harry an amused grin that instantly raised Harry's hackles. Narcissa followed her son,

her nose arrogantly held in the air. She wore flowing midnight blue robes and dusted her chair with distaste before she sat.

"So, you want to learn the fine art of Occlumency, do you, Potter?" Malfoy asked, sneering yet still managing to keep that irritating grin in place. "I highly doubt you'll have the necessary cunning to master it. After all, you Gryffindors tend to wear your hearts on your sleeves."

"Now, now, Draco," Narcissa said, "let's not discourage him before we get started." Although she apparently was scolding her son, Narcissa acted as if she was more amused than disapproving.

"Draco, Narcissa," Remus said, nodding to each of them.

"That will be all," Narcissa said, waving her hand without even sparing him a glance. "My son and I can take it from here."

"Actually, I'll be staying to observe," Remus said pleasantly.

Narcissa's nostrils flared. "Occlumency takes a great deal of effort and concentration. I won't have my son worrying about a werewolf attack while he's attempting it."

"I understand your concerns, but we're nowhere near the full moon," Remus said mildly. "I assure you that you're quite safe."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Harry asked, fuming. "Malfoy here is in far less danger from Remus than we are from him."

"That's enough, Harry," Remus said. His casual acceptance of the way the Malfoys treated him infuriated Harry, and he clenched his fists to keep from shaking his father's old friend.

"Oh, yes. Of course you would defend the creature," Narcissa said, sitting down as far from Remus as she could.

"Don't worry, Mother. I was forced to endure Lupin's company for an entire year while he taught at Hogwarts, and I managed to avoid being attacked. I can handle him," Malfoy said, smirking at Harry.

"Thank you for that, Draco," Remus said, rolling his eyes. "Now, I believe it's Occlumency that we're here to discuss."

Harry was pleased to see Remus finally letting his irritation show.

"Yes, it is. Draco is a superb Occlumens. I understand you've already had some instruction?" Narcissa asked, her icy blue eyes pinning Harry to his chair.

"Yeah, from Snape," Harry spat. "He said I was hopeless at it, however."

"That sounds like Severus," Narcissa said, a ghost of a smile appearing on her lips.

"I gave up on it after my fifth year. I really don't see the point," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, you lot never were the best judge of Snape, were you?" Malfoy asked. "You actually thought he was on your side."

"I didn't. I never trusted him," Harry said, clenching his jaw.

"Pity you were never able to expose him, then," Malfoy said, grinning.

Harry's blood boiled. It took all his self-restraint not to curse Malfoy where he stood. In fact, his wand was twitching in his hand.

"Both my mother and I are accomplished Occlumens. We'll work together to see what you're capable of, then we'll let you know if there's any hope to teach you," Malfoy said, gloating. He was obviously enjoying being in a position of power over Harry.

Harry couldn't wait to knock him down a few pegs, even if he had to suffer through Occlumency to do it.

"You and your mother only?" Harry asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. "What about your father? Is he accomplished, as well?"

Draco scowled, and Narcissa lowered her eyes. "No. He never felt the need to conceal any of his thoughts," Draco said bitterly.

"Draco, that's enough," Narcissa said, and this time she did sound angry. "Why don't you and Potter start? I'll observe."

Harry took a deep breath and moved into the center of the room, staring warily at Malfoy. His wand felt slick in his grasp from his sweaty hands, but he fought to control his nerves.

Malfoy's gray eyes glittered dangerously.

"Deep breathing, Potter. Allow your physical body to relax while you envision a strong stone wall within your mind. Focus on nothing else but the stone wall," Narcissa said, surprising Harry. It was the first actual instruction on how to clear his thoughts that he'd ever been given.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, picturing the cold stone of the hearth in the hut where Uncle Vernon had hid them all while trying to avoid Harry's Hogwarts letters.

"Legilimens," Malfoy cried.

Harry's vision swam. The stone wall he'd so carefully constructed imploded in his mind.

He was inside the hut on the sea, lying on the floor and attempting to sleep despite the freezing cold while Dudley snored on the couch above him..

He was sitting in Dumbledore's office after the Third Task, trembling with Fawkes perched on his knee. He was so tired; he wanted nothing more than to sleep and not think or feel anything for a time...

He and Professor Dumbledore sat with Professor Slughorn. The rotund retired Potions' Master insisted he didn't want to return to Hogwarts, that he was too old and broken to go back...

He was snogging Ginny on the couch inside their magical tent and getting caught up in the moment. His hand slipped beneath her shirt to feel the deliciously warm bare skin on her back...

"Enough!" Harry snarled, finally forcing Malfoy from his mind, enraged. "That's private." He was exhausted and panting heavily. It was all he could do to remain standing.

"Don't worry, Potter. I couldn't care less what you get up to with Weaslette, but it did make you finally fight back. Why did you let me see those other memories?" Malfoy asked, amused. A light sweat glistened on his brow, but otherwise he appeared unaffected.

"What happened, Draco? How did he do?" Narcissa asked, lazily drumming her fingers on her chair.

"I broke in without much resistance at all," Draco replied gleefully. "His pitiful attempt at a wall crumpled almost instantly. I saw Potter as a child with some fat lout in a freezing little hovel. The next scene was in Dumbledore's office, and things appeared rather tense. Potter looked a right mess, and Sirius Black was there."

Remus's head shot up at mention of Sirius's name.

"Ah, yes. Your dearly departed godfather," Narcissa said, her voice dripping with false sincerity. "How tragic. Did you recognize the memory, Potter?"

Harry nodded stiffly. "It was after the Third Task."

"The other was a memory of him, Dumbledore, and Slughorn. It appeared as if Dumbledore was trying to convince Slughorn to return to Hogwarts, but why were you there, Potter?" Malfoy asked, his eyes narrowed.

Harry shrugged. "Professor Dumbledore said he had an errand to run while we were on our way somewhere else. Why were you so interested in my memories of Professor Dumbledore, anyway?" Harry asked, whirling on Malfoy.

Malfoy shrugged. "These were the first memories I stumbled across, Potter. Either they've been on your mind lately, or it was pure chance. Your mind is an open book, after all. The Dark Lord will make mince meat of you in no time."

"That's enough," Remus said, snapping. For the first time that afternoon, there was a trace of anger in his voice, but Harry was uncertain as to the cause.

"Anything else, Draco?" Narcissa asked, obviously enjoying herself immensely.

"A snogging session between Potter and the Weasley girl. I don't know where they were, but he looked as if he was enjoying himself. It was on that memory that he finally managed to push me out," Malfoy drawled.

"This isn't going to work if Potter is already worried about your finding things he doesn't want you to see, Draco. Stay away from memories about his girlfriend. I most certainly don't want you exposed to that, anyway," Narcissa said disdainfully. "Try again and stick to thoughts when you were younger – your first year at Hogwarts, perhaps when you were both there together. Is that less threatening for you, Potter?"

Harry had to grit his teeth, not wanting Malfoy near any of his memories, but refusing to show his hesitancy. He wouldn't allow Malfoy to think he was scaring him.

"Fine," he bit out, his jaw aching, it was clenched so tight.

Remus appeared hesitant, but he retook his seat and allowed them to continue.

"Once again, work on that solid strong wall, Potter. Make it stronger this time, reinforce it. Use it as your shield," Narcissa said. "Draco."

"Legilimens," Malfoy said.

He was inside Madam Malkin's trying on robes for the first time with a nervous, sickly feeling in his stomach. Malfoy was standing on the stool next to him, questioning him on Houses and Quidditch and a variety of other things that Harry knew nothing about. He had the distinct impression that he didn't like this boy very much...

They were at Hogwarts attending their first flying lesson. Malfoy had snatched Neville's Remembrall and was taunting Harry, daring him to give chase. Harry had never been on a broom before, but he wasn't about to let the blonde get away with it...

He was trapped inside his cupboard feeling bored and incredibly hungry. He couldn't remember how long he'd been there, but knew he was cramped and uncomfortable and longing to stretch his legs. If only he could find something to eat...

Dudley and his pals Piers and Malcolm were chasing him home from school. They always thought a game of Harry hunting was the best way to burn off steam. Harry had twisted his ankle jumping over a fence, and his heart was beating loudly, fearing they'd catch him. They hadn't been able to catch him once yet this month, and they'd be determined for some payback if they did...

Malfoy stumbled slightly as Harry finally pushed him from his mind. He dropped to his knees, sweating and panting and beyond humiliated that Malfoy had seen some of those memories. Merlin, I hate this. It's a stupid idea.

"Harry, are you all right?" Remus asked, alarmed as he rushed over to assist Harry to his feet.

Harry felt shaky and ill, and his scar was burning hot. He rubbed it absently while trying to control his nausea.

"What happened, Draco?" Narcissa asked, perplexed.

Malfoy shrugged, staring at Harry with an odd expression on his face. "I don't know. I only saw a bunch of childhood memories; I don't know why it affected him so badly."

"Does your head hurt, Harry?" Remus asked, glancing significantly at Harry's scar.

Harry tried to nod but it made the room spin so he stopped. "Yeah," he whispered. "First time in a long time."

"I think that's enough for today," Remus said, watching Harry closely.

"I didn't know Potter had migraines," Malfoy drawled. "Of course Occlumency can trigger them. I'm surprised Snape didn't tell you; it's most likely the reason you were never able to master it. People who suffer migraines rarely can."

"I don't get migraines," Harry said through clenched teeth, wishing they'd all shut up until his head stopped pounding.

"Whatever you say," Malfoy said, smirking, although his expression seemed to lack its usual vindictiveness.

"Fine. If it isn't a migraine, we can try again in a few days," Narcissa said decisively. She turned on her heel and strode from the room, beckoning Malfoy to follow.

"Can I get you anything, Harry?" Remus asked, gently squeezing Harry's shoulder.

"No. I'll be fine after I lie down for a bit. Just tell the others I'll be down later," Harry whispered, trying not to heave all over Remus.

"Very well. At some point I would like to discuss what you meant by precautions, however," Remus said, helping him to stand.

Harry grunted noncommittally.

He wearily climbed the stairs back to his bedroom, feeling old and tired. His head ached in a way that it hadn't done in nearly a year, and he was alarmed by it. He opened the door and slipped inside, catching a glimpse of his pale face in the mirror on his door.

Opening his trunk, he carefully withdrew the Pensieve that Professor Dumbledore had given him. One by one, he carefully extracted gossamer white trails of memories from the Pensieve with his wand and restored them to his mind.

Neither Malfoy nor the Order had learned anything about the Horcruxes tonight. As long as he remained vigilant, they never would.

Chapter Fourteen

Azkaban

September melted into October without Harry even being aware of the passage of time. He felt as if he'd flipped through the pages of every book in the library and still come up with nothing on Horcruxes. He'd begun to understand Hermione's dismay that the library had let her down. How could there be nothing written about something that obviously existed?

He'd continued his Occlumency lessons with the Malfoys, but hadn't made any progress since that first lesson. While Harry's head ached during practice and even for a short time afterwards, he hadn't experienced any of the visions or flashes of Voldemort's moods as he had during his fifth year. The sessions always left him feeling tired and drained, however.

A dismal, tense mood had settled over headquarters during the past week. The number of Dark creature attacks against Muggles had increased dramatically. In fact, Mr. Weasley said he couldn't remember a time when there had been more vampire sightings within Britain. Several high-ranking Ministry officials had gone missing within a short span of time, leaving those left behind overworked and anxious. Some of the wealthier families had gone abroad, as far away from Britain as they could get.

Members of the Order were spread thin trying to clean up one mess after another, leaving headquarters virtually empty most of the time. While this allowed Harry to do his research unhindered, it also meant that no one had had the time to look for Crabbe and Goyle's fathers.

The attacks on Muggles and Muggleborns had Hermione understandably worried for her own family. Mr. Weasley had promised that her family was being watched, but she still worried. She'd got a bee in her bonnet about returning to Albania, that they'd somehow missed something there.

Again, something in Harry's gut told him what they were looking for wasn't in Albania. Ginny had suggested that perhaps Voldemort hadn't spent all his time there, after all. Greece bordered a large part of Albania and maybe that was what inspired his use of the Parthenon. Harry allowed that it was possible, but regardless, he didn't think either place held any answers for him.

Of course, Hermione wouldn't let it go and refused to accept his reasoning without a more sound explanation for his unwillingness to go back. The problem was Harry didn't have a sound reason; he just knew it. A dark, underlying part of him wondered if it had something to do with the bit of Voldemort's soul that he now knew resided within him.

He and Hermione had argued about it over breakfast, and now Harry was sitting in front of a fire in the drawing room with a large book on the Dark Arts in his lap. He wasn't really seeing the words, however. His

eyes had glazed as his mind dwelled upon the fact that he was a Horcrux.

Locating and destroying the cup had been a huge victory, but it also brought him one step closer to doing what he feared he'd have to do. He couldn't talk about it with any of the others because it seemed to distress them even more than it distressed him. So, Harry was left alone to contemplate his feelings, and the toll was wearing him down.

This was how Ginny found him when she entered the drawing room and sat down next to him. He took a moment to even acknowledge her presence, and when he did, it was with a start.

"What are you thinking about that's making you frown that way?" she asked, smoothing the tense lines around his mouth with her fingers.

"I was just thinking about what we had to do next," he replied.

"You're worried," she said.

The corner of Harry's mouth quirked upwards – he could never fool her. "A bit," he said. "Hermione wants to go back to Albania."

Ginny nodded without response. Harry had the impression she'd already heard the other side of the argument and wondered if she'd sought him out to continue Hermione's pleas.

When Ginny remained silent, he prodded her. "What d'you think?"

"Well," she replied slowly, "I can see why Hermione feels the way she does, but I also think your instincts have been spot on so far. If you don't think it's what we should do, I'm willing to trust your judgment."

Her words didn't reassure him the way they should have. "Why?" he demanded. "Why do you trust me? How can you be so certain I'm making the right decisions?"

"Harry, I think it's only human to second guess our decisions. The only time we can ever be certain if we're doing right is after the fact. You have to make these decisions without hindsight and, so far, it's working. You were right about the last Horcrux – not only where it was, but how to destroy it. I don't know how you know, but you do. I trust you, Harry."

Ginny's eyes bored into him, and he turned away from the intense scrutiny, feeling exposed and utterly vulnerable. "You shouldn't. I have a nasty habit of getting the people I care about killed," he choked.

"That's a Malfoy talking," Ginny snapped. "Don't listen to them, Harry. They're trying to get under your skin. I hate this stupid Occlumency idea. Malfoy hates you because of his own inferiority complex. He'll never be better than you, and inside he knows it, and it eats him alive."

Despite his melancholy, he couldn't help but smile at her fierce loyalty. "I love it when you're fiery," he said, grinning.

"Oh, you do, do you?" she asked, swaying her shoulders seductively. "I can show you fiery."

Leaning over, she kissed him soundly. He ran his fingers through the shorter strands of her hair as every nerve ending in his body suddenly stood on end. After several minutes of pleasant but tame kissing, she pulled back, frowning.

"What's bothering you, Harry?" she asked.

Harry averted his eyes again, wanting desperately to talk with her, but also worried about her reaction. Before he could second-guess it, the words burst from his throat. "I'm scared, Ginny. What if the reason I'm feeling this connection to these Horcruxes is because they're part of me, too?"

Ginny nodded solemnly, as if she understood his fear. "It most likely is. That would make sense."

It wasn't what he wanted to hear. He wanted her to deny it and give him logical reasons why it couldn't be so.

"But, Ginny! How can you say that and still trust me? I've got a bit of Voldemort in me," he said, nearly choking on the words.

"Yes," Ginny replied, nodding. "You have a bit inside you, but it's not you. You're in control, and you're the one I trust."

"How can you be certain?" he whispered, fighting the hope that flared in his heart.

"Is that what's bothering you?" she asked, tracing the line of his face with her fingertips. "Are you worried that Tom has more control over you than you know? Don't let him do that, Harry. He's making you doubt yourself, that's how he works. Don't let him succeed. You're going to beat him. You'll find these other two Horcruxes, and then you'll manage to defeat him while keeping yourself whole. I know you will."

"Ginny-

"Don't doubt it, Harry."

"I have to! Are you listening to yourself? Ginny, I have to destroy a part of myself to win," Harry said, feeling utterly hopeless.

"No," she replied firmly. "You don't have to destroy part of yourself. He's separate from you, and after all this time, he's never been able to gain control."

Harry looked up suddenly, her words jarring loose a memory.

"What?" she asked, perplexed.

"That instrument that I got from Professor Dumbledore," Harry said, his mind racing. "When I saw him checking it after your father was hurt, remember how I told you the smoke formed a snake? Well, Professor Dumbledore said something about being divided and the one snake split into two. Do you suppose it was me that he was checking on – checking to see if he'd managed to take control?"

"It's certainly plausible," Ginny said slowly, "but didn't you say Dumbledore wasn't certain about the Horcruxes until he got the memory from Professor Slughorn?"

"Yeah...but he always had his secrets," Harry replied, his brow furrowed.

Ginny shrugged. "Even if he suspected, that story proves it. You've been winning all along."

Harry looked at her doubtfully.

Ginny sighed, exasperated. "Harry, do you think you can believe in something that you've never seen before?"

It was Harry's turn to roll his eyes. "Ginny, I lived as Muggle for ten years before I was exposed to magic. I'd have to believe anything is possible after that, wouldn't I? But Voldemort is still much stronger than me."

"But you do have something just as wondrous that he doesn't – it's your ability to love, and the people who love you," Ginny said, taking his shirt in her fists and shaking him slightly. "Don't discount that. Dumbledore believed in you, I believe in you. You're stronger than any bit of Tom ever could be."

"You've already beaten him if he's been inside you all this time, and there is no trace. There was a trace with me, Harry. I have huge gaps in my memory that year, but I can remember walking outside, wondering why but doing it anyway. That was right before the roosters were killed. I went outside and then my memory just stops. You're stronger than that. You've always been true to yourself, and he couldn't bear to be inside you at the Department of Mysteries because you are so different from him. The piece of him that's inside you hasn't overtaken you, despite your tough childhood. Don't underestimate the value of that strength."

"Ginny, you were strong; you were only eleven," Harry said adamantly.

Ginny waved her hand in the air. "I'm not saying I didn't try to fight it eventually, but more than anyone else I know what you're up against, and I can see from experience how different it is. Believe me, Harry."

"I'm trying," he whispered.

Ginny held him in silence for a few moments before saying, "When you tried to break up with me at the end of term, you said being with me was like something out of someone else's life."

"It is," Harry said softly, not meeting her eyes.

Ginny grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. "That was the saddest thing I'd ever heard. What we had...what we have...is wonderful and special and it makes my heart dance, but I know it's the way things are supposed to be. It breaks my heart that you don't think you deserve that. You're going to win, Harry, and I'm going to spend the rest of our lives showing you how good things are supposed to be."

Harry looked up, startled. "You love me?" he asked, blinking.

Ginny's face colored brightly, and her gaze looked everywhere but at him. "I've always loved you, Harry."

Harry's spirit suddenly soared. "You have? Say it," he demanded.

Ginny giggled, embarrassed. When he continued to stare at her intently, he felt her tremble slightly before she whispered, "I love you, Harry."

He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her shoulder. "That feels good," he said, his voice muffled.

"What?" she asked, returning the embrace.

"Hearing those words."

Ginny sniffled against his chest.

He took a deep breath, inhaling that sweet flowery scent that always made him feel as if he was home. She'd shown her Gryffindor courage and done as he asked. It wouldn't be fair of him not to offer her the same reassurance.

"I love you, too," he whispered into her shoulder, his body tense. He was surprised at how easily the words flowed once he'd decided to say them.

Ginny pulled back, blinking and biting her lip. Her eyes filled with moisture as they wandered over his face, as if trying to be certain she'd heard it.

"I love you, too," he repeated, more confidently now. It wasn't hard to say at all.

Ginny's grin spread across her face, making her eyes shine. She pulled him tighter to her and whispered, "Now, this house is pretty much empty. Even Mum went out with some of the Order to clean up an attack in Cornwall. I think there are other things we could be discussing besides Voldemort while they're away, don't you?"

Harry grinned and pulled her onto his lap. Indeed, there were much pleasanter ways to spend the unsupervised afternoon.

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Several days later, Harry was scheduled to have another go at Occlumency with the Malfoys. Remus had gone on an assignment for the Order and was unable to attend. Alastor Moody had agreed to take his place. He arrived first and instantly pulled Harry aside.

"Afternoon, Potter. Before we start here today, I thought I'd pass on a friendly warning," Moody said gruffly.

"A warning?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"Be careful what information you allow to be seen in these sessions. Constant vigilance, Potter. Not only against the Malfoys – never a lot to be trusted as far as I'm concerned – but also against any information you don't want leaked to other sources," Moody replied.

"Other sources? Are you telling me the Malfoys are passing along information to the Order?" Harry asked, his anger rising. Even though he'd suspected it, he couldn't help the wave of disappointment that swept over him.

"Kingsley always does what he believes to be the right thing. He tends to forget that he might not be the only one seeing the big picture – or might not be the one with all the facts. Narcissa will always do what suits her best. You'd do well to remember that," Moody said, his magical eye swirling towards the door.

A moment later, Draco Malfoy strolled down the hallway. He smirked when he saw Moody and Harry watching his approach.

"Good, you're both here. My mother asked me to inform you that she won't be able to attend today's lesson," he drawled, sounding bored.

"What do you mean she's unable to attend?" Moody snapped. "What's she doing? Watching her hair grow?"

The color in Malfoy's cheeks heightened slightly, but otherwise he showed no response. "She said she won't be expected to make it a priority if others simply brush it off without a satisfactory explanation. If you people can't give it the respect it is due, she certainly won't either."

"Stupid, stuck-up woman," Moody muttered under his breath.

"Lupin couldn't be here because of a situation with the war," Harry said through gritted teeth. "She does remember there's a war going on, doesn't she?"

"How could she forget?" Malfoy asked, sneering. "It's left us stuck here with you and your merry lot of bunglers."

"Stay here both of you," Moody barked. "I'll go fetch her."

He left both boys on the landing as he stormed up the stairs towards the wing where Narcissa stayed.

"Oh, Mother will love that," Malfoy said, his lip twitching.

Despite his annoyance, Harry felt the corner of his mouth quirk as he envisioned the scene. When he and Malfoy realized how close they were

to sharing a laugh, both quickly wiped the smiles from their faces and shoved their hands into their pockets, scowling.

"So, Potter, what's so important about learning Occlumency, anyway? You're obviously not very good at it," Malfoy asked.

Harry shrugged, averting his eyes. "Professor Dumbledore thought it was important. Do you think Moody will get your mother to come down?" Harry asked impatiently. If they weren't going to have an Occlumency lesson, he had other things he'd rather do than stand around chatting with Malfoy.

"Not likely. Mother's in a foul mood," Malfoy replied.

"What's she upset about now?" Harry asked, rolling his eyes.

Malfoy appeared thunderstruck. "What reason could she possibly have to be upset? I don't know, Potter. Maybe those filthy Muggles you call relatives conditioned you to find being locked up acceptable, but I assure you, my mother and I do not," he sneered.

Harry inhaled sharply; it was the first time Malfoy had made any reference to what he'd seen of the Dursleys.

"Why do they hate you so much? I thought you were everyone's golden child," Malfoy asked, his gray eyes puzzled.

"We're not talking about the Dursleys," Harry snapped, feeling slightly unstrung. "We're talking about your mother's diva antics."

"My mother has been confined with your precious Order for months without even being allowed the simplest contact with my father. Her patience is wearing thin," Malfoy shot back.

"I wonder why? It couldn't possibly have anything to do with the fact your father is a Death Eater and most likely would sell you out to his precious Dark Lord, does it?" Harry asked, scoffing. He was pleased to see Malfoy's color fade slightly.

"My father would never betray my mother," Malfoy said in a low, dangerous voice.

"No? How about you? Would he turn you over to Voldemort, Malfoy? His own son," Harry asked. Malfoy cringed, a myriad of expressions crossing his face.

"You think you're so tough tossing that name around, don't you? He's going to make you pay for it, you know," Malfoy said, recovering his poise.

"Oh. We're back on this again, are we?" Harry asked in a bored voice.

"Yes. We are. In fact, we've never got off it. The Dark Lord is going to kill you, and where does that leave us? The Order will be effectively wiped out once they've lost their only hope, and my mother and I will be left like sitting ducks," Malfoy spat.

"You don't know the Order at all if you think they'll just roll over and let him do as he pleases, even without me," Harry replied softly.

"But it won't matter, will it? You're their precious Chosen One, right? Without you, they're all lost...and you certainly don't present much of a threat," Malfoy said.

"Time will tell," said Harry, fighting not to show any emotion. Despite the fact he agreed with the git's assessment, he wasn't about to let Malfoy know it.

"Oh, there's an understatement. Bravo," Malfoy said, applauding.

Harry had grown weary of Malfoy's taunts, and it didn't appear that Moody was having any luck with Narcissa, either. "What is it you want, Malfoy? What does your mother expect from us?" Harry asked.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed as he stared intently at Harry. "I want to speak with my father."

"So write him a letter. I'm certain you could get Tonks to deliver it for you," Harry said, carelessly waving his hand.

"I can't put anything into writing, you idiot. My father more than likely has orders to pass on anything he receives from us, and he can't go against a direct order," Malfoy said.

"Can't or won't?" Harry asked belligerently.

"Can't," Malfoy replied through clenched teeth. "I need to speak to him in person."

"Good luck," Harry replied, rolling his eyes.

"He doesn't know he has an option – that my mother and I are alive. I'm certain he believes you've killed us," Malfoy said quietly.

Harry's eyes widened. "We're not the ones that go around killing people for sport," he said incredulously.

"Oh, get over yourself, Potter. We're your enemies; he'd expect nothing less. Dumbledore knew that. He offered us an escape, and he included my father in that offer," Malfoy replied.

Harry's mind raced. Malfoy's request could prove the perfect cover that Harry needed to get into Azkaban. If Professor Dumbledore had made him the promise, the Order would feel obliged to keep it. It would suit Harry's plans to check on Dung's belongings if he could wrangle a way to go along.

"If I can convince the Order to allow you out to travel to Azkaban, I'm going with you."

"What? There's no way you're listening to a private conversation between my father and me," Malfoy said indignantly.

"Then you're not going," Harry replied, shrugging.

Malfoy scowled, but after considering his options, he eventually nodded. "I suppose I don't have a choice. Very well, you can accompany me."

"Gee, thanks, Malfoy. Will you wear your best dress robes for the occasion?" Harry asked, raising his eyebrow.

Malfoy flushed, turned on his heel and stormed from the room. Harry grinned. This might work out exactly the way he needed.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had carefully reviewed their plans about requesting the trip to Azkaban. Hermione thought it was a risky idea for both Harry and Malfoy and didn't think the Order would allow it. Harry thought he could persuade some members easily than others. The obstacle was narrowing down his choices.

The opportunity presented itself approximately a week later when Tonks and Remus burst into the sitting room where the teens were gathered.

"We did it, Harry," Tonks said, grasping Remus's robes after she tripped in the doorway. They hadn't seen much of Tonks at all during the month of September. She was either stationed at Azkaban or recuperating from her visits there.

Remus deftly caught her, and they continued into the room as if nothing had happened. Harry and the others covered their grins.

"Did what?" Ron asked.

"You asked us if the Ministry had a way of locating someone and wanted us to track Octavius Crabbe and Busby Goyle. I haven't spent a lot of time at the Ministry recently, but I was there tonight, and I finally located one of them," Tonks said, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Only one?" Hermione asked, frowning. "I thought magical imprints could be traced. The Ministry must have ways of watching a certain person?"

"It's not as simple as that. I'm looking for specific people, but any magic done in the vicinity where that person is will show up on the record. If they're in a place like Diagon Alley...well, the numbers can be staggering. The only reason I found Octavius Crabbe so quickly is that he performed a spell in a Muggle area - a flame charm," Tonks replied.

"Where?" asked Harry, feeling an adrenaline rush beginning. He'd been cooped up too long and was eager to accomplish something.

"On a beach in Scotland. It's very deserted this time of year, so I'm not certain what he's doing there. Want to go take a look?" she asked.

Harry's mind raced. He was certain it would be the same beach where he and Dumbledore had found the fake Horcrux, or at least above the rocky ledge where Tom Riddle had once lured two frightened children. Since autumn had begun, the weather was growing chillier. Harry imagined the

beach was cold after nightfall, and Crabbe might forget Voldemort's instructions about not using magic in favor of comfort.

"Yeah," he said. "Let's go take a look and see what he's doing."

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny left with Remus and Tonks despite Mrs. Weasley's worried face. Ginny kissed her on the cheek before Mr. Weasley wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulder, and the two stood stoically as they watched their children depart.

The group Apparated to a spot on the roadside a fair distance from the rocky cliff. A crisp breeze blew, causing them to clench their jackets closer to their bodies. The smell of salty air greeted them as they glanced around, letting their eyes adjust to the darkness. Harry could hear the crashing of waves against the sharp rocks at the base of the cliff. The familiarity of the place, and the haunting memories of what had happened on his previous visit, sent a sharp pain through his heart.

He'd been here with Professor Dumbledore on the last night of his former headmaster's life. He'd watched in awe as Dumbledore detected the hidden entrance below, and the magic surrounding it. He'd forced his mentor to drink poison because of a promise he'd hastily made when he'd been desperate to be allowed along on an adventure. Harry inhaled a deep breath of salty air. This time, he wouldn't allow himself to be tricked.

Ginny must have sensed his inner turmoil, for she slipped her small hand into his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. He attempted to smile, but knew he'd failed miserably. Remus motioned for them to be quiet and to follow him as they moved down the road.

They hadn't gone very far when Harry spotted Crabbe standing on the rocks beside a small campfire that was hovering in the air – and he wasn't alone. Another man stood across from him, gesturing wildly at the fire.

Harry and the others cast Disillusionment Charms upon themselves and quietly crept closer towards the duo in order to hear what was being said. Harry couldn't suppress a shudder as he glanced at the steep incline where he and Dumbledore had followed Riddle's trail. It felt almost as if that had been another lifetime. Dumbledore had trusted him to bring him back to safety.

I am not worried, Harry...I am with you.

Harry shook his head. Now was not the time to dwell on memories; he had a job to do.

"Did you have some information to pass along to me, or is your only purpose here to complain that I decided to keep warm, Ferguson?" Crabbe asked his cohort, sounding disgruntled.

He appeared as thickset and solid as Harry remembered, although he thought he might have grown pudgier around the middle since that fateful night in the graveyard.

Death Eaters must be eating well these days, Harry thought sourly.

The other man, Ferguson, was leaner than Crabbe, although still rather stout. He had a thin mustache that curled slightly at the end, perhaps thinking it made him appear aristocratic. Harry thought it made him look like a ponce.

"I was asked to tell you to keep your eyes open for any of the Parkinson birds. If they come to you seeking aid, you're to detain them and call the Dark Lord immediately," Ferguson said, sounding as if he were repeating something he'd memorized.

"Parkinson? What's Philip done to have the Dark Lord looking for his family?" Crabbe asked in a stunned whisper.

Ferguson shrugged, but lowered his voice and said, "Philip's dead. His wife and kids have disappeared the same way the Malfoy bint and her brat did. Master believes one of them knows where the Malfoys are hiding."

Crabbe whistled through his teeth. "My Lord must be very unhappy with the recent run of traitors. Why do you suppose that is? D'you think the Potter kid-"

"I wouldn't finish that thought if I were you," Ferguson said, glancing around nervously. "The Dark Lord always knows, and you wouldn't want him to suspect that you're questioning the loyalty of his servants."

"No! No. I mean, that's not what I meant. The Dark Lord will discipline his servants, and soon all will call him Master," Crabbe said fervently.

"I still have to go and pass this information to Simmons. Mind your post and keep a lookout for any of the Parkinsons," Ferguson said. He turned on his heel and began walking toward the road without waiting for a response.

Remus motioned for the others to follow him, and he led them in the opposite direction from where Ferguson had departed. When they were far enough away from Crabbe to ensure that he couldn't overhear them, Remus reversed the Disillusionment Charms.

"Parkinson? As in Pansy Parkinson?" Ginny asked immediately.

"Yes," Remus said, nodding. "Philip Parkinson is...was a Death Eater. Pansy and her older sister must be on the run. I vaguely remember both girls from when I taught at Hogwarts."

"We'd better get back to Headquarters and inform the rest of the Order," Tonks said, grimly compressing her lips.

"Yes," Remus replied. "Does any of this mean anything to you, Harry? Do you know why Octavius Crabbe is stationed here?"

Harry nodded. "I have an idea," he answered, avoiding the older man's eyes. "Thanks for letting me know you'd found him, but he's not the one

I need. It's Goyle that I have to find. Can you keep trying, Tonks?" Harry asked.

Tonks nodded, glancing hesitantly at Remus. "Of course. I wish I knew why, though."

Harry shifted his feet, hating lying to them. "I think he's guarding something I need to find."

"Need to find in order to find You-Know-Who?" she asked.

"Something like that," Harry said, nodding. "Can you help me?"

"Of course. I'll keep checking each time I go to the Ministry. I think Mad-Eye is trying to come up with some kind of tracking system, as well. It's keeping him busy anyway," Tonks said, smiling. "Of course, the Ministry has tried to track You-Know-Who for years and never had any luck with it."

"I have one more request," Harry said.

"What's that?" Remus asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Harry-" Hermione said, and he knew she would try and warn him off.

"Malfoy wants to make a trip to Azkaban to speak with his father," Harry said quickly. "It was something Dumbledore promised him that night on the Astronomy tower, and I'm going with him."

"And me," Ron said.

"And me," both Hermione and Ginny said, glaring at both Ron and Harry.

Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation. "We can't all go."

"None of you are going," Remus said, raising his voice over the complaints of the other three. "Have you all gone mad? I don't think any of you has any idea what Azkaban is really like. Whatever you're imagining, the reality is ten times worse."

"Why does Draco want to see his father?" Tonks asked.

"Dumbledore promised Draco that he would protect Lucius when he got out of Azkaban if Draco switched sides. He wants to make certain his father knows he has a choice, and that Draco and his mother are okay. He says his father has orders to turn over anything in writing to Voldemort," Harry said. "I need to see the belongings that Dung had with him when he was arrested. I think he has something of mine. If you arrange a visit for me, we can bring Malfoy under the Invisibility Cloak."

"Invisibility Cloaks won't work against Dementors," Ginny said, scowling. "There are still some there, and you're not going alone, anyway."

"He can remove the Cloak once we're inside," Harry said, ignoring the second half of her statement. "Since this was the last promise Dumbledore made, we have to honor it."

"I know we agreed to help you, Harry, but I don't like this," Remus said. "I don't think you're prepared for how difficult Azkaban will be, for you especially."

Harry nodded. "Maybe you can help with that, then, but I need to do this, Remus. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

"Let me talk to Mad-Eye," Tonks said, watching Remus closely. "He has a knack for getting the others to agree to things they normally wouldn't."

"Good enough," Harry said.

"For now, let's go back," Remus said, nodding to each as they Disapparated.

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A fortnight later, Harry sat on a couch inside Regulus Black's former bedroom flipping through an ancient book on the Dark Arts. Hermione had discovered the room while seeking a quiet place to read and had stumbled across a book partially sealed into the wall.

Leave it to Hermione to sniff out a hidden book.

It described many hexes and curses so vile that they made Harry's stomach churn just reading about them. But, hidden within the text of an entirely different matter was a small paragraph about Horcruxes and how they were made. The book was Romanian in origin – Ginny had recognized some of the writing as similar to things Charlie had sent her.

Hermione thought they should plan to leave for Romania posthaste to investigate any ties that Voldemort might have made there.

While Harry agreed it was a good lead in order to seek the remaining Horcrux, he was far more interested in finding a translation to the paragraph. He knew he could ask Charlie but didn't want to involve him, if possible.

He glanced at his watch impatiently. Tomorrow was Halloween. It would mark the sixteenth anniversary of his parents' death. It was also the day he was scheduled to go to Azkaban. He thought it strangely ironic.

Remus had given Malfoy and him the news several days ago at an Occlumency lesson. Malfoy appeared surprised but pleased and requested they keep the information from his mother. Harry wondered if anyone had told him about Pansy Parkinson but hadn't brought it up with the blonde. He certainly had no fondness for the Slytherin girl – he remembered her as a bully, much the same as Malfoy – but no one deserved to be hunted like that.

Remus said Harry, Malfoy and Ron would accompany Tonks on her next trip to the prison. Kingsley had arranged the visit through Rufus Scrimgeour. Scrimgeour had been extremely eager to learn the details of Harry's trip, and Harry suspected some Ministry interference before the

day was through. Remus had told him that no more than one of his friends could accompany him, and Mrs. Weasley had absolutely forbidden Ginny from going to Azkaban. She'd tried to stop Ron too, but Mr. Weasley had gently reminded her that Ron was of age.

Harry had chosen Ron, which meant Hermione hadn't spoken to either of them in days. Ron had made the mistake of telling Hermione not to be stupid, that of course he'd be the one to go with Harry. Harry would swear he saw icicles form on Ron's eyebrows from the glare Hermione gave him. And Ginny wasn't too pleased, either.

Aside from the fact he didn't want to push Mrs. Weasley any further than she'd been pushed already, the masculine side of his brain did want to protect Ginny from Azkaban. He remembered that she'd had difficulty with Dementors herself and wanted to spare her if he could. Hermione had just been through a serious and harrowing injury, and Harry thought it was a good idea for her to avoid the Dementors, too, if possible.

Of course, the girls saw things differently, but his decision had been made. Ron was just as intent to protect Hermione as he was Ginny, and Harry wasn't going alone, so their arguments didn't hold merit. When it came right down to it, this was something he thought Ron could handle better than Hermione, anyway. She had a tendency to panic if things went wrong.

Harry closed his book and was about to head off to bed when the door opened, and Ginny slipped inside.

"Hi," she said, shuffling her feet and not looking at him.

"Hi," Harry replied, aware of the hope flaring in his heart. She'd had very little to say to him in the past few days, and he wasn't very keen to go to Azkaban while she was cross with him.

"Tonks said you're leaving early tomorrow," Ginny said.

"Yeah. We're going on her regular shift."

Ginny took a deep breath and flung her arms around him, squeezing him tight. "You're not forgiven for ditching me, but I wanted to wish you luck. I hope you find what we're looking for, and I hope it's not too bad for you there."

"It'll be fine, Ginny. I'm sort of used to the Dementors now," Harry said, running his hands along her back. It felt so good to have her in his arms again. He didn't know how he could miss something so much that he really hadn't had all that long to begin with.

"Quit being noble, Harry. No one ever gets used to Dementors. Just stay with Ron and no heroics," Ginny said, holding his face between her hands.

Harry pulled a face. "I'll be okay, Ginny. If we find it, I'll bring it back so we can figure out how to destroy it safely."

"You won't be able to bring your wand inside, so a Patronus isn't possible," Ginny said, worry evident in her eyes.

"I know. But Tonks will have her wand, and we'll stay with her the whole time. Don't worry, Ginny," he said, gently brushing a strand of hair from her face. It cheered his heart to see the concern shining in her warm brown eyes – concern for him. It was still such a novel concept to realize how much she cared about him. He enjoyed the way it made him feel inside and hoped he made her feel a bit like that, too.

Ginny leaned in and kissed him soundly on the lips, making Harry forget all about Dementors and prisons and everything else. In fact, he wasn't thinking of anything but the slip of a girl in his arms and how soft her skin felt beneath his hands.

Although they'd promised each other not to get carried away, they were still teenagers and prone to all the raging hormones that went along with their ages. Their hands would roam curiously, and several articles of clothing had inexplicably gone missing on several occasions. Still, despite their minor slips, they'd managed to keep themselves in a reasonable semblance of control. The idea had crossed his mind however, that he didn't know if those checks would remain in place the next time they were out on their own and away from the prying eyes of Ginny's family.

"Good luck," Ginny whispered when she finally pulled away. Her hair was disheveled, and she wore a slightly dazed expression.

Harry just wanted to get back to the kissing. He nodded fervently and pulled her back into his arms, feeling as if there was no way even a Dementor could dampen his spirits.

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Halloween morning dawned stormy and gray. There was a distinct chill in the air that Harry knew would only worsen on the open ocean. It was exactly the kind of dismal day that seemed appropriate for a trip to Azkaban. He'd dressed warmly but still felt goose bumps rise on his skin as he boarded the boat that would take him to Azkaban.

He, Ron, and Malfoy had met Tonks and Mad-Eye in the entrance hall. Harry reckoned Moody was only going along to keep an eye on Malfoy; he still suspected that Malfoy was up to something. Of course, Moody generally suspected that everyone was up to something.

They'd Apparated to the Ministry and taken a controlled Portkey to a small island not far from Azkaban where the Ministry ran a checkpoint. No one was allowed in or out of the prison without going through the island's security. The wards at the prison prevented both Apparation and Portkeys, much like the wards at Hogwarts.

Malfoy had remained concealed beneath Harry's Invisibility Cloak until they'd arrived at the checkpoint. There he'd had to register his wand and state his intent to visit his father. Harry was incredibly apprehensive about leaving his wand at the checkpoint. Tonks assured him it would be safe; there were precautions in place so that only he

could remove it. Besides, only the Aurors were permitted to bring wands inside the prison. If he wanted to go, he'd have to leave it.

Once they'd completed the registration, they were ushered outside to a small boat ramp. The icy wind blew off the North Sea in fierce gusts, causing Harry to pull his jacket more tightly around his body. His hair ruffled in the breeze as the clean, salty air filled his lungs.

Grim-faced Aurors stared suspiciously at them as they boarded. There were surprisingly few passengers, and Harry assumed the prisoners incarcerated within Azkaban didn't receive many visitors. Along with Tonks, there were five other Aurors taking the journey to relieve those who had worked the night shift.

The boat was small and mostly open to the wind. Stiff wooden benches were aligned in rows behind an enclosure where the captain piloted the boat. Harry and Ron sat on one bench while Tonks and Mad-Eye took the bench behind them. Tonks left room for Malfoy to join them, but he purposefully took the bench opposite them and sat alone.

"Where do they put the prisoners?" Harry asked, wondering how it would feel to be making this journey knowing there was only pain and imprisonment at the end. This trip already appeared foreboding, and he was certain he'd be returning in only a few short hours.

"Prisoners don't ride with passengers," Tonks said, shaking her head. "There is a heavily secured ship that makes the trip once a day. Prisoners are Stunned while they go in and out on that one."

"They're Stunned even when they're leaving?" Ron asked, his voice squeaking slightly.

Tonks smiled grimly. "There isn't anything about this place that's pleasant."

"How long is this journey going to take?" Malfoy asked. He stood up and scowled at the crude seating. "These accommodations are barbaric."

The boat jerked slightly as it left the dock, causing Malfoy to stumble and hit his knee against the bench. He winced painfully and grabbed onto his wounded knee. Ron sniggered loudly, causing Malfoy to glare at him as he retook his seat.

"What are you laughing at, Weasley? Just because a wooden bench is considered a step up from what your family is accustomed doesn't mean—"

"Not one word about my family, Malfoy," Ron said, standing up and towering over the blonde. In the cramped quarters of the launch, Ron had to hunch over so that his head wouldn't hit the roof. "There's no one on this boat who'd make a fuss if you suddenly found yourself overboard, so I'd keep quiet if I were you."

"All right, that's enough, lad," Moody said, chuckling and motioning Ron back to his seat.

Harry turned away from their bickering to watch the waves crash against the side of the boat. He could feel the cold spray of the water and

pulled deeper into himself in an attempt to keep warm. The island from where they'd departed had rapidly become a distant speck upon the horizon. Nothing but the cold, gray sea surrounded them as far as the eye could see in any direction. He wasn't certain how far they'd traveled, but it seemed as if they were exposed to the wind and icy surf for hours. A fog had rolled in, making visibility nearly non-existent. Harry strained his eyes, trying to see anything in the distance.

Suddenly, the captain called out above the wind, "Land, ho!"

Harry tried unsuccessfully to suppress a shudder as a massive stone structure emerged from the fog as if a curtain had been lifted. Jagged, seaweed-covered rocks poked out of the water surrounding the small island. The sharp, rough edges would be enough to make any stray boats hesitant to try and dock.

The walls of the prison arose steep and menacing from the icy cold sea, forcing Harry to crane his neck to see the top. He could see the water line that the tide had marked on the stone, making it appear smoother and darker than the remainder of the structure.

The captain maneuvered the boat into a small inlet that Harry hadn't noticed at first. As he watched the boat make the treacherous journey up the channel, he saw several of the jagged stones move out of their way. Obviously the channel was controlled by magic.

When they reached the end, they docked on a simple wooden platform to debark. The moment Harry stepped off the boat, he felt a chill deeper than anything weather-related sink into his skin. He broke into a clammy sweat despite the cold, and his head felt suddenly woozy. He had no doubt there were Dementors nearby.

As the small party approached the stone wall, a doorway magically appeared several meters above their heads. A metal stairway was lowered, and they ascended into the prison. Tonks pressed her wand against the door, which emitted a series of soft pops before gliding open.

The blast of air coming from inside the prison was colder than the sea air in which they were standing. Harry followed Ron inside, his heart pounding and his head swimming. A bout of nausea churned his stomach, nearly causing him to gag.

A tall, thin, cloaked figure stood on the far side of the room, observing them as they entered. Harry's vision blurred as a distant screaming began to echo in his head. Instinctively, he reached for his wand only to find it missing. He took deep breaths, trying to control his rising panic.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

He stumbled as Tonks quickly ushered them across the room and would have fallen if Ron hadn't caught him.

"You all right, mate?" Ron whispered as they entered the long stone corridor outside the first room. Ron was very pale, making the freckles on his face stand out darkly.

Harry nodded, his world steadying again after they'd left the room where the Dementor still stood. His stomach roiled, and he was very glad he hadn't eaten much for breakfast.

"That's right, Potter," Malfoy drawled, staring at Ron and him with amusement glinting in his steel gray eyes. "I'd forgotten you had problems with Dementors. They make you faint, don't they?" Despite his taunts, Malfoy's pallor had faded, as well.

"Back off, Malfoy," Ron growled, staring at Harry with concern.

Harry didn't even bother with a comment; it was taking all his effort to remain standing. He'd tried to put a hand on the cold stone of the wall in an effort to collect himself, but that had been a bad idea. There was something alive in the walls. Harry didn't know how else to describe it. The stone was cold and slightly slimy from the damp chill, but there was also a deep agony that emanated from it. It was almost as if the stone had absorbed all the misery and torment from the people that had been imprisoned here through the years.

Harry watched as water dripped from the ceiling and ran in rivulets in certain spots along the massive corridor. It looked as if the walls were crying.

"Are you going to be able to do this, Harry?" Tonks asked. She'd moved to his side and lowered her voice. Her hair had been her traditional bubblegum pink when they'd left that morning, but since entering the prison the color had faded and become dull.

"I'm fine," Harry replied, feeling anything but fine. "Let's just get it over with."

"What do you want to do first?" Tonks asked, her eyes showing concern.

It made Harry uncomfortable, and he grit his teeth as he tried to ignore it. It was hard enough dealing with the effects of the Dementors, never mind dealing with sympathy because of it.

"Let's take Malfoy to see his father before we look through Dung's things," he replied. If the amulet was with Dung's belongings, he didn't want to bring it anywhere near Lucius Malfoy.

"The cells where the prisoners are located begin on level three. That's where Dung's cell is. Lucius is in the high-security wing on level five. The stairs are this way. I just want to warn you - there are Dementors on that level, so be prepared," Tonks said grimly.

They climbed the stairs in silence. The presence of the Dementors had affected them all, and not even Malfoy had the energy to be difficult. Once they'd reached level five, Moody informed Malfoy that he wouldn't be able to see his father alone. Moody said he was going with him.

"No way, Moody" Malfoy replied, some of his former bravado returning. "You're not going to use anything my father says against him at a later date, not a chance."

Moody shrugged as if it made no difference to him one way or the other. "Then you're not going in, either, lad. You're not entering his cell without an escort."

"Tonks can go then," Malfoy replied, sneering. "She's sort of family. I'll trust her over you."

"Sorry, Draco," Tonks said cheerfully. "I'm on duty. I have to go relieve my partner, so I really can't sit with you. You can pick Moody, Ron or Harry, but one of them is going inside with you."

Malfoy scowled. "Potter then," he said, sneering

"Good enough," Moody growled. "Potter, keep your ears open that these two aren't plotting anything against the Order. Keep the Invisibility Cloak on so you won't be seen."

"I thought Invisibility Cloaks didn't work against Dementors," Harry asked, pulling the Cloak out of his pocket.

"The Cloak isn't meant to fool the Dementors," Tonks replied. "They don't see the way we do. They'll sense two people entering and two people leaving. The Cloak will only deceive Lucius."

"As long as you keep your mouth shut," Moody said, his magical eye staring menacingly at Draco.

"I don't want my father to know Potter is there any more than Potter wants to be seen. I don't even want him there at all," Malfoy replied, turning his back on both Harry and Moody.

"What you want has never been one of my considerations, boy," Moody replied, harshly. "Go on down the corridor. He's in cell 5-J; it'll be on your left. Ron and I will be waiting here."

Ron looked extremely hesitant to let them go, but there was nothing to be done for it. Tonks pressed her wand to the heavy steel door and it slid open, stopping with a loud clang. Harry threw the Invisibility Cloak over his head and followed Malfoy down the long, dimly lit corridor.

The air was even heavier than it had been downstairs, and Harry knew the Dementors were close by the volume of the screaming in his head. He felt positively ill and hoped he wouldn't alert Lucius Malfoy to his presence by vomiting all over the man's feet.

Draco glanced at the numbers of the cells as they walked. Harry peered into each cell and felt a great wave of sympathy for the prisoners huddled inside each small hole. There was barely enough room to move inside, and most of the prisoners didn't even have the energy to stir as they passed.

Sirius spent twelve years locked up here, probably on this level.

Harry shook his head. This wasn't the time to dwell on that. Malfoy stopped walking and placed his hand on a silver disk located outside the cell. The disk flashed green, indicating it was safe to enter. There were no doors or bars to hold the prisoners but instead a ward ensured they were kept inside. Tonks had said the ward would allow them inside the cell, but they would be unable to leave until they again passed their hands over the disk. If Lucius attempted an escape, they would all be trapped within the wards.

Harry hadn't bothered to ask exactly what that meant. He didn't think he really wanted to know.

He followed Draco inside the cell, and it was a moment before he noticed Lucius sitting on the edge of his bed. He'd obviously been sleeping as his eyes were crusted, and he squinted at his son as if trying to process the fact he was there. Lucius was thinner than Harry remembered. His long blonde hair was matted and dirty, and he'd lost that haughty aristocratic demeanor that he'd always shown. He looked haunted. Harry couldn't imagine trying to live for years under these conditions. It was a wonder anyone left Azkaban with his mind still intact.

"Father?" Malfoy asked tentatively. His voice shook slightly as his eyes roamed over his father's broken form.

"Draco? What are you doing here?" Lucius asked. His voice was raspy from lack of use. "Everyone has been looking for you. Is your mother with you?"

"She's safe, Father. She doesn't even know I'm here," Draco replied, swallowing heavily. "How are you?"

Lucius Malfoy shook his head as if to clear it. That ugly sneer that Harry remembered so well returned to his features. "What have you done, Draco? Have you made a bargain with the blood traitors? Where is your pride? I'm so disappointed in you."

"Father, listen to me. I can help you. When you're released from here, you can come into hiding with us," Draco said, a pleading quality to his voice that Harry found painful. He knew from years of experience that Draco's pleas would fall on deaf ears.

"A real Malfoy would never crawl on his belly with the slime and dregs of society," Lucius spat, seething now. "I thought I'd raised you to know that. This is your mother's influence, isn't it?"

"Father, the Dark Lord will kill you when you're released if you don't do something to ensure your own survival," Draco cried.

"Then I will die with honor, as you should have done," Lucius replied.

"Father-"

"No, Draco. You can still salvage this," Lucius said, moving closer to his son. His eyes began to shine with a demented light. "Go back to the Dark Lord. Kneel before him and beg his forgiveness. Prove your loyalty

to him by killing those who have given you aid. It might convince him to grant you some leniency."

Draco threw his head back and snorted derisively "There is nothing lenient about him; you know that. He'll have me beg and then kill me anyway."

"Then you should die," Lucius replied.

Draco blinked, clearly stunned. "Father, I'm your only son."

"No son of mine would dishonor the Malfoy name in this way," Lucius said, sneering. "I knew after we had you that you were a weakness to your mother's loyalty. She'd do anything for you, to save you. She's thrown away her own future to protect yours. It's why we never had another child. I knew she was weak, but you... You, I thought had learned your proper place."

"My proper place?" Draco asked. "What, to kneel in front of a Half-blood? I thought you said Malfoys were better than that."

Lucius raised his hand and slapped Draco's face before Harry could do anything to stop it. This was painful to witness, and Harry wished he were anywhere else. He suddenly wondered if this was how Draco had felt while watching scenes of Harry's childhood with the Dursleys during Occlumency.

"That's Potter talking," Lucius spat. Harry's head jerked upward at the sound of his own name.

"Is that who's offering you protection?" Lucius asked incredulously. "Have you aligned yourself with Potter? Oh, Draco, how could you have sunk so low? Potter doesn't stand a chance."

"Of course he doesn't. But there is a better chance of survival through his cohorts. I know at least that they won't kill us," Draco said, making one last attempt to sway his father.

"Until you stand up and take account for your actions, you are no son of mine. Think about what I've said, Draco. You need to turn back to the Dark Lord. You are near his enemies and can aid him greatly. It could earn you great honor and respect. You are nothing without it," Lucius said, his voice silky smooth as he tried to entice his son.

Draco sighed heavily, but pulled away from his father's caressing hand. "Then we really have nothing else to say. You were the one who taught me that a Malfoy is worth much more than any other wizard because of our heritage, and we should protect that lineage at all costs."

"You are a coward," Lucius spat, turning his back.

Draco's shoulders slumped. "I'll give Mother your best," he said softly, placing his hand on the silver disk and stepping outside the moment the ward went down. Harry quickly followed.

As they strode up the corridor towards the room where the others had remained, Harry removed the Invisibility Cloak, feeling awkward. He

wondered what Malfoy was feeling. His own father had just told him that he should turn himself over to be killed. How could a father do that to his son? A new and powerful respect for what his own parents had done for him arose in his heart. It seemed not every parent would do such a thing after all. Harry was startled to realize how sorry he felt for Draco Malfoy.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and he meant it.

"You should be," Malfoy snapped, not breaking his stride. "This is entirely your fault."

"My fault?" Harry asked, nonplussed.

"My father wouldn't even be here if it weren't for you and your blasted heroics," Malfoy said, seething. "The Dark Lord would never have wanted to punish him by using me and none of this would have happened. It's all your fault."

Harry's sympathy for Malfoy's plight disappeared in a puff of smoke. "It's not my fault your father chose to put a mask over his head and run around with a lunatic who thinks he's better than everyone else. Your father did this to himself, Malfoy," Harry snapped.

"It's your fault you haven't done what you've been supposedly chosen to do and got us all out of this mess. What are you waiting on, anyway? Trying to lap up as much of the glory and spotlight while you can, are you? Afraid the idiotic public who fawn at your feet will turn on you once they realize what a fraud you are?" Draco asked, his face turning pink.

"No, that's more your style, Malfoy," Harry said. Taking a deep breath, he tried to regain control. "Look, I know you're angry about the way your father treated you. I would be too-

"What do you know about it?" Malfoy asked bitterly. "You don't even remember having a father. You think the way those miserable Muggles treated you gives you any right to say you understand how a family works? As far as I'm concerned, the Muggles had the right idea. They're the only ones who saw you for what you really are."

Harry was about to lash out when the room suddenly swam before him. He grabbed the wall for support but instantly pulled his hand back when the cold stone sent spasms up his arm. His mother's voice began screaming in his head. He'd been so caught up in his spat with Malfoy that he hadn't noticed the change. Now, he was aware of the drop in temperature and how clammy his skin had become.

Malfoy ignored him and continued his rant as he strode forward. Harry swayed on his feet. He shook his head to try and clear it, but only ended up dropping to his knees as his vision continued to blur.

Suddenly, Malfoy's voice broke through the fog that had clouded Harry's brain. "What do you want? Let us pass. We've got permission to be here," he whined, sounding distinctly afraid. "What's wrong with you, Potter? Get up. There are Dementors here."

Harry could see them now, two Dementors gliding towards them in that insidious way they had of moving. One came from in front, one from behind. There was nowhere to run or hide. They seemed to move more slowly than Harry remembered. He knew that Tonks had said that only the old Dementors had stayed behind, which might be why they moved more slowly. It didn't seem to make a difference to Harry, the effects were the same, only they lasted longer.

His last thought before his world went completely black was that Ginny was right. No one ever got used to the effects of Dementors.

A/N: Huge thanks to my beta, Sherylyn, for getting this done despite some pressing real life commitments. I really appreciate it.

Chapter Fifteen

Yet Still Miles to Go

A tense, grim mood settled over Grimmauld Place as everyone awaited word from Azkaban. They had tried to go about their daily business but found their attention wandering and their minds elsewhere. Everyone had quickly given up hope of getting anything done and instead gathered in the large sitting room to pass the time together.

Ginny sighed heavily as she struggled to sit still. She'd tried to wake up bright and early to see Harry before he left, but the alarm she'd set had never rung. She suspected her mum might have had something to do with that, but knew she was wound too tight to bring it up now. She'd only end up flying off the handle, anyway, and she couldn't afford any more rows right now.

She and Harry had tentatively called a truce the night before, but she still felt annoyed by his constant desire to protect her. Hadn't she proven herself capable of handling just as much as Ron or Hermione? Somewhere deep inside, she knew Harry couldn't help it. His need to protect her was simply part of who he was, and she both loved and resented him for it.

Hermione, too, was angry with both Harry and Ron for leaving her behind. The logical side of Ginny's brain understood that they all couldn't go to Azkaban, but it was infuriating that Harry had chosen Ron without even thinking about it. Okay, so maybe Ron could handle Dementors better than either she or Hermione, but still... She shuddered, remembering the powerful memories of Tom that the Dementors had induced on the train in her second year.

No. It wasn't as if she wanted to go near the Dementors, but Harry didn't handle them so well, either, and he'd never considered just letting someone else go. Ginny bit her lip and had to blink to keep her eyes from filling. She had a terrible feeling about this. Somehow, she knew in her heart that something wasn't right, and she felt utterly helpless sitting on the couch reading a magazine. She needed to do something.

She let her eyes wander around the room, focusing on the rest of her family as they tried for her sake to appear unconcerned. Her heart

filled to bursting for the lot of them. No matter that they drove her 'round the bend on occasion, they were a wonderfully supportive bunch.

Her mum sat in a huge armchair in the corner, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed, furiously clicking her knitting needles. On her lap sat the Weasley family clock that she'd rescued from the Burrow. All the hands remained on Mortal Peril, so what she expected to see happen, no one knew. The expression on her face clearly said not to bother her, and the rest of the lot knew her well enough to respect that look.

Bill and Fleur shared a chair and cooed at each other incessantly while they teamed up in a game of chess against Remus. Remus removed a pocket watch from his faded robe every few minutes to check the time. A shadow would cross his features each time, and Ginny noticed Bill and Fleur pretending not to see moves that could have finished the game sooner.

Her dad and the twins had all abandoned work at different times during the morning and returned to headquarters to await news with everyone else. They now sat around a coffee table while the twins tried to explain the concept of Muggle poker to her dad. Mr. Weasley wasn't nearly as interested in the card game as he was with the poker chips and kept trying to see if they would float in his drink, or how many he could suspend at a time with his wand. Ginny simply couldn't understand her dad's fascination with Muggles, although she knew it amused Harry and Hermione.

She and Hermione sat together on the couch. Ginny had tried to work on the schoolwork that her mother insisted she do, but she'd given it up as hopeless today. Instead, she flipped through the pages of a teen glamour magazine while Hermione held a seventh-year Transfiguration book in her lap. Ginny couldn't understand how Hermione could use Transfiguration to keep her nerves calm when it had the complete opposite effect on Ginny.

Ginny kept nudging her friend in the ribs and dragging her attention to various articles in the magazine about rating your love life. It amused her to see Hermione's identical red head next to her own while they flipped through the ridiculous questions. Ginny had always wanted a sister and thought Hermione could now pass for one. Despite the obvious worry in the air, every once in a while she and Hermione couldn't help breaking into squeals of girlish laughter. Both would turn red when the attention of the others turned towards them, but it broke the tension, and Ginny thought it was good for Hermione to just let loose for a change.

Narcissa Malfoy hadn't made an appearance all morning, not even to take some breakfast back to her room. As far as Ginny was concerned, no one had really missed her. She couldn't help but wonder what Narcissa thought about her son traveling out to Azkaban to visit her husband, however.

The sound of the front doorway opening sent everyone running into the hallway. Ginny yet again cursed her height while she strained to see around her much taller brothers. Everyone gasped in surprise as Professor McGonagall, Hagrid and Kingsley Shacklebolt entered with three smaller figures hidden beneath black robes. Hermione nudged Ginny in the ribs, and nodded towards one of the strangers. Ginny squinted,

attempting to see what Hermione was trying to tell her. Her eyes flew open wide as she realized the person was wearing Hogwarts' robes with a Slytherin crest on the left pocket.

Remus shouldered his way through her brothers. "Hagrid! Kingsley! You found them," he said, ushering the guests towards the sitting room from where they'd all emerged. Remus obviously knew who the hidden strangers were, and Ginny peered at them curiously. She was surprised that her mother hadn't yet tried to usher her from the landing. Maybe she really was coming around.

"Yes, the information proved reliable. We thought it best to bring them here to keep them all together and supervised," Kingsley said, his deep voice echoing in the stillness.

The lead figure jerked and removed her cloak, revealing a middle-aged woman whose dark hair was streaked with gray. It was pulling loose from the bun she wore at the nape of her neck, and although she was dirty and ruffled, she had the aura of someone used to being waited upon.

The other two figures removed their cloaks as well, showing the faces of two teen-aged girls, both with upturned noses; while on the younger it was unattractive and gave her a hard face, it gave the older girl an aristocratic appearance. Both were disheveled and looked as if they hadn't had a good meal in days. Ginny was well acquainted with the younger of the two, and from the expression on Hermione's face, knew she had recognized the newcomer, as well.

"What do you mean by 'supervised,' Mr. Shackbolt? I thought you had offered us sanctuary," the elder witch asked formally, her brow knit in disapproval.

Kingsley bowed stiffly. "Of course we did, Mrs. Parkinson. However, you must understand the need for precautions in these dark times. Certainly you would expect the same of anyone else we allowed to take shelter here," he said.

Mrs. Parkinson pursed her lips but remained silent.

"Molly, is there anything we can offer them to eat before they retire? We'll put them on the same floor with the Malfoys for the time being," Professor McGonagall said.

"Of course," her mother replied, almost as if she was happy to finally have something productive to do. "Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. I'll fix up a tray and bring it right up."

"Granger!"

Hermione quickly turned her head, startled by the sound of her name. Pansy Parkinson stood behind them, staring contemptuously.

"What are you doing here?" the dark-haired girl asked. "And what the hell have you done to your hair?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," Hermione replied coolly, her gaze raking Pansy's tangled mop.

"Oh! I don't believe this. Has Draco actually aligned himself with a Mudblood and a bunch of blood traitors? Next you'll tell me Potter is here, too?" Pansy shrieked.

"That will be enough of that, young lady," Mr. Weasley said firmly, anger flashing in his blue eyes. Her father's anger – so rarely seen – silenced the room. Even the Parkinson women were stilled. "This house will offer sanctuary to any who needs it; however, we will not tolerate that language nor the hatred behind it. You'll do well to remember that, Miss Parkinson."

"Forgive my daughter's lack of good taste," Mrs. Parkinson said, glaring at Pansy. "We've had a difficult time these past few days, and I fear the strain is showing on all of us."

"Of course it is, Anastasia," Professor McGonagall said briskly. "We all sympathize with your loss. Perhaps you'd like to see Narcissa. Follow me. I'll take you to her room."

Professor McGonagall led Mrs. Parkinson from the room, casting a stern glare at the rest of the occupants, as if warning them to behave. While the adults moved to one side of the room and began a hushed discussion, the young people stared mistrustfully at one another.

Finally, George moved away from the table where he'd been sitting and walked over to the Parkinson girls. "Iris, it's been a long time," he said a bit stiffly, addressing the elder girl. "It's nice to see you again."

"Yeah, not since you flew out the front door our seventh year," Iris said, smiling. She had the same features as her sister, but her face had a more oval shape that gave her a softer appearance. When she smiled, Ginny conceded that unlike Pansy, she was truly pretty.

"Yeah, yeah. Enough with the false pleasantries. Where's Draco?" Pansy asked, scowling at both George and her sister.

Ginny had the distinct impression that a fierce rivalry existed between the two sisters, and that Pansy resented any attention given to Iris. Ginny tried to cover her grin – that knowledge just might prove useful.

"He and Harry took a trip to Azkaban," she said smoothly, carefully watching the Slytherin's reaction.

"He what?" Pansy shrieked, spinning around with wide eyes.

"He wanted to speak with his father. We're waiting for them to return," Hermione replied. Ginny was interested to note the coolness in Hermione's voice. Usually Hermione advocated giving everyone a chance or the benefit of the doubt, but something told Ginny there was no love lost between these two.

"Is he crazy?" Pansy asked no one in particular. "Doesn't he know there's a standing order to bring his body back to the Dark Lord? He at least wants Potter alive, but Draco is in real danger."

"Yeah, Harry's so lucky," Ginny replied, rolling her eyes.

"Still sniffing around after the Boy-Who-Lived, I see. Where's your self-respect?" Pansy asked, sneering.

"Recognize the traits, do you, Pansy?" Ginny asked, gazing nonchalantly at her own nails.

Pansy scowled. "I can't believe you cut your hair and gave it to Granger. I mean, I understand her wanting it. The idiotic males at Hogwarts all seem to have a thing for your hair, but I don't think they'll like you as much without it," Pansy said, smirking triumphantly.

"You seem really focused on who pays attention to my hair, Pansy," Ginny replied, amused. "You know, there are charms you can use to turn yours red, you'll just have to stay on top of the roots."

Pansy's face flushed. "Don't flatter yourself. I notice everything that goes on at that school."

Fred and George's heads were swinging back and forth between the girls as if they were watching a tennis match.

"Pansy, play nice," Iris said, clearly amused. "We have to stay here until Mother comes to her senses, after all."

"What is Draco thinking?" Pansy whined. "How long have they been gone, and when are they due back?"

"I already told you, we're all waiting for them to return, Pansy. We're worried about Harry and Ron, too," Hermione said stiffly. Pansy's question reminded them all how long the group had been gone, and Ginny felt that uneasiness return.

"Potter will probably pass out before they even enter the prison. Doesn't he have problems with Dementors?" Pansy asked coldly.

"Any trouble they have is more likely to be caused by Malfoy panicking and giving them all away," Ginny snapped, reaching for her wand.

"Don't you dare blame Draco for any of this. I'm certain Potter somehow tricked him into going," Pansy said, pulling her own wand from her pocket.

"Yeah, because he's such an idiot anyone can trick him into anything," Ginny said, her eyes blazing.

Fred deftly caught Ginny around the waist and pulled her away from the Slytherin girl. "Easy, Ginny. Don't give Mum a reason to send you upstairs," he whispered.

"You do have to admit, Pansy..." Iris said, sounding bored as she sat on an armchair and studied her broken nails. "...Draco was a bit of an idiot to get himself mixed up with a bunch of Gryffindors. Now, we're stuck with them, too."

"As I remember, there was once a time you didn't mind being seen with a Gryffindor. Weren't you one of the birds who used to follow Oliver around Hogwarts with your tongue lolling?" Fred asked, grinning.

Iris's eyes flashed defiantly, but color flooded her cheeks. "I most certainly did no such thing."

Pansy snorted and looked at her sister with disgust. "You did. Don't you dare call Draco an idiot," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"I'll call him whatever I please," Iris snapped. "It's his fault Daddy's dead."

Pansy recoiled. Her eyes darkened before she drew back her hand and slapped her sister across the face.

George jumped over the back of the couch, crossed his feet on the coffee table, and conjured a bucket of popcorn. "Ooh, catfight," he said, beaming. Fred immediately joined him, leaving Ginny snickering.

Mr. Weasley glanced over at the commotion, but when the argument ceased, he returned to his conversation.

Hermione stepped between the two sisters, holding up her arms. "Stop. Look, we heard about your father, and I'm sorry. This isn't helping any of them, however. We're all worried-"

"Oh, put a sock in it, Granger," Pansy snarled. "Who asked you to stick your impossibly large nose into it, anyway? What makes you always think that anyone else is interested in what you have to say? You're just upset because you know it's most likely that stupid redheaded stooge of Potter's who'll mess up. Doesn't he always? Go back to your books, you insignificant little Know-It-All."

Hermione's eyes flashed brightly. "Fine, Pansy. I'll just let your sister hex you into a jelly. It's not as if anyone here will miss your mouth, anyway."

"What makes you think my sister has any chance against me?" Pansy asked, affronted.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I've seen you duel, Pansy. Anyone could hex you into a jelly."

"Is that so?" Pansy asked, reaching again for her wand.

Hermione was quicker. She had her wand pointed between the other girl's eyes before Pansy had barely moved. "Put your hand any closer to that wand, Parkinson, and I'll show you exactly what I've learned in those books."

Pansy paled considerably while the Weasleys who were watching the spat howled in mirth.

"Sit down over there," Hermione said, jerking her head to a chair set slightly apart from the others, "and shut your mouth, or I'll be forced

to shut it for you. We're all going to sit down like civilized people while we await news. I don't want to hear another word out of your mouth."

"You tell her, Hermione," Fred said, tossing some popcorn.

Hermione turned her wand on Fred, her eyes glinting dangerously. "That goes for you, too. Not one word."

Fred swallowed heavily, but he sat back on the couch.

Ginny sniggered; she loved seeing anyone get the best of one of the twins. Hermione could be downright scary when she was riled.

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Harry's world spun. His vision kept fading in and out to black, and he couldn't make sense of what was happening. He could hear screaming, but it was odd – distorted – as if it was coming from both inside his head and also somewhere nearby. He could feel cold stone beneath his hands. It felt dirty, but there was also something very strange and unnatural about it. It felt sinister somehow, and Harry didn't like it. He suspected he was on the floor but couldn't remember how he got there. He wished that screaming would stop – it was confusing, and he couldn't think.

He moved his arm, searching for his wand but couldn't find it. He needed a Patronus but couldn't cast one without a wand. He tried anyway, to no avail.

He felt ill. He curled into a ball and continued to try and fight the darkness that wanted to claim him. Something warned him that giving in to it now would be very bad indeed. The screaming continued to grow louder, and other voices joined the chaos in his mind. He thought he could hear Malfoy, but that didn't make any sense. Malfoy was never in Godric's Hollow.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him!"

There were footsteps; he could hear someone running and someone else was shouting, but he couldn't make out the words. He could see colors flashing despite his closed eyelids and knew spells were being fired. Sirius fell through the Veil. A bright flash of green light connected with Professor Dumbledore and caused him to topple off the Astronomy tower.

Something cold and putrid came very near his face. His body convulsed with shivers as he tried to pull away. He knew he should be panicked, but he was so tired, and he just couldn't get his mind to work...

"Not Harry! Not Harry! Please – I'll do anything – "

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

"Not Harry!"

"Harry! Harry!"

Someone was shaking him, slapping his face. He twisted and tried to pull away, but his body was simply too weak, and his head only lolled to the side. Someone shouted something – a woman's voice that he couldn't place but knew he recognized. Other voices responded, as if she were issuing orders.

Harry tried to cling to what he thought was real, but his thoughts kept slipping away as if they were water through his fingers. Someone bodily lifted him to his feet and wrapped an arm around his waist. His legs wouldn't support his weight, however, and he nearly fell down again.

"Come on, Harry. I'm getting you out of here," Ron said in his ear.

Ron's got me – I should have known.

Ron barked something to someone else, but Harry couldn't understand what he'd said. All the screaming had stopped, but his teeth were still chattering uncontrollably. He heard a drawling response before another person took his other arm and began to drag him, his legs uselessly trailing on the ground.

When they finally stopped moving, they placed Harry down somewhere not soft, but definitely more comfortable than the floor had been. Someone held his head and tried to shove something in his mouth. Harry clamped his jaws shut instinctively and tried to turn his head away.

"Relax, Harry; it's chocolate," Tonks said gently, swiping some of his hair off of his sweaty forehead. "It'll make you feel better. Here, Draco. You eat some, too."

Harry blearily opened his eyes and took a bite of the chocolate that Tonks was holding out to him. As his vision slowly focused, he realized he was back in the holding room where Moody and Ron had been waiting. The chocolate was doing its work, and Harry felt a little better. He took the chunk from Tonks and managed to sit up.

The chill was subsiding, although he still felt as if he were recovering from a nasty bout of flu. The palms of his hands were scraped and bleeding, and he thought his knees might be, as well. He had to adjust the chocolate to his fingertips so as not to smear it with his blood.

He could see Malfoy sitting next to him, looking waxy and pale, but still scowling. He, too, was eating a large hunk of chocolate. Tonks sat across from the two boys, her eyes moving rapidly between them. She had dirt smeared along the side of her face, and her hair now looked more gray than pink.

"What happened?" Harry tried to ask, although he couldn't quite form the words. Ron lifted the chocolate in Harry's limp hand and pushed it up towards his mouth, encouraging him to take another bite.

"I don't know what would've made them behave that way. They've never attacked visitors in the past," Tonks said, shakily. "I was on my way back down to check on you lot when I heard Draco screaming. The

supervisor on duty is going to inform the Ministry that the Dementors left behind here are unstable."

"We'd just left my father's cell when those things came at us. Don't think the Ministry won't hear about this from me, either. The security in this facility is deplorable," Draco spat. "I could have been killed in the time it took you to get those things off of me."

"Relax, boy. It wasn't you they wanted," Moody said, his magical eye focused on Harry. "They stepped right over you to get to Potter."

Harry's eyes widened; everything was still a blur to him. He watched as Malfoy leaned back and petulantly crossed his arms over his chest.

"Potter was useless," Malfoy said, sneering. "Some hero you turned out to be; you passed out again as soon as they came at us. Obviously they're unpleasant, but why do they affect you so much? What do you see?"

"I hear my parents screaming while Voldemort murders them," Harry snapped, his head throbbing.

Even Malfoy had the good grace to look abashed.

Harry felt embarrassed and extremely irritated with both himself and Malfoy. He didn't know what had made him say that; he wasn't thinking clearly. He had to get his focus back if he was going to search for the Horcrux. He looked away from the sympathetic gazes of the others with a scowl and stuffed some more chocolate in his mouth.

"Why do the Dementors always go directly for Harry?" Ron asked, sounding anxious. Harry was grateful to him for diverting the attention.

"Most likely because he's a walking feast to them with all the crap he's been through," Moody said shortly. "I don't want to sit around here all day; we're sitting ducks in this room. Let's go to the holding facility and get what you want so we can get out of here."

"I agree," Harry said, using Ron's arm to help him stand. "I want to get out of here, too."

"Did you have any luck with your father, Draco?" Tonks asked, cocking her head to the side.

Malfoy averted his eyes, scowling. "No."

Tonks stared at him for a moment, but decided to let it go. She patted Malfoy gently on the shoulder as she passed him. "All right then. Holding is located on Level two. Follow me."

"Wait a minute," Harry said, staring beyond the stairwell where Tonks stood. He felt very weak and tired, but he was still aware enough to know Tonks was trying to hurry him off the floor. "What's that room down there?"

There was one other cell set apart from the others and located further down the hallway.

"It's just a cell that's no longer used," Tonks replied, shifting her eyes.

"Why isn't it used?" Ron asked.

"What difference does it make?" Draco asked, his eyes drifting nervously back towards the other cells. "Let's just get out of here."

"You said this is the high security wing, right? This is where they hold the most dangerous prisoners," Harry said.

Tonks nodded. "Yes, which is why we should keep moving," she replied, taking Harry's arm and trying to steer him towards the stairwell.

Harry pulled his arm away and began walking down the hallway, using the wall for support. "And that's the cell where one prisoner escaped. That's why they don't use it anymore," he whispered.

"Harry, don't do this to yourself," Tonks said.

Ron's eyes opened wide, finally realizing whose cell it had once been. "Harry, we've got other things to do," he said quietly.

"I know," Harry replied, still moving toward the cell, "but I just need to see it. He spent twelve years here, and if I don't at least see it, no one will ever know."

He'd reached the cell but stopped just before the door. His legs no longer appeared willing to carry him further. He swallowed heavily, staring at that opening and slowly shuffling his feet forward. The cell was dismally small and very dark – barren. There was a single camp bed against the wall, and Harry could just make out the rough sketching of a dog, a wolf and a stag etched into the stone.

A painful lump grew in Harry's throat as he imagined how abandoned and utterly alone Sirius must have felt. He'd been kept prisoner in this small space – not much bigger than a broom cupboard, actually. The similarity didn't amuse him at all. Twelve years. Twelve wasted years...

Ron's hand on his shoulder brought Harry back to the present. He blinked his eyes to clear them and steeled his resolve. They followed Tonks back to the brightly lit stairwell, and Harry leaned heavily on Ron while they walked. He wanted nothing more than to get back on that cold little boat so he could shut his eyes and sleep for a while. He hoped Dung's things would be easy to find.

"Potter, if you can't move any faster at least get out of my way," Malfoy said as he pushed past Harry and Ron. "I want to get out of this foul building."

"Don't worry about him. He'd nearly wet himself by the time Moody and I got there," Ron said, scoffing. "Although, it is lucky he screams like a little girl or else we might've never known you were in trouble," he added loudly enough for Malfoy to hear.

The blond ignored him and hurried down the stairs after Tonks.

"Leave him alone," Harry muttered weakly. "He's just lashing out because his father was a right git."

Ron blinked. "Are you defending Malfoy?" he asked incredulously.

"No," Harry said quickly. "I still think he's a whiny little coward. He's just had a rough morning."

"Yeah, unlike you who finds this place a barrel of laughs, right?" Ron said, scowling.

"Don't be a prat," Harry mumbled. He wanted to smack that smug grin right off his mate's face, but feared he wouldn't make it to the holding unit without him.

When Tonks finally stopped walking, she stood in front of a thick steel door. She used her wand to unlock it, but then had to bodily push it open as it got stuck halfway open. Harry stared, agape. There was row after row of haphazard items – mostly clothing – all stuffed into boxes. There didn't appear to be any order to the room at all.

"Mostly when people leave here, they don't want to stop for anything and just go," Tonks said, shrugging apologetically. "The boxes are labeled according to the cell number. "Dung's is 3-R."

"Are you mad? It'll take us forever to search through here," Ron said, aghast.

Tonks twisted her lips to the side. "It gets worse. I can only take one of you in here at a time."

Harry's heart sank. It didn't look as if he'd be getting out of Azkaban any time soon.

The dinner hour was rapidly approaching and there still had been no word from Azkaban. Ginny could feel the tension radiating off the adults, and it did nothing to ease her nerves. Hermione had gathered her books and planted herself on the landing above the entrance hall, refusing to speak to anyone.

Remus paced like a caged animal. Ginny had overheard him tell Bill that Tonks should have sent word by now, and he was worried. Tonks' regular shift was almost at an end, and if they all didn't turn up shortly thereafter, Remus was planning on going to look for them. Ginny hadn't said as much, but if that happened, she planned on going with him. Neither her mother nor anyone else would stop her. She could see the same kind of determination glinting in Fred and George's eyes.

After they had got Mrs. Parkinson settled in her room, her mother and Professor McGonagall had disappeared into the kitchen. One or the other would occasionally bring tea into the sitting room, but otherwise they'd remained out of sight. Ginny had the distinct impression that

they were complaining about Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Parkinson, and the other two women were most likely upstairs doing the same.

Iris had left the sitting room shortly after Hermione's outburst, but Pansy remained in her chair. She'd dozed off and on, but otherwise appeared determined to stay until Draco returned. Her small black eyes shot daggers at everyone whenever she was awake.

Ginny's nerves were wound tightly as a clock spring. Her brothers seemed to understand and gave her a wide berth. She kept envisioning all sorts of horrible scenarios, and she was both concerned and furious that none of the missing group had bothered with a simple owl to let them know what was happening. When Harry returned, she wanted both to kiss him and strangle him. Stupid, noble prat...

When the heavy front door finally opened, Ginny had been so lost in her own thoughts she hadn't immediately heard it. Hermione had, however, and was halfway down the stairs before Ginny took off after her. Being the more athletic of the two, Ginny quickly caught up and overtook her friend, arriving in the entrance hall just as Moody shut and sealed the door.

Tonks led the weary and drained-looking group inside. Harry, especially looked positively ghastly. His eyes immediately sought her out, and some color reappeared in his cheeks when he found her. Ginny's heart softened as she moved towards him. She wrapped her arm around him and helped him to a chair, alarmed by how heavily he leaned upon her. The mere fact that he accepted her assistance so meekly showed her how tired he truly was.

"Ron!" Hermione shouted, throwing her arms around him and causing him to stumble. "Where have you been? What happened? Are you all right?"

"Easy, Hermione," Ron said, wrapping his long arms around her and hugging her close. He tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace. "We're fine. Just happy to be out of there."

Hermione refused to let go and guided Ron to the chair next to Harry.

"Draco!" Pansy shrieked from the top of the stairs. She sprinted towards them taking the stairs two at a time.

"Pansy?" Malfoy said blankly, confusion clearly written on his face. He was pale and his shoulders drooped, although Ginny could read genuine pleasure in his expression. Maybe he really did care for the rude Slytherin girl. Who'd have thought?

"Are you all right?" Pansy cooed, leading Draco away from the others.

"What are you doing here?" Draco asked, his voice scratchy and hoarse.

"It's a long story. Mother and Iris are here, too. Come upstairs and join us, and I'll explain everything," Pansy said as they climbed the stairs. She turned and cast a victorious look over her shoulder, as if expecting that everyone else wished they'd been the ones to lead Draco away.

The rest of the Order emerged, and everyone gathered in the entrance hall. Remus hurriedly approached Tonks, wrapping her in a fierce embrace.

"What happened?" he asked, leading her towards a chair.

"Oh, Ron! Harry!" her mother cried, rushing towards the two boys. She stopped mid-stride, casting anxious glances at each of them. She looked lost and out of place realizing that Ginny and Hermione were already hovering over each of the boys, taking care of them as she usually did. Ginny's heart momentarily constricted in sympathy for her mum, seeing the pain of letting go clearly written on her face.

"Scrimgeour happened," Tonks said sourly.

"And Percy," Ron replied, grimacing.

"Percy?" Mrs. Weasley asked, her eyes opening wide. "What does this have to do with Percy? Sweet, Merlin. They haven't stationed him at Azkaban, have they?"

"He was there on Scrimgeour's orders," Moody said gruffly, lifting his wooden leg onto the footstool her dad had brought to him. "Scrimgeour sent along a stack of necessary paperwork that had to be filled out before we could leave. He's just trying to learn what Potter was doing there."

"Wouldn't we all like to know," Tonks said, shooting a glare in Harry's direction. "We've got problems with the remaining Dementors; they're unstable. They attacked Harry and Draco."

"What do you mean 'attacked' them?" Remus asked, his eyes widening. He glanced at Harry, who still hadn't spoken.

He'd rested his head on Ginny's shoulder. His eyes were closed, but she could feel the tension in his body and knew he was still listening to every word they said.

"Two of them that were supposed to be on patrol cornered Harry and Draco after they'd left Lucius's cell. It was only Draco's shouts that alerted us that something was wrong. Neither Draco nor Harry had wands, so I hate to think what would have happened if I hadn't got there when I did," Tonks said, shuddering. She leaned into Remus's chest and blissfully shut her eyes when he began to stroke her pink hair.

"We can use the kitchen fire to Floo Kingsley. He's at the Ministry this evening," Professor McGonagall said briskly.

"Dinner's waiting, you must be famished," her mum said as the adults moved towards the kitchen.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny didn't follow them, but instead retired to the room that Harry and Ron shared. Ginny led Harry gently to his bed where he collapsed without even removing his jacket.

"Was it horrible?" Hermione asked, biting her lip. She helped Ron to sit on his own bed and sat down beside him, gently brushing the hair from his face.

"It was bad," Ron replied, cracking his neck and causing Hermione to wince. "After the Dementors attacked Harry and Malfoy, we had to search through the entire holding area. That place was stuffed to the ceiling with rubbish. It took forever, and we were only allowed in one at a time."

"Did you find it?" Hermione asked, squeezing Ron's hand.

Harry dug his hand into his pocket and removed the heavy gold locket that hung on a chain. "Got it," he said without opening his eyes. He pulled himself into a seated position next to Ginny and laid his head back against the headboard.

They all stared silently at the Horcrux for a moment while listening to the sound of each other's breathing.

"After we found it, we had to put up with Percy," Ron said, finally continuing the story. "He brought all these extra forms and questionnaires for us to fill out. He made us each fill out one even though Harry was the only one who took anything. Tonks was right hacked off about that."

"Tonks? What's wrong with her? She did seem rather put out downstairs," Ginny said.

"Once she saw the locket – Percy insisted we had to declare what we took – she got really upset. She thought Harry nearly got himself killed only to get a present for you," Ron said, sniggering at Ginny although the smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"So, now we have to figure out how to destroy it," Ginny said, ignoring Ron's jibes.

"Yeah. I suppose that's the next step," Ron said, shrugging.

"I found a Translation Charm while I was researching. I tried it on the Romanian book, but it wouldn't work on the section on Horcruxes. It's as if that part of the book didn't even exist," Hermione said, her frustration obvious. "It's ridiculous. The only word I've been able to decipher is object, and that doesn't help. It's repeated several times, so I assume it's referring to the object used to make a Horcrux."

"I wish we could ask Professor Dumbledore," Ron said glumly. "It would make this so much easier."

"Perhaps we can," Harry said, his eyes only half open. "His portrait is in McGonagall's office at Hogwarts. I saw it there."

Hermione shook her head. "It will depend on when the portrait was commissioned. If it was before Professor Dumbledore suspected Voldemort had made Horcruxes, the portrait will know nothing about them."

"Didn't you say Professor Dumbledore didn't know about them until you got that memory from Slughorn, Harry?" Ginny asked in alarm. "That would mean the portrait would have had to have been done within the last few months of school."

"No," Harry said wearily. "Dumbledore suspected the Horcruxes existed since I brought him the diary – maybe even before that. He just didn't know how many."

"He would have had to have known there were more, right? I mean, Voldemort came back after the diary was found, and he went after the ring himself before you got that memory," said Hermione.

Ginny felt Harry stiffen and she looked over at him, finding his eyes wide. "Dumbledore did go after that Horcrux long before we got that memory from Slughorn," Harry said. "I'd forgotten that. So, he knew there was more than one, maybe he even knew I was one."

"He suspected there was more than one, Harry. You said so yourself. Slughorn's memory only confirmed the number," Hermione said.

"He must have known," Harry said, looking dazed. "He just didn't tell me."

"Harry, if it was something he only suspected, why would he have told you?" Hermione asked reasonably. "He must have known it would only upset you, and he obviously cared about you very much. If he knew at all, he probably wanted to be certain before he mentioned it. You believe that he hadn't known Snape was going to betray him that night."

Harry's nostrils flared at the mention of Snape's name, but he sank back against the headboard once again.

"I suppose it's something we'll never know," he said, causing Ginny's heart to ache. She placed her hand on top of his and squeezed it reassuringly.

"Blimey, I'm starving," Ron groaned, breaking the tension. "We missed lunch while we were stuck out there,"

Hermione smiled. "I'll run downstairs and bring up some of the sandwiches," she said, causing Ron to smile in a self-satisfied way.

"Thanks, love," Ron said softly. Hermione beamed and quickly left the room.

Ginny settled back with her head against the wall and listened as Harry's breathing became deep and even. She watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest and knew he was already sleeping. His dark lashes showed starkly against the paleness of his face. Ginny always enjoyed watching him sleep because he looked so young and carefree. All the tension and worry that had lined his face so frequently over the past few months would disappear, and he was just Harry again.

She remembered overhearing her mother talking to a friend when Ginny was a child. Her dad had made a trip out to Azkaban for the Ministry, and he'd been really shaken when he'd returned. Her mother had told her

friend that Azkaban was a horrible place, and her dad was a sensitive bloke. She said the atmosphere always affected softhearted people worse.

Softhearted certainly fit Harry. He had more compassion than anyone she'd ever known. No wonder he'd had a difficult time of it.

By the time Hermione returned with some food, Harry was snoring lightly against Ginny's shoulder. She found his weight oddly comforting. Ron, too, had nearly dozed, but started again when Hermione arrived with the food. Even that didn't bring the color back to his face, and he poked and moved it around more than ate it. Ginny and Hermione kept casting worried glances at one another. It must have been really bad for Ron to be put off food. After they'd finished their dinner, Ron eventually dozed off again. She and Hermione tucked the boys in before returning to their own room for the night.

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It took several days for Harry and Ron to feel like themselves again, and they spent most of that recovery time sleeping. By week's end, however, Harry once more felt that restless drive to move forward. He had another Horcrux in his hands – he was certain this locket was the correct one – and now all he needed to do was destroy it.

Exactly how to destroy it was another matter. He'd taken the locket into the basement of Grimmauld Place to see if he could open it. Unlike the fake Horcrux that easily opened, the golden trinket with Slytherin's elaborate insignia remained tightly sealed. Ron reckoned that perhaps Regulus had been able to destroy the Horcrux trapped inside, but Harry wasn't convinced. He could feel the power and evil emanating from it, and knew the piece of Voldemort's soul still remained.

He wondered if he'd felt something from the real locket when they'd found it at Grimmauld Place the first time. Of course, he wouldn't have known what the feeling meant then, and he supposed he'd been dealing with such a mess of raging feelings at the time, anyway, one more might not have made much of an impact.

Knowing this was it didn't tell him what he needed to do to destroy it, however. He'd done the diary and the cup on sheer instinct; he'd been panicked each time. This time, however, sitting in a warm room with the cool object clasped in his hand and not a danger in sight, his task wasn't as clear.

Malfoy had made his presence much more apparent in the house since Pansy's arrival. The two could often be found in the kitchen sharing a snack, in the drawing room curled up by the fire, or sneaking out of any number of empty rooms. Harry didn't even want to imagine what they were doing. The fact that it was his house made him shudder. It also irritated him that Malfoy was able to shove the war and all his problems away while Harry found it exceedingly difficult to do that.

It's my house...it should be Ginny and me exploring all those rooms, he thought irritably.

Since her arrival, Pansy's greatest pleasure appeared to be finding the right words to set either Hermione or Ginny off, which wasn't difficult. Ginny, particularly, had a very short fuse when it came to the Slytherin. In fact, Pansy and Iris had apparently mended their rift and united under the common goal of needling the Gryffindor girls.

On more than one occasion, Harry had found himself sitting open-mouthed – Ron and Malfoy by his sides wearing identical gobsmacked expressions – as the girls sniped at each other. Harry was both fascinated and amazed by the low blows girls could zing at each other. Blokes usually came to blows much more quickly, but Harry also thought they got over things quicker, as well.

One afternoon about a week after he'd visited Azkaban, he was sitting in the library again trying to find some kind of a translation for his Romanian book when Remus joined him. Tonks had stopped glaring at him each time she saw him, but she hadn't gone back to her usual joking manner, either.

"All right, Harry?" Remus asked, entering the library and taking the chair next to Harry.

"Yeah," Harry said, stretching. "Just doing a little reading."

"Your color is better," Remus said, studying Harry's face. He nodded towards Harry's book. "What's that you're reading?"

"I found it up in that large bedroom beneath the attic. I can't read it though, it's not in English," Harry said, not meeting Remus's eyes.

"Ahh," Remus said, his eyes clouding over. "That was Regulus's room. The language is Romanian."

Harry looked up sharply. "Yeah, Sirius told me he became a Death Eater. Do you read Romanian?"

"No," Remus replied, shaking his head. "Sirius's Uncle Alphard lived in Romania. Both he and Regulus were very fond of him. That book looks like it contains a lot of Dark Magic; no wonder Regulus had it. You're not considering using anything in there, are you, Harry?" Remus asked, his brow furrowing.

"No, not using it," Harry replied, averting his eyes.

"Exactly what does that mean?" Remus asked, slipping into that stern, teacher's voice that Harry remembered from third year.

Harry's mind raced. His relationship with Remus had been strained since he'd started his Occlumency sessions, and he didn't like it. Remus was his last link to his parents, and he didn't want to lose that. He knew he could trust Remus, and he did need some help. He was growing weary of walking this fine line of wondering whom to trust.

"Sirius said there was a rumor that Voldemort killed Regulus himself, but Sirius didn't believe it," Harry said, watching Remus closely.

Remus shrugged, still appearing perplexed. "It seems unlikely."

"I'm not so sure," Harry whispered, deciding to follow his instincts.

"Pardon?" Remus asked.

Harry shifted his position so he was facing Remus. He took a deep breath, steeling himself. "Regulus did something...something huge...and I think Voldemort might have found out about it, or at least found out that he was planning it. I don't think he knows even now how far Regulus got with his plan. It would be just like Voldemort to underestimate him. I think Sirius said he was really young when he died."

"Yes, he was only eighteen. I'm afraid you've lost me, Harry," Remus said, shaking his head.

Harry licked his lips, which had gone very dry. "Remus. Can I ask you something and also ask you to swear not to repeat what we say to anyone?"

Remus shifted in his seat, and Harry knew he was struggling with his answer, but he nodded. "Go ahead."

"What can you tell me about Horcruxes?" Harry whispered.

Remus inhaled sharply as he visibly paled. "Where did you learn about those?" he asked, his voice strained. "Harry, you can't possibly be considering anything so vile-"

"I'm not," Harry interrupted before Remus's imagination could get carried away. "Professor Dumbledore and I had a discussion about them...but he's not here to ask anymore."

"Dumbledore told you..." Remus broke off suddenly, his eyes flying open wide. "Of course," he breathed, his eyes darting to Harry's scar. "That's how he survived, isn't it? That's why he didn't die."

Harry nodded solemnly

"The necklace you took from Azkaban – Tonks was so angry that you risked your neck for it – is that it? Is that the Horcrux?" Remus asked, lowering his voice on the word 'Horcrux'. "Do you think Regulus stole it? Is that why you're asking about him?"

"I know he did," Harry replied calmly "I know he stole that one, anyway."

Remus gulped audibly. "That one?"

Again, Harry nodded solemnly, never breaking eye contact.

"This is what you were working on with Professor Dumbledore, wasn't it? Remus asked.

"Yeah. Don't ask me to tell you how many there are, or how many I've found. I shouldn't even have said this much, but I need to know what

this book says about destroying them, or anything you might know," Harry said.

Remus' shoulders slumped as he rested his head in his hands. "I should have trusted you," he whispered, his voice muffled.

"Why didn't you?" Harry asked, unable to keep the bitterness from seeping into his voice completely.

Remus laughed humorlessly. "All my life, I've been a follower. When I was younger, I knew some of the things Sirius and your dad got up to were wrong, but I'd never voice it. Last Christmas, when you voiced your mistrust of Snape, I wouldn't hear a word of it because Dumbledore insisted he was on our side. I wish I had a bit more of your backbone, Harry. I wish just once I could stand up for what I believe and just do the right thing.

"After you returned from your battle with the dragon, we were all so concerned. Minerva and Kingsley were insistent that we needed to learn what you were doing in order to protect and help you. I ignored my own misgivings and went along with them. You were right, Harry. The Occlumency hasn't worked, and I wouldn't blame you if you turned your nose at the lot of us."

"I wouldn't do that," Harry said, scuffing his toe on the ground. It was hard to remain angry with Remus when the older man looked so miserable. "You can make it up to me if you help me figure out how to destroy the locket."

Remus shrugged, smiling sadly and opening his arms wide in a helpless gesture. "I don't know a lot; the subject is considered taboo. I do know that in order to create one you need to commit an act of murder – a fully planned and intentional killing without mercy – and that you need to hold the object in your hand along with your wand when you do it."

"You have to be holding it with your wand," Harry repeated. That information was new.

"I don't know the spell, but I think I can find out," Remus said tentatively.

"How? I've looked everywhere and there's virtually nothing written," Harry replied.

"I have access to some of the more unsavory quarters than you do, Harry," Remus replied, lowering his eyes. "Do you want my help?"

Harry felt torn, worrying that he was signing Remus' death certificate by getting him involved. He had no choice, however. He needed some help.

"Please."

"Consider it done," Remus said, nodding.

"Do you know anything about destroying them?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't. I told you everything I know. I'll see what I can find out, though."

"That's all right. I have one more idea to try," Harry said, a plan already formulating in his mind. He didn't know where the idea had come from, but he was suddenly convinced it was the right thing to do.

"What's that?" Remus asked.

"I need to go back to that beach where we found Crabbe," Harry said firmly.

"Why? What's there?" Remus asked, perplexed.

"That's where Professor Dumbledore and I went the night he died," Harry said, swallowing heavily. "That's where Voldemort originally placed the locket. I just have a feeling that it might need to be destroyed there."

Remus's eyes had flown open upon hearing Harry's revelation. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I need you to look into your sources. Ron, Hermione and Ginny will come with me."

"Be careful, Harry," Remus said, squeezing Harry's shoulder.

"You, too," Harry said, smiling tightly.

With a plan in his head, he shut the book firmly and went to look for his friends.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny again Apparated to the spot Remus had brought them the last time. Their announcement that they were going out had startled Mrs. Weasley, and she'd wanted them to take an escort, but she'd relented under Mr. Weasley's reassurances. The teens hadn't been specific about their destination, and if Mrs. Weasley had any hunches, she didn't share them.

When they arrived on the shore, a cold, gusty wind was blowing off the sea. It reminded Harry of the trip to Azkaban, and he shivered, steeling his shoulders against it. He could hear the distant clang of a lighthouse buoy ringing in the wind. The four teens could see firelight burning in the distance, and they crouched down low as they approached it.

Crabbe was still there and still using the fire to keep warm. Harry couldn't blame him – the wind off the water was bitterly cold.

"The entrance to the cave is below, and it's a steep climb down," Harry whispered. "I'm going to disillusion us all. Just keep your hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you, and I'll lead you to the spot where we have to go down. We're going to have to walk fairly close in

order to get there, but once we're at the bottom, we shouldn't have to worry about Crabbe seeing us."

"Why don't we just Stun him, then we can revive him when we leave?" Ron asked.

"Then he'll report to Voldemort that someone Stunned him, and he'll know we were here," Hermione replied.

"Right," Harry said, nodding. "As of now, I think we got the cup undetected, so he doesn't know we're onto him. I'd like to keep it that way, if possible."

Harry cast the spell on each of his friends and finally himself. He walked slowly and carefully along the beach and towards the cliff. His heart pounded in his chest, and he could taste the tangy, metallic taste in his mouth from an adrenaline rush. He was close enough to Crabbe to hear the man's breathing. Crabbe sat on the rocks reading a tattered copy of the Daily Prophet. He really wasn't much of a guard, but it had to get boring staying here day after day.

Harry reached the cliff and began the treacherous climb downward. Although he couldn't see his friends, he could hear their breathing behind him. Ron cursed under his breath several times as the girls loosened rocks above him. Harry was below Ron, so he got hit with the additional rocks Ron was jarring loose in trying to avoid the other stones.

"Ron! Be still," Harry hissed in exasperation after a particularly sharp rock bounced off his temple.

"Oh. Sorry, Harry," Ron said, finally realizing he'd been raining debris down upon Harry's head.

Harry finally reached the slippery rocks below. The tide was low, and the smell of decaying sea life was nearly overpowering. But thanks to the lower water line, more of the jetty was exposed than on his previous visit, and the rocks were much less slippery.

Hermione spoke, causing him to startle. "Where do we go next?"

Harry removed the Disillusionment charms and pointed toward the fissure in the rocks where he'd traveled once with Professor Dumbledore. "We have to swim over there," he said.

"Swim?" Ron asked, staring at the water reluctantly. "It'll be bloody freezing."

Hermione, who appeared just as displeased, patted his arm bracingly. "Don't worry, Ron. We'll dry ourselves off and cast warming charms straightaway."

They both stared at the water, taking deep breaths and preparing to jump. Ginny rolled her eyes and pushed them out of the way. "Oh, for heaven's sake. The sooner we do it, the sooner it will be over," she said, jumping straight into the chilly waves. Her head bobbed up quickly, and she brushed her newly shortened hair out of her eyes.

"It's an eye opener," she said, her teeth chattering as she began a graceful crawl stroke toward the fissure.

Harry jumped in after her and heard the splashes indicating that Ron and Hermione had followed. He was grateful for the splashing of the waves against the rocks, for he was certain it would muffle any additional splashes they made from Crabbe.

Harry quickly overtook Ginny as he led them to the tunnel in the rock and felt his fingers scrape against the seaweed-covered rock. His limbs felt numb by the time he'd reached the larger cave and heaved his body out of the water. His heavy winter clothing was drenched and made moving difficult.

He helped a shivering Ginny from the water, then turned to assist Hermione, and finally Ron.

"Bloody hell," Ron said, shaking violently.

Businesslike as always, Hermione demanded that he stand still as she cast charms to dry his clothing.

The hair on the back of Harry's neck prickled in warning, and he glanced around uneasily. Still shaking from the chill, his hand shot out, grasping Hermione's wand before she could cast the drying spell on her own sodden clothes.

"Harry, what-"

"Shh," Harry said, glancing around warily. "No more magic until we're inside."

"What's the matter?" Ginny asked, rubbing her hands along her arms, trying to warm them.

"I don't know," Harry said, still looking around. "I'm worried Voldemort might have done something to warn him if magic is performed here – something like the Ministry uses. I don't think it'll work inside because there are so many spells in place already, but out here... Just hang on a few more minutes, okay?"

Hermione nodded, her eyes wide and fearful as she peered around each rock.

They waited several minutes, wands at the ready, to see if anyone would come. Eventually, Harry felt reassured that it had been his imagination. With the tension easing, the discomfort of being cold and wet returned with a vengeance.

He moved as quickly as he could towards the stone wall, trying to feel that now-familiar hum. He was again shivering so violently that he couldn't be sure of what he felt. Removing a knife from his belt, he quickly cut a thin slice along his arm.

"What are you doing?" Ginny shrieked, pulling the knife away from his bleeding arm.

"It needs a sacrifice," Harry said, hissing in pain as Ginny pulled the knife too quickly.

He let a few droplets of blood fall from his cut and smeared them along the wall of the cave. The bright white light of the archway flickered and formed the entrance. When the bloodstained wall disappeared, Harry quickly stepped through, beckoning the others to follow behind him. Ginny, Ron, and Hermione had all been stunned speechless, and they followed him with wide, wary eyes into the pitch-black darkness.

Once inside, Harry quickly healed the cut on his arm and dried his clothing while Hermione did the same for herself and Ginny.

"This is where you came that night," Ron said, his voice unnaturally loud in the stillness.

"Yeah," Harry said, grimacing as he looked at the motionless black lake. He was interested to see that its center still glowed eerily green. "Whatever you do, don't touch the water, or we'll have to deal with the Inperi sooner than expected."

"I don't want to deal with them at all," Ron said, shuddering as he looked at the lake. He had his arm wrapped around Hermione's shoulders, and he pulled her closer.

"Me, either," Harry said. Despite all the other horrors he'd seen thus far, there was just something about the Inperi that made his skin crawl. "I need to get out to that little island in the middle of the lake to try and destroy the locket. You'll need to keep watch in case Crabbe comes in here. I don't know if he regularly checks within the cave or not, but if he does, he's certain to notice the arch has been opened. You'll have to detain him."

Hermione adamantly shook her head. "You're not going alone, Harry. We're all going to do this together this time."

"We can't," Harry said flatly, his eyes already seeking out the spot where Dumbledore had summoned the boat. "The boat won't hold us all; it's too small."

"You went with Dumbledore," Ginny said. "It must be big enough to hold two, anyway."

Harry shook his head. "Only because my magic didn't register since I was underage and unqualified. Dumbledore said it's not the weight that matters, but the magical power."

"Technically, you're still unqualified; we all are," Hermione said.

"Do you want to take that chance by all of us getting into that boat and perhaps stirring up those Inperi if it doesn't work?" Harry asked, frowning.

"It doesn't matter," Ginny replied, shrugging. "I can go with you. I'm underage, remember?"

It irritated him that his own reasoning for not wanting to take Ginny along in the first place kept coming back to bite him. Still, leaving her on the shore with Ron and Hermione didn't mean she was any safer than if she came with him if those Inferi decided to attack.

"Okay," he said. "Ginny and I will go out to the middle, Ron and Hermione, you'll keep guard."

"Why can't you just destroy it here?" Ron asked, obviously uneasy with the decision.

Harry pulled the locket from his pocket and stared at it for a moment. Finally, he shrugged and said, "Something tells me it has to be destroyed out there. I just feel it. The Basilisk's fang helped to destroy the diary. The dragon's fire helped to destroy the cup. Something tells me that potion is needed to destroy the locket. It has to be done out there."

"I don't like this, Harry," Hermione said, wringing her hands.

"I don't either, but the quicker we get on with it, the quicker we can get out of here," he replied, taking Ginny's hand and leading her away

"Be careful," Ron said, watching them walk.

Harry stopped, turned back and solemnly nodded. This place had started Dumbledore's downfall, and he'd been the most powerful wizard of all. There was no guarantee here for any of them.

"You be careful, too. Watch out for each other. The archway should reseal on its own, although I don't know how long it'll take. Just stay alert. Once we destroy this thing, I have no idea what the Inferi will do."

Hermione let go of Ron's hand and sprinted towards them. She hugged Harry and then Ginny. "We can cover you here. Just be careful out there, and come back quickly."

Harry nodded and tugged Ginny's hand. They gingerly walked along the water's edge until they'd reached the spot where he remembered Dumbledore had found the boat the last time.

Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes and let his other senses heighten. He could hear Ginny's rapid breathing and knew she was frightened even though she hadn't shown it. He could smell the ocean and thought he could nearly taste the salt on his lips. Reaching out his hand, he waved in the air, seeking the cord to release the boat. It took several moments, but Ginny remained still and finally, Harry could hear that distant hum and felt warmth spread up his arm.

He tugged on the invisible cord, and the small boat was lowered in front of them. Ginny gasped as the chains set it in the water.

"I can't believe you and Dumbledore both fit in this," Ginny said, her voice trembling.

"It was a tight fit," Harry said thickly. A painful lump had formed in the back of his throat, making speech difficult. He took Ginny's hand and caressed it with his thumb as he led her towards the boat.

He climbed in first, steadying it before he spread his legs wide and allowed her room to settle between them, leaning her back against his chest. He could feel her slight body trembling and suspected it had nothing to do with the chill.

"Just keep your hands inside and never touch the water," he whispered. "Everything will be all right."

The boat began its trek across the eerily still black water. Harry kept his wand lit, but tried not to look too closely in the water, knowing what he would find.

"Don't worry about me, Harry. It's rather frightening, but I'm okay. I always feel okay when I'm with you," Ginny said, resting her head back on his shoulder.

Her words were eerily familiar and reminded him of something Dumbledore had said that night. He shuddered and pulled her to him as the boat glided ever closer to the glowing green light. By the time they reached the small circle of rock that held the chalice, Ron and Hermione weren't even visible. Only the two small pinpricks of light from their wands let Harry know where they were.

He and Ginny got out of the boat and moved swiftly towards the chalice. Harry was surprised to see it had been refilled. He supposed it made sense. Regulus must have once emptied it to retrieve the locket, and it had been refilled for Harry's and Dumbledore's arrival.

He removed the Horcrux from his pocket and stared at it, wondering what he should do next. Some of his recent decisions had been made as if he'd taken an incorrectly brewed Felix Felicis potion. He would know exactly what he had to do, but once he made the first step, the rest of the plan deserted him. Still, things could be worse. After all, he did have the Horcrux; he just needed to destroy it.

I can do this.

As Harry approached the chalice, he could feel Ginny's eyes on the back of his neck. He appreciated her silence while he worked out this puzzle.

Suddenly, sound and light erupted from across the lake. Harry could recognize spells volleying back and forth, and he knew Ron and Hermione were in trouble. They'd been discovered.

"Ron and Hermione," Ginny said, her face growing even paler than it already was. "That looks like more than just Crabbe they're battling, Harry. He must have called for reinforcements."

Harry felt panic rise in his chest. He didn't know how many Death Eaters Ron and Hermione were up against, but it was obviously more than one. Could they hold them off until he and Ginny could get there, and

what would happen to the Horcrux if they were captured? He had to destroy it first, but how could he not help Ron and Hermione?

His decision was made for him when the lake around their rock island began to churn. Skeletal white hands, arms and skulls began rising from the lake. Ginny screamed as one brushed its hand against her leg. She moved closer to him, bracing her back against his so they could cover each other.

In the battle across the lake, someone had obviously touched the water.

The Inferi rose from the lake, their blank sightless eyes staring straight ahead as they jerkily reached for their prey.

Harry gulped as he watched them surround Ginny and him. There were so many of them. Things had just got a whole lot worse.

Chapter Sixteen

Chaos

Harry and Ginny stood back to back, brandishing their wands at the Inferi that were closing in on all sides. The water in the lake around them bubbled and churned as countless white heads broke the surface. Dead, vacant eyes stared out of sunken sockets, as more and more of the Inferi dragged themselves from the water. Harry could feel Ginny's legs trembling against his and wished he could offer her some kind of reassurance.

Ginny screamed as an Inferius clamped its claw-like hand around her wrist and began dragging her towards the water.

"Incendio," Harry shouted, causing a burst of flame to erupt from his wand. The Inferius immediately let go of Ginny and shrank from the flame. Ginny pulled her arm close to her body, backing up several steps as she did.

Harry waved his wand and created a ring of fire around Ginny and himself. The Inferi cowered and shuffled back towards the water, shielding their faces as they fled from the bright, hot flames.

"They're afraid of the light," Harry shouted over the roar of the fire.

She nodded, warily watching the Inferi. "We can't stay inside here forever though, Harry. How are we going to get rid of them?" she asked.

She was right. Harry's ring of flame had already begun to flicker and burn out. Several of the bolder Inferi pivoted and moved back towards them. Harry began to inch closer to Ginny but slipped as an icy hand grabbed his ankle and began tugging him toward the edge of the rock. He landed hard on his side, dropping the Horcrux in the process. It skidded away from him, landing near the bottom of the chalice. He jerked his foot away and scrambled back from the edge.

"Harry!" Ginny called, grabbing his shoulder. "Incendio," she cried as another Inferius tried to grab him.

He could hear shouts and cries coming from the shore and knew the Inferi must have emerged from the water on that side of the lake, too. Judging from the sound of the screaming, the Inferi were indiscriminate in choosing their victims.

Harry stretched his arm and grabbed the locket just as a bony white hand reached out and grasped it, too. He felt a burst of icy cold energy emanate from the locket, traveling up his arm and momentarily freezing it. He dropped the locket in surprise, watching as the Inferius did the same. The Inferius' arm hung uselessly by his side, dangling as if it was no longer part of his body. Without another glance towards Harry, he turned and crawled back into the water like a wounded animal.

"Harry, get up," Ginny screeched, her eyes wild. He turned to see her brandishing her wand like some sort of Muggle machine gun. Bursts of flame shot out of it, as she aimed at anything near her that so much as moved. If the situation hadn't been so dire, he would have laughed at her Rambo imitation, knowing she'd have no clue who Rambo was.

"Ginny, start moving back toward the boat," Harry shouted, creating a wall of flame on the other side of the chalice. It at least cut the number of Inferi that could reach them in half.

"What about the locket?" Ginny asked.

"Trust me. We've got to get in the boat," Harry said, urging her back as he kicked away another hand.

"But the boat's made of wood. We won't be able to use fire to keep them away from us," Ginny said, glancing at him as if he'd gone mad.

Harry, who was desperately struggling to keep his limbs out of reach of the grasping Inferi, gritted his teeth. "Can we argue about this later, Ginny? Just get in the boat."

"Fine," Ginny snapped, sounding extremely put out. "Reducto," she said, sending a particularly bold Inferius flying through the air and back into the water with a splash.

Once she'd reached the boat, Harry snuffed the flame wall and bolted back towards her. He leaped over several of the Inferi and scrambled inside next to her.

"What now?" Ginny asked, crouching low as a long white arm reached for her. "Petrificus Totalis."

Once inside the boat, not only couldn't they conjure fire, but they also couldn't use any slicing or bludgeoning spells for fear of destroying the craft. The boat began to shift and rock as the Inferi returned to the water.

Harry could hear hands scraping along the bottom of the boat, and it began to tilt as several of the creatures tried to hoist themselves up on the side.

"Harry!" Ginny shouted, panicked. She grasped the side to try and steady it.

Harry removed the locket from his pocket, grasping the chain and holding it open like a noose. He'd only have one chance, and if he missed the locket would drop to the bottom of the lake. He didn't think he'd ever be able to find it before being drowned by all the Inferi.

An Inferius gave the boat a nasty jolt, sending Ginny sprawling into Harry and nearly knocking him over the side. Harry tried to regain his balance and pull out from under Ginny but it was no use. There were too many of them, and the boat couldn't support the weight. It leaned to the side and began to turn.

Both he and Ginny tried to push their bodies to the other side to rock it back, but it was hopeless. The Inferi kept pulling until the boat flipped over, sending both Harry and Ginny splashing into the black water.

Harry kicked hard, bringing his body back to the surface. He gripped the locket so tightly in his hand it made an imprint on his skin. The water felt slimy and alive. Harry didn't even want to think about what else could be swimming in its depths. He gasped as he reached for the overturned boat.

A hand clutched his ankle beneath the cold water, pulling him down. He kicked, attempting to get away. He could see Ginny struggling not far from him.

"Ginny!" he gasped as her head went under. He reached out and grabbed her arm, tugging with all his strength. When she surfaced, he pulled her away from her captor and pushed her towards the boat.

"Hang on," he said, giving her a boost so she could cling to the capsized underbelly. The Inferi kept trying to pull him under, but he continued to fight. Finally, when an Inferius was close enough for Harry to reach, he slammed the chain of the locket around the creature's neck.

The Inferius threw his head back, writhing in a silent scream, twisting his body as if in agony. The amulet glowed a sinister red reminiscent of Voldemort's eyes. As the Inferius sank back beneath the water, Harry aimed his wand at the locket.

"Apertum," he cried. The locket sprang open. Suddenly, an unearthly scream filled the air as the inside of the locket exploded in a cacophony of color and light. Harry felt the wave of heat rushing towards him, and he flung his body over Ginny, feeling the blistering heat scorch his back.

For a moment, neither of them moved. They clung to the bottom of the upturned rowboat, breathing heavily and waiting for the next blow to fall.

"Are you all right?" Ginny asked, her voice muffled by Harry's weight.

His back felt as if he's spent too long in the sun, but otherwise was all right. He shifted his weight off Ginny and carefully raised his head. A sobering sight met his eyes: bodies lay everywhere. They were sprawled over the rock island, and floating aimlessly in the water. They were just that, however – bodies – no sign of animation remained.

"What happened?" Ginny whispered, horrorstruck. She shifted closer to Harry and buried her face in his shoulder so she was only half looking at the grotesque sight.

"I don't know," Harry whispered, stunned. "I think the sliver of Voldemort's soul reacted negatively with the cold death of the Inferi. I noticed it when one of them touched the locket. Voldemort does have an unnatural fear of death."

"What do we do now? We have to get back to the shore, but I'm not certain we can flip this boat back over – and I really don't want to get back in that water," Ginny said, her voice cracking slightly.

Harry shuddered, his drenched clothing now suddenly feeling very heavy and cold.

The boat jerked and suddenly began traveling across the water, back in the direction they'd come. Harry and Ginny clung to the bottom, their fingers aching as they tried to wriggle out of the water as much as possible. As they moved, they hit many floating corpses, causing the boat to rock and tilt. Ginny buried her face in Harry's chest and clung, as he held her close, keeping his gaze fixed firmly above the water. The darkness and silence of the shore where they'd left Ron and Hermione caused Harry's chest to constrict tightly. He prayed his friends had managed to subdue any Death Eaters and still managed to escape the Inferi.

The boat moved at a good clip, but it felt torturously slow to Harry, whose only thought was to get to the edge and aid his friends. He strained his eyes to see what was happening, but it was useless. The darkness was impenetrable.

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When they reached the edge of the lake, Harry slid off the boat into the knee-deep water and lifted Ginny onto the shore. They grasped hands and sprinted towards the archway.

As they moved closer, they slowed and crouched low so as not to be seen. Several corpses were sprawled on the beach, and Harry thought he recognized the unmoving form of Crabbe lying half in the water.

A mewling sound caught his attention, and he quickly moved towards the now-sealed archway. Ron stood towering above a crouching Wormtail, who huddled against the stone, his hands outstretched and pleading. The sleeve of Ron's jacket was bloody and torn, and the expression on his face held such rage that Harry was surprised Wormtail was still alive.

Hermione knelt beside Wormtail, ensuring the ropes binding his hands were secure. She, too, appeared battered and bloodied but wore a hardened expression upon her face.

"Ron! Hermione!" Harry shouted, relief washing over him.

"Oh! You're all right," Hermione cried, leaping up and flinging her arms around Harry's neck. She let go and did the same to Ginny. "We were so worried. We couldn't see what happened to you."

"The Inperi happened," Harry said grimly.

"Yeah. After you left, Crabbe and a few more of his goons burst through the archway," Ron replied, keeping his eyes fixed on the cowering Wormtail. "Fortunately, it sealed again after only a handful of them entered. Wormtail here tried to back away from the fighting and stepped right into the lake, unleashing the Inperi. He ran away, but his mates weren't so lucky."

"It was awful," Hermione said, her lip quivering. "Those things just dragged the other two men right under the water. Ron and I managed to conceal ourselves behind the rocks, but they stood right on the shore."

"We reckoned we were done for when all of a sudden we saw that big explosion over the water, then they all just collapsed. What happened?" Ron asked.

"I destroyed the Horcrux, and it somehow destroyed the Inperi. They were connected to it somehow, like the dragon was to the cup. It makes me wonder if the Basilisk in the Chamber would have died if I'd just stabbed the diary first," Harry said, shrugging.

"We caught Wormtail trying to get the archway to reopen, so Hermione conjured the rope. I say we take him back to headquarters on the full moon and let Remus have a go," Ron said, nodding towards Wormtail.

"We've still got a problem though," Hermione said. "There are other Death Eaters outside, and I'm certain they'll be waiting for us."

"Can we Apparate from right here?" Ginny asked.

Harry shook his head. "Don't even try. I'm certain Voldemort would have thought of that and not wanted any victim to be able to get away from the Inperi. It either wouldn't work, or you'd end up horribly splinched."

"Great, I suppose we could just use him as a hostage," Ron said, nodding towards Wormtail.

"They won't care," Harry replied, shaking his head. "We're going to have to fight our way out. We just have to reach the opening of the cave and get back on the rocks. We can Apparate right from there. That's what I did with Professor Dumbledore."

"It's getting there that'll be the hard part," Ginny said, taking a deep breath as if steeling herself for what was to come.

"How many of them are there?" Harry asked. "Did you get a good look?"

Hermione shook her head. "I didn't get a chance to count, but I'd say maybe half a dozen." She bit her lip while looking directly at Harry. "Harry, there's one more thing."

"What's that?" Harry asked, knowing he wouldn't like the answer.

"Snape was leading them," Ron spat.

Harry set his mouth in a grim line. A cold fury clenched at his heart whenever he heard the name of his former Potions Professor mentioned. The idea that he was here now – just outside the archway – filled Harry with a burning desire for revenge.

"Harry," Hermione said, holding up her arms. "Don't do anything stupid. You've destroyed the Horcrux, but there is still one more to find. We need to get out of here as quickly as possible. It's the other Horcrux that matters now, not Professor Snape."

Harry remembered the night he'd chased Snape across the Hogwarts' grounds, feeling such rage and fury. He'd wanted nothing more than to take Snape's life in return for the life Snape had just taken from Harry. He hadn't cared about anything else, not the prophecy, not Voldemort, not anything; he'd only wanted revenge.

Now that some time had passed, he still felt that boiling anger toward his former Potions master, but he was calm enough to realize that he did have a job to do. Still, he wasn't about to let Snape get away again if he could help it.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid, Hermione," Harry said, his voice deadly calm. "But if I can get him, I'm going to do it."

"Never mind Snape," Ginny snapped, grabbing his arm and spinning him towards her. "There's no guarantee that Voldemort isn't out there by now."

Harry's eyes widened. Ginny was right. The reason Voldemort had assigned Wormtail, Crabbe, and the others to this task was because they weren't bright enough to ask questions. Why, then, was Snape here at all? Voldemort would want to deal with anyone near his precious Horcruxes, personally.

Even if it weren't for the fact one Horcrux remained unaccounted for, Harry didn't feel ready to face Voldemort. He'd thought there would be more time – time to plan and strategize and to get his things in order – time to say goodbye.

"Ginny's right," Hermione said, her eyes widening. "Harry, what if Voldemort is out there?"

"Did you see him before the archway closed?" Harry asked, his eyes scanning the solid wall covering the arch.

"I don't know," Ron said, beginning to sound panicked. "I was focused on Snape. I didn't pay attention to any of the others."

Harry shook his head. "If Voldemort was there, you'd know. He's unmistakable," he said grimly.

"It doesn't mean he couldn't have arrived since the arch closed," Hermione said.

"This is what we're going to do. When I open that arch, I want everyone to stand clear just in case they cast spells first. If they do, we at least have better cover here. If not, we need to stick together and get out as fast as possible. Once you're outside the perimeter of the cave, Apparate to headquarters. I'll take Wormtail with me," Harry replied.

Wormtail looked up at him fearfully. "Harry, what do you need with me? You know how this has to end. You're both going to die," he said, his voice dripping with false sorrow.

"Not until I'm ready," Harry replied, "and you're going to be my shield when I walk out that door."

"What?" Wormtail asked, his face blanching.

"What's the matter, Wormtail? You don't trust your new friends not to sacrifice you? You should have stuck with your old ones, then. They never would have betrayed you," Harry said, roughly dragging Wormtail to his feet.

He quickly cast a Silencing Charm so that Wormtail wouldn't get the opportunity to give them away. He was about to slice his arm in order to open the archway when Ron stopped him.

"Harry, don't! Crabbe got me with a Slicing Curse when they first entered, and my arm's still bleeding. I'll do it."

Harry nodded. Pulling Wormtail to one side, he watched as Ron smeared his blood onto the stone. The white light around the archway shimmered for a moment before illuminating fully. The solid stone once again disappeared, leaving the arch open.

They weren't immediately ambushed, although Harry could hear voices arguing ahead. He was startled when water began rushing through the now open archway. The tide was rising, and the floor of the outer cave was filling.

Shoving Wormtail ahead of him and holding his wand firmly, Harry moved through the arch. The moonlight outside illuminated the front of the cave where Snape stood with at least four other Death Eaters. The back of the cave was darker and allowed Harry and the others to remain hidden in the shadows.

Unmasked, Snape was arguing contemptuously with another Death Eater. Although the smaller figure remained hidden beneath her mask, the voice of Bellatrix Lestrange was unmistakable.

Harry felt a boiling anger rise in his heart. This was his chance to finally battle two of the people who'd each taken someone precious to him. He clenched his wand so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He took a deep breath and tried to remain calm. Although the rage was

still there, he knew he had to be careful this time. He needed to plan this and not simply react to it, or all hope would be lost.

Harry moved into the interior of the cave, pushing Wormtail ahead of him with his wand. The floor was damp and slippery as rivulets of water rushed over his feet, pushed by the incoming tide. He could feel the water quickly soak through his trainers and hoped the squelching sound wouldn't give them all away. He didn't want to chance voicing a drying spell.

There was no way to get past Snape and the others unnoticed, but Harry hoped the element of surprise would be on their side.

Wormtail ruined that chance by stomping his foot, causing a loud splash that echoed throughout the chamber. The Death Eaters turned, surprised, before they began firing an assortment of spells.

Harry yanked Wormtail in front of him and slammed him into the wall. He aimed his wand at the nearest Death Eater, who was striding towards him with a malevolent expression on his haggard face, and fired a Stinging Hex straight at the man's eyes. The Death Eater yelped, slapping his hand over his eye as he began to hop around madly. Harry quickly cast a Stunning spell, dropping him to the ground.

He scanned the cave, taking note of their escape route. He could now count a total of five Death Eaters, including the one he'd just Stunned. Ginny and Hermione were each engaged with other Death Eaters and from what Harry could see, they were doing a fair job of it. His eyes stopped moving when they locked on Snape's cold black ones.

Snape scowled as he strode into the cave, his cape billowing behind him. "Potter," he said, sneering. "I might have known it would be you. You've always tended to stick your nose where it didn't belong."

"And I might have known it'd be you that Voldemort sent to do his dirty work. How does it feel to still be the lackey, Snivellus?" Harry asked through gritted teeth.

Snape's face screwed up with hate and rage. Raising his wand, he fired several curses in rapid succession. Thanks to his quick Quidditch reflexes, Harry managed to dodge most of them, and he raised a shield in time to block the last one. Wormtail tried to move away from him during this distraction, but Harry's arm shot out and forced the cowering little man against the cave wall.

"Petrificus Totalis," Harry snarled, freezing Wormtail where he stood.

"It appears that you've yet to learn your lesson about snooping into other people's private affairs, Potter," Snape said, his eyes glittering maliciously. "You're no better than your poor excuse for a father. He never managed to learn his place, either. Of course, we all know where that left him."

Snarling, Harry allowed his hatred to build as he cast the strongest Bludgeoning Hex he could master. Snape ducked and rolled to the side, but the spell hit another Death Eater who had just entered the cave

behind them. The man screamed in agony as his body was hurled through the air and plunged into the sea below.

Ignoring the interruption, Harry again tried to curse Snape. He first fired a Stunner and then a Cutting Spell as his anger grew. Snape continued to evade Harry's curses, easily anticipating Harry's every move.

"Sectumsempra," Harry bellowed, but still Snape cast his shield in time.

"You'll never be a true match for me until you learn to close off your mind, Potter. Obviously you're not disciplined enough to do this," Snape said, sneering. "Diffindo."

Harry rolled to the side. His frustration mounted as his curses continued to be deflected. He heard a yelp and turned to see Ginny casting her Bat Bogey Hex at the Death Eater who'd cornered her. In that brief moment of distraction, Snape cast a spell that left a deep gash on Harry's shoulder. It felt like an invisible whip coiling around his arm, pulling his wand hand forward.

Harry quickly grabbed his wand in his other hand and moved behind a rock, taking cover. Panting with exertion, he could hear the sound of spells being cast around him and knew the others were still on their feet.

He rounded the rock in time to see Snape attempting to move towards him.

"Relashio," he shouted, sending an array of sparks towards Snape and forcing him to retreat. Harry fired a volley of spells as he slowly began to move forward. Snape managed to deflect the curses, but he was forced to take cover himself.

In the meantime, Hermione had managed to subdue her assailant. She ran towards Harry and crouched beside him, quickly casting a Healing Charm on his shoulder.

"Hermione, take Wormtail. There's enough of an opening that you can get past if I keep Snape busy," Harry said in a hushed whisper.

"Harry-

"Just do it, Hermione," he snapped, determined that they were taking Wormtail with them. "Sirius is going to finally be cleared for what Wormtail did, so help me."

"Okay, Harry," she said, nodding resolutely.

Hermione removed the spell from Wormtail and, using her wand, made him walk in front of her as a shield. Snape had no problem firing at Wormtail, however, and he Stunned him before aiming at Hermione.

"Stupefy," Harry shouted, diverting Snape's attention.

"Always playing the hero, aren't you, Potter? You're just as arrogant as your father, and you're bound to meet the same end," Snape said silkily. The contempt shone from his black eyes as he advanced on Harry.

"You're not half the man my father was, and never will be. That's where all this bitterness really comes from, isn't it, Snape? You know you'll never be as good. You've got a bit of an inferiority complex, I think," Harry said, pleased with the flash of anger that showed on Snape's face.

"Sectumsempra," Snape hissed. The intensity of curses Snape fired at Harry intensified, and Harry knew he'd struck a nerve.

"Your inability to shield your mind will be your downfall, Potter. Your frustration is making you sloppy, and the Dark Lord will have an easy time of it with you," Snape said, sneering. Harry could tell that Snape was enjoying the anticipation of that final confrontation.

"I don't know," Harry replied, panting. "He's certainly made the effort, but hasn't had much luck, yet."

"Don't mistake your good fortune for any measure of skill or talent," Snape spat.

"Dumbledore gave you everything. He gave you a chance and believed in you when no one else ever thought you were worth the effort, and you betrayed him," Harry said, sending a Blasting Hex Snape's way.

Snape blocked it. "I gave him the best years of my life," he said, snarling. "He wasted my talents by leaving me to child mind a bunch of sniveling idiots. I should have been so much more. I was the hero of the first war, but you got all the glory, and then I was expected to protect you. The Chosen One! If you are the only hope of the wizarding world, Potter, it wasn't difficult to see which side would win. There's no one left to protect you now."

Overwhelmed with rage and frustration, Harry let loose a series of curses at the advancing Snape, but Snape remained one step ahead of him, able to deftly read Harry's thoughts and plan his counter curses.

Harry stumbled and fell backwards, watching as Snape advanced toward him. His face was screwed up in an expression of intense loathing, and Harry was left without a doubt that Snape wanted to humiliate him and make him suffer simply for who he was. But Harry also realized his advantage. Snape wouldn't truly do anything to harm him – he was still following Voldemort's orders.

"That's right, Potter. The Dark Lord wants the pleasure of killing you himself, but that doesn't mean he'll mind if I toy with you beforehand," Snape said, answering Harry's unspoken thoughts. "That's the way your dear dead father liked to do things, after all. He never fought without his little gang backing him up and doing the dirty work for him. Never once did he face me in a fair fight. Oh, no, he was much too cowardly for that."

Harry had heard enough. He'd had to fight his way away from bullies long before he'd ever learned to use a wand. In one smooth motion, he leaped to his feet, lunged forward, and delivered a strong right hook to his former Potion master's jaw. He felt several of Snape's teeth loosen on impact.

Barely registering the surprise on Snape's face, Harry let his fists fly. He may have been born a half-blood himself, but Snape obviously had forgotten his Muggle roots, as he was unprepared for the physical attack. Harry had repressed six years of insults and abuse from this man, and he now had an outlet for that anger.

Blood flew from Snape's split lip as he crumpled against the wall.

"Not so smart-mouthed when it comes to Muggle dueling, are you, Snape?" Harry snarled. "You're not so glib when your students can actually fight back."

He was interrupted when a piercing cry ripped the still air. He jerked his head in time to see Bellatrix Lestrange holding a writhing Ron under the Cruciatus curse. Ron screams cleared the rage-induced fog from Harry's brain. He moved away from Snape and rounded his wand on Lestrange. She managed to dodge several curses, all the while keeping Ron under the intense agony of her spell.

Hermione turned from the opening at the front of the cave and began moving back towards Ron.

"No!" Harry shouted. "Just go while you can."

Ginny, who had joined Hermione at the cave's opening, grasped the older girl firmly round the arm and pulled her away. She shoved a still-Stunned Wormtail into the water, and jumped in after him, holding firmly to Hermione.

Harry aimed his wand and put all his energy into a Stunning Spell. The red light hit Bellatrix squarely in the chest, and she crumpled to the ground in a heap.

Using his wand, Harry levitated an unconscious Ron in the air and hovered his limp body towards the opening. He released the spell and watched as his friend plummeted into the cold water below.

Snape stirred and from the corner of his eye, Harry saw him reach for his wand. Swearing, Harry kicked Snape's hand hard, sending the wand clattering. He desperately wanted to grab Snape and bring him into custody, too, but he was more concerned about Ron drowning while still unconscious. He leapt over Snape while the man was still trying to retrieve his wand. Taking a running head start, he dove into the icy water, feeling all the breath leave his lungs with the shock of cold.

He resurfaced quickly and frantically searched for Ron. The redhead was lying face down in the water. Harry grasped his shoulder and pulled with all his might until they'd reached the rocks. He saw Snape emerge from the cave – his face bruised and bloodied yet still livid with rage – a moment before he side-along Apparated Ron away.

He reappeared outside Grimmauld Place in time to see Remus and Mr. Weasley hurrying down the stairs behind Ginny. Hermione held her wand pointed steadily at a still-Stunned Wormtail.

"Ron!" she screamed, dropping her wand and scrambling towards them.

Harry gently lowered Ron to the ground, feeling panicked and short of breath. Ron had been under the Cruciatus for a very long time. He shook his head, attempting to dislodge the images of Neville's parents that had crept into his thoughts.

"What happened to him?" Mr. Weasley asked, dropping to his knees beside his son and aiming his wand at Ron's temple. "Ennervate."

Ron didn't respond.

"Bellatrix Lestrange held him under the Cruciatus. He lost consciousness before I could get her away from him," Harry replied, his voice cracking.

"Ginny, go inside and have someone Floo Madam Pomfrey. Don't wake your mother if you can avoid it; I'll tell her myself," Mr. Weasley said.

Ginny, pale and wide-eyed, nodded before sprinting inside.

"Ron, wake up," Hermione said, tears causing clean streaks to cut through the grime on her face. "Are you listening to me, Ron? I need you to do this."

Mr. Weasley patted Hermione on the back. "Move aside for a moment, Hermione, so I can take him inside."

Harry moved to help Mr. Weasley lift Ron's comatose body, but it proved unnecessary. Mr. Weasley gently levitated Ron inside. Hermione remained in the same spot, staring numbly at the ground where Ron had just been laying.

Harry wrapped his arm around her and tugged her to her feet. "Come on, Hermione. He's going to be okay," he whispered into her hair. The color and texture of her wig still surprised him at times.

Hermione turned and buried her face into Harry's chest. "He has to be, Harry. I didn't see it happen. I was so focused on getting Wormtail outside."

"You caught him," Remus said, speaking for the first time. His voice had a deadened, hollow quality to it that made the hair on Harry's forearms stand on end.

Remus stood motionless above his former friend, an expression of mingled scorn, rage, and disgust displayed on his face. Using his foot, he pushed the unconscious figure onto his back and continued to stare.

"What are we going to do with him?" Harry asked nervously. Remus's demeanor alarmed him, and he didn't trust what his former professor might do.

"Take Hermione inside and check on Ron. I'll keep an eye on him until we can get someone to take him to the Ministry. I'm not exactly welcomed there," Remus said. The bitterness he usually hid so well sounded clearly in his voice.

"Remus," Harry said, staring between his father's old friend and the front door. He was saved having to make the choice between Remus and Ron when Mad-Eye Moody limped toward them.

"You got one. Good work, boy," he said, gruffly.

"It's Peter Pettigrew," Harry said. "He needs to be taken into custody to prove Sirius's innocence once and for all."

Although Fudge had conceded that Sirius was innocent, he'd never made a formal declaration about the Ministry's mistake. It had all been shoved under the rug when the news that Voldemort had, indeed, returned had come to light.

Sirius deserved better than that.

"I need to check on Ron," Hermione said, sniffing. She began tugging on Harry's arm to move him inside.

"Go on. Madam Pomfrey is with Ron now. It'll be my pleasure to take care of him," Moody said, roughly grabbing Wormtail by the collar of his robes.

Inside headquarters, Harry and Hermione found Ginny pacing outside a closed door off the entrance hall. She sprinted towards them and threw her arms about them both. Harry could feel her trembling and wrapped his arm tightly around her slight frame.

"How is he?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know. Madam Pomfrey is checking him over now, but she kicked Dad and me out. Dad went upstairs to get Mum," Ginny replied.

"Alastor took Peter to the Ministry," Remus said quietly as he entered the room behind them. Harry thought he looked older than he'd ever seen him, even after a full moon. "How's Ron?"

"We don't know yet," Ginny said, pulling closer to Harry.

"At least come and sit down," Remus said, guiding Harry towards some chairs. Harry kept his arms wrapped around both girls as he led them away from the door. They had just sat down when Mrs. Weasley ran down the stairs, Mr. Weasley right on her heels.

"Ron! Where is he?" she demanded frantically. She wore a dressing gown that she hadn't bothered to fasten, and her hair was tousled from sleep. She had a frantic expression in her eyes that reminded Harry of a wild animal.

Mr. Weasley led her to the closed door, and the two of them slipped inside. Hermione stood as if to follow, but instead began wringing her hands as she sat back down. Ginny reached across Harry and took one of Hermione's hands in her own, squeezing it tightly.

Hermione turned her watery gaze on the younger girl and smiled tremulously. She took a deep breath, and Harry felt her relax beneath his arm.

"He'll be okay," she whispered. "He has to be; he's Ron."

They waited in silence for several moments, the air laden with tension. Remus sat in a chair across from the three teens, his eyes scanning each of them.

"Did you destroy it?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Yeah," Harry said, nodding. "It's done. We were ambushed though...by Snape and some others."

"Severus was there?" Remus asked, looking up sharply.

"Yeah. It was curious though. Crabbe obviously called for back up when he realized we were there, but I would have expected Voldemort to be the one to show up. I can't help but wonder why he didn't," Harry said, feeling that sense of uneasiness return.

"That is odd," Remus said, rubbing his chin. "We haven't had a report of any Death Eater activity so far this evening, although we rarely know anything in advance these days. How did Severus react when he saw you?"

"Sneered a lot, then started throwing curses," Harry replied.

"He tried to curse you?" Remus asked, color rising to his cheeks.

"Yeah. I tried to curse him, too, but I didn't do so well. He can read me like a book," Harry said, clenching his fists. It was galling how easily Snape could predict him. If he couldn't manage against Snape, how was he ever going to battle Voldemort?

"One step at a time, Harry," Remus said, as if reading his thoughts.

"I can't master Occlumency, Remus. If I can't clear my mind, they'll both always know which curse I'm about to use. How can I beat that?" he asked. "Even when I tried to shield my eyes, he still blocked me."

"Then how did you get away?" Remus asked mildly.

"Luck," Harry spat, disgusted. "I got so frustrated that I hauled off and punched him in the mouth. He wasn't expecting that, and I don't think he ever learned to fight the Muggle way."

"So, you didn't think about it, you simply reacted," Remus said, rubbing his temple.

Harry shrugged. "I suppose."

"That's what you need against Voldemort then, isn't it? The element of surprise," Hermione said. Her eyes remained fixed on the closed door where Ron had been taken, but she'd obviously been paying close attention.

"How can I surprise him when he can read my thoughts?" Harry asked, exasperated.

"You just did it with Severus," Remus replied.

"So...you're saying I have to go up against Voldemort without a plan. Oh, that's just great. At least it takes awhile to say Avada Kedavra, because that's about how long I'll last," Harry said, flinging his back against the couch.

"No. We're saying the plan has to be adaptable," Hermione replied patiently.

"Besides, we still have to find the oth-"

"The next Horcrux," Harry said, interrupting Ginny. He still didn't want Remus to know that there was only one remaining to find.

Ginny's eyes were wide and round. "Right. We don't even have a place to begin looking for the next one," she said, her voice wavering.

Remus's eyebrows had risen slightly, but he remained silent.

"That doesn't mean we can't start making some plans," Hermione said, immediately switching into revising mode. Images of her pre-OWL hysteria flashed through Harry's mind. She was interrupted mid-stride when the door opened, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exited. Madam Pomfrey, who was levitating an unconscious Ron, followed them closely.

"How is he?" Hermione asked, rushing over to lift Ron's limp hand into her own.

"We're taking him to St. Mungo's," Mrs. Weasley said, sniffing into a handkerchief.

Mr. Weasley wrapped his arm around her. "We'll send word as soon as we know anything."

"I want to go with you," Hermione said, her eyes wild.

"We do, too," Ginny added, while Harry nodded. They'd jumped up off the couch and stood behind Hermione. All three looked into Mr. Weasley's face with pleading eyes.

"We're wasting time," Madam Pomfrey said briskly, disengaging Ron's hand from Hermione's grip. "He has some severe spell damage that needs immediate attention, and it's more than I can do here. Let the Healers do their work, and you can see him afterwards."

Using her wand, she levitated Ron toward the front door with Mrs. Weasley scurrying behind her.

"I give you my word that we'll Floo you as soon as we know anything," Mr. Weasley said, locking his eyes on each of the teens. He then raised his gaze to Remus.

Remus put his hands on Hermione's and Ginny's shoulders. "Why don't I make some tea while we wait," he said calmly. "We're all worried, but we don't want to create any distractions at St. Mungo's. We want their attention focused on Ron."

Harry knew Remus was right. Harry's appearance at St. Mungo's was bound to create a scene – just look what had happened when he'd been spotted in Diagon Alley. Helping Remus, he tugged both girls' hands.

"Come on, Remus is right. We can visit St. Mungo's as soon as they've got Ron awake," he said, leading the girls away while Remus went to start a pot of tea.

The night dragged unmercifully slowly. Harry, Ginny, and Hermione sat with Remus in the drawing room drinking their tea. They each dozed on occasion, but mostly just stared at the clock on the mantle that seemed to tick abnormally loudly in the still house. Harry absently wondered what happened when Mad-Eye had arrived at the Ministry with Wormtail, but the ex-Auror hadn't yet returned, and Harry's thoughts were too focused on Ron to ask Remus to check.

Remus had given Hermione a large, steaming cup of tea, and Harry suspected he'd laced it with some sort of Calming Draught because Hermione had been far more relaxed after drinking it. She sat curled on a chair with a hand-knit afghan across her legs, staring at the rapidly dwindling wick of the candle in front of her.

Remus sat in the chair beside her, holding a book in his hand that he had yet to open. He tried several times to initiate a conversation, but after receiving only grunts and one-word answers in reply, he'd finally given up and lapsed into the tense silence.

Harry and Ginny sat side by side on the couch, their hands tightly clasped. Ginny was white-faced as she stared into the fire, chewing on her lip. Harry desperately tried not to think about the possibility of Ron suffering permanent spell damage. He knew he was doing a shoddy job of it by the way his hands shook, rattling his cup against the saucer when he'd tried to take a sip of tea.

He must have finally dozed at some point, because he was startled awake when Mrs. Weasley entered the drawing room and tried to disentangle him and Ginny.

Ginny groggily pushed at her mother's hands and tried to burrow her face back into Harry's jumper.

"Mrs. Weasley!" Harry said, becoming fully alert. "What happened? How's Ron?"

Ginny, too, jumped up, her eyes opening wide while Hermione and Remus sat bolt upright in their chairs.

"He hasn't regained consciousness yet. They've got him in the Spell Damage ward at St. Mungo's," Mrs. Weasley replied, worry lines heavy around her eyes and mouth. "I left Fred with him while I came back to check on you. I want you all upstairs and in bed, right now. None of you are going to St. Mungo's until you have a kip. Has your father returned?"

"Dad? I thought he was with you," Ginny said, furrowing her brow.

"He was until we got an urgent owl from Percy that he needed to return to the Ministry," Mrs. Weasley replied, wringing her hands.

"Sit down, Molly," Remus said, guiding her to the chair he'd just vacated. "Let me pour you a cup of herbal tea. You need to have a rest before returning to St. Mungo's, as well."

"Oh, Remus," Mrs. Weasley cried tearfully. "He's just so still. I can't bear the thought that my Ronnie might never return to me."

"He will, Molly. You have to believe that," Remus said, pouring her some tea.

Hermione had visibly paled at Mrs. Weasley's words and silently sank back onto the couch. Harry moved to sit next to her while Ginny walked over to her mum.

"Percy sent an Owl? What's so important that he had to drag Dad away from the hospital?" she demanded hotly.

"You don't want to know," Mr. Weasley replied, entering the drawing room with Mad-Eye following. Both had tired, grim expressions on their faces that caused Harry's stomach to churn with dread. He'd seen that look too many times in the past, and knew it didn't bode well.

Mr. Weasley walked across the room and planted a kiss on Mrs. Weasley's head. He sank down on the chair next to her and smiled weakly as Remus offered him a cup of tea.

"Thanks, Remus. How's Ron?" he asked.

"There hasn't been any change since you left. Fred is with him, and he said he'd call if Ron wakes. The Healers don't expect him to for quite some time yet because of all the potions in his system. We won't know anything for certain until he's awake," Mrs. Weasley said, her lower lip trembling.

Mr. Weasley shut his eyes tightly as he patted her on the shoulder.

"What happened at the Ministry, Dad? What did Percy say?" Ginny asked. Her face was exceedingly pale, making her freckles stand out starkly. She sounded young and frightened, despite the determined cast of her chin.

Mr. Weasley sighed heavily and lifted his other arm, allowing his daughter to slide under. He pulled Ginny in close and kissed the crown of her head.

"The Ministry is in chaos," he sighed wearily.

"Why? What happened?" Harry asked, his eyes volleying between Mr. Weasley and Moody, who remained with his back in the doorway. He had his arms folded across his chest as he stood scowling at everyone in general.

"Rufus Scrimgeour is dead," Mr. Weasley said quietly.

"What?" Ginny asked, blinking.

"Murdered," Moody said gruffly. "The Dark Mark was seen hanging above his home late last night. Rumor has it that You-Know-Who himself was the one who did it."

Harry and Remus exchanged a meaningful glance.

"The Ministry is in chaos. They're trying to keep it quiet at the moment so as not to create a panic, but I fear the Prophet already knows. I suspect it will be the morning's headline," Mr. Weasley said.

"Panic?" Ginny repeated numbly.

"If You-Know-Who can get to the Minister of Magic that easily, no one is safe, and nothing the Ministry can say will convince them that they are," Mr. Weasley said, gently running his hand along Ginny's cheek.

"Well, they aren't," Harry replied.

"I know that, Harry, and anyone who has been following this situation reasonably knows that, as well, but people like to fool themselves into believing someone else is in charge. That someone else is handling things. Now, the person they'd hoped was handling it has been murdered. I fear this is going to put more pressure on you, Harry," Mr. Weasley said.

"I don't care about that," Harry replied.

"You should," Moody said harshly. "You don't need any additional attention right now."

That was true; he certainly didn't want to be under any more of a microscope than he usually was while he searched for the remaining Horcrux.

"There's more," Mr. Weasley said, rubbing the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. "And you're really not going to like it."

"What's that?" Remus asked, his grip on Harry's shoulder tightening.

"The Wizengamot had to appoint an acting Minister until we can arrange an election," Mr. Weasley said, his body stiffening.

"Yes," Remus replied. "That's standard protocol."

"The atmosphere at the Ministry right now is tense and fearful. Everyone is looking over their shoulders. No one trusts anyone else," Mr. Weasley said.

"Much the same as it was during Voldemort's last reign of terror," Remus replied, glancing at Harry.

"Indeed. The Wizengamot felt they had to appoint someone who could reinstate order – to enforce the rules during this dark time. They needed someone to provide a systemized organized approach – someone who craves order and thrives on the rules."

"Who did they appoint, Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked, his stomach knotting. He could feel a trickle of sweat rolling down his back despite the chill in the room.

"They felt they needed a determined bureaucrat," Mr. Weasley replied, appearing apologetic.

"Who did they appoint?" Harry said again, more forcefully this time.

Mr. Weasley sighed heavily and glanced at the room. It was obvious he dreaded the answer.

"Dolores Umbridge."
Chapter Seventeen

Dolores's Decrees

November brought below-normal temperatures throughout the land, and the political climate matched the weather. Interim Minister Dolores Umbridge had imposed a strict curfew upon Great Britain. All witches and wizards not employed by the Ministry had to be in their homes by nightfall. Anyone wanting a special dispensation for work purposes had to request a waiver from the Ministry – in writing – in triplicate.

New laws and Ministry Decrees were issued daily, some directly contradicting others, although no one appeared to care. The wizarding public was desperate for someone to tell them what to do, no matter how inadequate those instructions might be. They were afraid, and the new Minister wasn't above playing on that fact.

As Mr. Weasley had feared, the Daily Prophet had run a headline the morning after the murder of Rufus Scrimgeour with a full moving picture of the Dark Mark floating above the Minister's handsome home. Although the details had been sketchy, the expected response had been exactly as Mr. Weasley had predicted. Witches and wizards took to the streets in mass hysteria. Some tried to flee the country, and the Ministry had to close its International Portkey office for several days after a riot had broken out in the lobby.

Despite Umbridge's attempts to convince the public that Harry was merely an unqualified school boy and not critical to the defeat of Voldemort, the people held onto their hope that Harry would somehow stop the madness. Each day, the Daily Prophet ran a list of Harry-

spottings and had several reporters assigned to the task of tracking his comings and goings. Every day that went by saw an increase in the public's demand that he break his silence and make a statement about his efforts to stop the war.

Mr. Weasley told them that Interim Minister Umbridge was growing increasingly frustrated by her failed attempts to tamp down interest in Harry. The public appeared ready for her to organize things, but it was Harry they expected to finally end Voldemort's reign of terror. Umbridge quickly realized that her renewed smear campaign wouldn't succeed. She'd pulled back from her public attacks on Harry and instead concentrated on more covert attempts to dislodge him from the public's favor.

The Order already felt the strain of Umbridge's reign. Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had been working for the Muggle Prime Minister, was ordered to relinquish his assignment. According to Umbridge, the wizarding population was in far more danger than the Muggles, and she didn't have the resources to spare at the moment. She'd refused to listen to any arguments against leaving the Muggles defenseless, and told the Prime Minister she'd be in touch if there was anything he needed to know.

She'd left him without the slightest recourse for contacting anyone in the wizarding world for help in a war he didn't understand. When several high-ranking Ministry officials attempted to point this out, she argued that since the Dark Lord loathed the intermingling between the wizarding and Muggle worlds, distancing the two factions would actually help the Muggle population. When Mr. Weasley and several others had continued to argue, she'd threatened them with charges of treason.

Attacks on Muggles had been rising steadily, and several London landmarks had suffered damage, including Tower Bridge and Big Ben. The destruction had left the Muggles so preoccupied, they'd barely noticed the other strange occurrences throughout the city.

While Harry was worried about the damage Dolores Umbridge was wreaking, his main concern was Ron. Three weeks had passed since he'd been cursed, and he'd yet to regain consciousness. He remained confined to the Spell Damage ward at St. Mungo's. Hermione had visited each day and returned - pale and weary - to report there had been no change. The Healers still suspected he'd eventually come out of it, but none of them were willing to target a date - or if he'd suffer any permanent brain trauma as a result.

Harry had wanted to rush straight to the hospital that first day, but Mr. Weasley had gently pointed out the danger to Ron if word leaked out that Harry Potter was a regular visitor. So far, they'd been able to keep Ron's injuries from the press, but Harry's appearance would change that. Harry knew it was the truth, but it didn't make him feel any better. He'd clenched his teeth and nodded stoically, having to settle for Hermione and Ginny's reports on Ron.

Harry sat in the kitchen one morning, moodily stirring a cup of coffee when Mr. Weasley and Remus Lupin entered, each wearing grim expressions.

Harry's heart lurched. "What happened?" he asked.

Mr. Weasley sat down, and ran a hand through his thinning hair. "I think we need to remove Ron from St. Mungo's, Harry," he said, sighing.

"Why? What's happened?" Harry asked, a thrill of fear bubbling in his chest.

"You explain. I'll Floo Poppy and ask her if she can tend him here," Remus said, squeezing Harry's shoulder as he passed.

"Dolores Umbridge has obtained information that Ron is at St. Mungo's, and she's in the process of writing a Decree stating that any patient suffering spell damage from an Unforgiveable needs to be detained in a Ministry facility until the incident can be investigated," Mr. Weasley said, clenching his teeth and twisting his coffee cup around in his hands.

"Detained how? Ron isn't even conscious," Harry said, jumping from his chair.

Mr. Weasley raised his hands, attempting to calm Harry. "I know that, Harry. She's frustrated by her lack of ability to learn what you're doing. She wants to make it appear that it's the Ministry that's in charge, and right now, the public is more enamored with you. Despite all her efforts, she hasn't been able to convince them that you're a dangerous threat to the peace that she's trying to form. It's infuriating her.

"She knows you, and she knows how close you are to Ron. I believe she'll use him as a bargaining tool once he's under her care. We need to get Ron out of St. Mungo's before her Decree is passed."

"How do you know about this?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. "Percy owled me early this morning. He's dismayed by the Minister's plans for Ron."

Harry bit his lip, not entirely convinced it wasn't Percy who told Umbridge about Ron in the first place. He wasn't about to say that to Mr. Weasley, however. Some of his feelings must have shown on his face, because Mr. Weasley sighed heavily.

"I understand your mistrust of Percy, Harry, and I can't say that I blame you, but I do believe that he loves his family. I think Percy had a rude awakening at Bill's wedding, and he's trying to make amends. I have to believe that," he said.

His eyes looked so sad and almost pleading that Harry had to swallow a lump in his throat. If it turned out that Percy wasn't on the right side of all this, Harry would make certain he paid for it.

"I'm going with you," he said, not about to be swayed by any argument.

"Harry—"

"I've stayed away so as not to draw attention to Ron's being there. He's leaving now, anyway, and his connection to me might actually work in his favor for once. My presence at St. Mungo's should cause enough of a distraction to get him out. I'll bring my Invisibility Cloak, as well," Harry said, his jaw set.

Mr. Weasley sat back in his chair, watching Harry closely. Finally, he nodded. "All right, Harry. You've done a lot of growing up this past year, haven't you, son?"

Startled, Harry jerked his head toward Mr. Weasley.

The older man smiled fondly. "You were such a scrawny little thing when Ron first brought you home. Molly used to say that if you turned sideways you'd disappear, you were so thin. You were always polite and soft-spoken, but even then I could sense an underlying strength of character. You've grown into a remarkable young man, Harry. Your parents would be proud."

Harry wasn't certain how to respond, so he merely nodded, feeling a warm glow of pleasure flush his cheeks. When Remus returned, the three of them left Grimmauld Place and Apparated to an alley near St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

London's streets were being decorated for Christmas, and Harry was stunned to realize he'd been so caught up in the war that he hadn't even been aware of the season. Boughs of holly and evergreens were wrapped upon the streetlights, and Harry could hear the distant clang of a bell from a department store Father Christmas. The streets were already packed with shoppers carrying bundles of brightly wrapped packages.

They'd managed to enter the apparently deserted department store that hid St. Mungo's without attracting any attention. The reception area was filled with various witches and wizard seeking medical attention. Healers in lime green robes moved from person to person, assessing who was in the direst need of attention.

The witch sitting at the Inquiry desk was young with a pockmarked face and platinum blonde hair. She cracked her gum repeatedly and looked up with a bored expression on her face as they approached the desk. Her eyes zeroed in on Harry's scar, and her jaw hung open, dropping her gum on the desk with a thump.

"Blimey, it's Harry Potter," she said, an annoying nasal twang to her voice.

All activity in the waiting area halted for a brief moment and a heavy silence filled the air. It lasted only a moment before whispering broke out amongst the people. They began pointing and moving closer toward Harry in order to hear him. Several of the Healers began elbowing each other and nodding in his direction.

Annoyed with the reception witch, Mr. Weasley grabbed the register and signed his name, handing the quill to Harry. "We know where we're going," he said coldly.

Grabbing Harry's elbow, he moved quickly towards the lift. Remus followed behind them as the hum of voices in the lobby grew louder. They rode the lift to the fourth floor where the Spell Damage ward was located as quickly as possible, but news of Harry's presence preceded them for the corridors filled with witches and wizards eager to catch a glimpse of the Chosen One. Several people asked him questions, but Harry kept his eyes focused firmly ahead of him and didn't slow his stride.

The nurse sitting at the desk in front of the Spell Damage ward was a young, rather plump, star-struck girl who repeatedly fluttered her eyelashes at Harry.

"We're here to see Ron Weasley," he said, nodding pleasantly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter," the witch replied nervously, her eyes fixed on his face. "We've had a direct order from the Ministry that no one is allowed in the ward until further notice. We've got two visitors inside now, and we're waiting to clear them out."

Harry leaned over the desk, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Aw, come on. Certainly if there are already visitors inside a few more won't hurt. I promise we'll be in and out so quick that no one will know," he said.

The witch opened and closed her mouth several times like a fish, apparently wanting to object but unable to find the words.

"I'd consider this a great personal favor," Harry said, briefly scanning her nametag, "Sandy. Do you think you could let me see my friend?" He'd learned from experience that Ginny always tended to give him his way when he used that sappy, puppy-dog expression, and he only hoped it would work with the nurse, as well.

"All right, Mr. Potter," Sandy said breathlessly, "but you'll have to be quick. I'll be in so much trouble if anyone finds out I let you in here."

"Thank you, Sandy," Harry said, feeling very pleased. He quickly hurried through the door to the closed ward. Remus and Mr. Weasley followed him, each wearing wide grins.

"I think I've seen both your father and Sirius pulling stunts like that, Harry. Well done," Remus said, chuckling.

Harry's face colored. "I hope I don't get her sacked like the witch at the Apparation Testing Center," he said. There was nothing to be done for it, however. They had to get Ron out of here.

"His room is this way," Mr. Weasley said, leading Harry around the corner.

When they entered, they discovered the room wasn't empty. A stout man sat in the chair by Ron's bed, his back to the door. Harry drew his wand in a flash and aimed it at the man. "Move away from his bed and keep your hands where I can see them," he said.

The man started and turned around, revealing the surprised face of Harry's classmate, Neville Longbottom.

Harry felt his body deflate as the air and the tension left his lungs through his nose. "Neville. What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Harry," Neville said brightly. His round face beamed as he recognized Harry. "Hello, Professor Lupin. How have you been? And you must be Mr. Weasley."

"Nice to see you again, Neville," Remus said warmly.

"Gran and I are here to visit my parents, but there's something strange happening. They gave us a really hard time about getting in, and they tried to have us fill out all this extra paperwork. Gran went upstairs to give the Head Healer a piece of her mind. I don't envy that bloke," Neville replied, grimacing.

"How's Ron?" Harry asked.

He moved cautiously toward the bed and got the first look at his friend in weeks. Ron's skin was pale, making the freckles on his face stand out starkly. He looked peaceful, however, as if he was only sleeping. Somehow, Harry had expected him to look as if he was in pain. He was relieved that wasn't the case. Still, it was strange and rather eerie to see Ron this way. He was used to a Ron who was lively and full of energy. He wanted his friend back.

"Gran told me he was here, so I cut of a sprig of my *Mimulus mibletonia* and planted it for him. It's supposed to have healing properties, so I thought it might help," Neville mumbled, kicking his foot against the bed.

Harry glanced at the small green plant resting on Ron's bedside table and found it hard to swallow around the lump that had grown in his throat.

"It's a lovely thought, Neville," Hermione said, entering the room. Harry suddenly realized that Hermione's coat was lying on the chair beside Ron's bed.

"Hermione! When did you get here?" Harry asked, his eyes widening. He'd assumed she'd still been asleep when he'd left with Remus and Mr. Weasley.

"I've been here for a few hours. I couldn't sleep," she replied, not meeting his eyes. Her eyes had dark shadows beneath them, making them appear almost bruised. She moved towards Ron and gently brushed the hair on his forehead. "There hasn't been any change. What are you all doing here? What's happened?"

"Umbridge is making life difficult, and she's about to try and take Ron into Ministry custody," Harry replied, a tic working in his cheek.

"What? That's ridiculous," Hermione cried, her eyes seeking confirmation from the older two men in the room.

"So is Umbridge," Harry replied.

"What are we going to do? We can't let her do this, Harry. Mr. Weasley? She can't just take him," Hermione said, her voice growing shriller with each syllable.

"Calm down, Hermione," Remus said, grasping her shoulders. "No one is going to take Ron anywhere."

"We're here to break him out. Even unconscious, Ron's a rebel," Harry said, smirking.

"How? They're watching all the doors. How do you propose to get an unconscious body by them without anyone noticing? They're counting who goes in and who goes out. They know Neville and I were the only two left in here," Hermione said without taking a breath.

"Take Ron," Neville said suddenly, a fierce, determined expression crossing his face. "You take Ron, and I'll stay in his bed. It won't fool them for long, but long enough to get you out of here."

"Neville-" Hermione said.

"Do it. I can handle this," Neville said, sticking out his chin.

"The Ministry will be all over you, asking you all sorts of questions," Harry said. "It's me they want, and they're going to try and use Ron to get to me. They'll use you, too."

"It won't matter," Neville replied, squaring his shoulders. "I don't know where you're taking him and as long as you don't tell me, even with Veritaserum there's nothing I can give them."

"Thank you, Neville," said Mr. Weasley quietly, extending his hand to Neville.

"I want to help, in any way I can. If you need anything, Harry, you know where to find me," Neville said, shaking each of the other men's hands.

"Thanks, Neville," Harry said, feeling extraordinarily proud to call Neville a friend.

When Neville reached Hermione, he pulled her into a hug rather than shaking her hand. He handed her the potted plant that resembled a pulsating cactus. "Take this, maybe it'll help."

"Thanks, Neville," Hermione said, her eyes glistening.

Mr. Weasley removed his wand from his pocket and aimed it at his son. "Petrificus Totalis," he said, causing Ron's entire body to stiffen. "Levicorpus."

Ron's body rose in the air and hung eerily still, slightly in front of Mr. Weasley.

Remus moved next to him, attempting to block him from view. He turned to Harry, his eyes twinkling. "Now, Harry, if you can just work your charm on Sandy as we leave, hopefully she won't give the rest of us a second glance."

Hermione kissed Neville on the cheek before he climbed into Ron's bed. She took her place in front of Ron, and they moved toward the door.

Harry hurried to the front desk, attempting to block the nurse's view of the others. "Thank you for letting me see my friend, Sandy. I really appreciate it. We'll all be leaving, now."

Sandy blinked, staring dreamily at Harry. "Okay, Mr. Eyes...er... Potter...Mr. Potter. You...er...have very nice eyes... the color I mean. It's striking."

Harry felt his face flush. "Thank you, Sandy."

"I have faith in you, Harry. I know you'll beat him," Sandy said, grabbing his hand.

Harry fervently hoped what he was doing wouldn't get Sandy into trouble. "I'm going to try," he told her sincerely, feeling his words were incredibly inadequate.

The rest of the group had made their way onto the lift. Harry joined them just as the door closed. Removing his Invisibility Cloak from his pocket, he shook it out and swung it over Ron's head.

"I'm certain the reporters will be aware of my presence here by now. If we get held up, let me deal with them while you get Ron out of here," he said to Remus and Mr. Weasley.

Neither of the two men looked particularly happy with the idea, but they both nodded their agreement, knowing he was probably right.

They emerged from the lift and rounded the corner into the lobby before all hell broke loose. Cameras flashed and a swarm of reporters swarmed toward them, firing questions so rapidly Harry couldn't distinguish anything being said.

Blinking to clear the spots from his eyes, he shot a meaningful glance at Remus. Harry moved slightly away from the others to give them a chance to get away and raised his arms in the air, trying to quiet the crowd with a gesture. When that failed, he stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly.

He saw Remus and Mr. Weasley slip through the entrance unhindered, and breathed a sigh of relief. He was dismayed to realize Hermione had stayed with him, however.

"Mr. Potter, what is your opinion of our Interim Minister? I understand you were at odds with her when she briefly took charge at Hogwarts," a male reporter with narrowed eyes and an oily face asked, shoving a recording quill and parchment beneath Harry's nose.

"Yes. Dolores and I have had our differences in the past," Harry replied, refusing to acknowledge her title, "but I hope she can leave all that behind us and concentrate on the situation at hand. Stopping Voldemort's reign of terror should be everyone's first priority."

He rolled his eyes at the gasps and shrieks of dismay the name caused, finding them ridiculous. How could they report on Voldemort's activities if they couldn't even stand to hear his name?

"Do you think she's capable of leading us?" a female reporter asked, her bright red nails caressing her quill.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think Voldemort or his followers care much about any Decree the Ministry might issue. They're not going to stop him."

"What is going to stop him, Mr. Potter?" the witch asked eagerly.

Harry had to control a grin as he wondered if she might actually start drooling. "I am," he replied, locking his eyes with hers.

The reporters' quills scribbled madly as the buzz of conversation once again reached fever pitch.

"What are you doing at St. Mungo's today?" another reporter shouted, quieting the crowd.

"I was visiting a good friend of mine who was hurt recently in a battle with some of Voldemort's Death Eaters. During that battle, one of the Death Eaters was captured and is now in custody at the Ministry. That man's name is Peter Pettigrew," Harry said, clearly enunciating each word.

The room erupted into chaos yet again. Hermione glanced at Harry with wide eyes, but nodded for him to continue.

"As I told the Quibbler when I did my interview after Voldemort's rebirth, Pettigrew was instrumental in his return. I haven't seen much reported about his capture, but perhaps you can ask the Ministry if he's revealed anything," Harry said, ignoring their continued reactions to hearing Voldemort's name.

News of Wormtail's capture had been kept extremely quiet, and Mr. Weasley had learned that the rat still wasn't being held in Azkaban, but was instead in the Ministry's Holding Facility. Access to him had been given only to those Aurors hand-selected by Dolores Umbridge. Harry thought it was about time the public was given the full story. Hopefully, it would put some pressure on the Ministry.

"Where is Pettigrew now?" a reporter with a thin mustache asked.

"As far as I know, he's at the Ministry, but I'd assume they're preparing to send him to Azkaban" Harry replied, shrugging. "Maybe they've learned where Voldemort is hiding."

"You think the Dark Lord is in hiding?" another reporter asked eagerly.

Harry shrugged again, holding his hands in the air. "Haven't seen him lately."

Questions about Pettigrew and his capture were flying fast and furious, and Harry couldn't suppress the bubble of pleasure that gurgled in his chest. Dolores was going to be mightily hacked off about this.

"Look, there's Interim Minister Umbridge, now," Hermione said, grasping Harry's arm so tightly that her nails dug into his skin. "Why don't you ask her about Pettigrew's fate?"

The crowd of reporters swarmed around a surprised Dolores Umbridge, her toad-like face growing red with fury when she realized what all the questions were about. She glared across the room at Harry, desperately trying to make her way toward him. He could hear her simpering voice trying to get the reporters out of her way. Hermione grabbed Harry's hand, and they made their escape as quickly as they could.

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Although Christmas was rapidly approaching, the mood inside headquarters remained tense and somber. One of the guest rooms had been converted into a makeshift infirmary, and Madam Pomfrey had moved into the adjoining room. Despite her diligent care, Ron remained unresponsive. Hermione had set the plant Neville had given her on Ron's bedside table, and as the little sprig grew, Ron's coloring had also improved. Still, that slight change hadn't brought him out of the coma, and everyone's hopes were dwindling.

Harry refused to believe his best mate would spend the rest of his life in a vegetative state. It simply couldn't end up this way.

Harry's statement to the press about Wormtail's capture had forced the Ministry to admit that they indeed had him in custody. Any other details were sketchy, and the Daily Prophet had soon printed an article questioning Umbridge's leadership ability. After two such articles appeared in rapid succession, they'd suddenly stopped. The Order's attempts to locate the reporter who'd written the articles had, so far, fallen short. It appeared the reporter had fallen off the face of the earth.

Neville had sent an owl informing them that with all the commotion Harry's announcement about Wormtail had caused, he was able to leave St. Mungo's without being detained by the Ministry. When they'd come to his home to question him, his grandmother's intimidating presence had quelled the two Aurors. It appeared that Dolores Umbridge was unprepared to go up against a respected pureblood family.

At headquarters, Harry, Hermione and Ginny were in the library comparing their notes on where each of the Horcruxes had been found, and how it was destroyed. None of them had the heart to suggest

continuing their search without Ron, although Harry feared it might come to just that sooner rather than later. He'd decided to hold off through the holidays and simply try and enjoy this time with the Weasleys while they all had the chance.

Unexpectedly, loud voices in the entrance hall caused the three teens to stick their heads outside the door to see what was happening. Tonks, Mad-Eye Moody, Bill, and Mr. Weasley were all standing around, and they appeared to be having a row with Remus.

Remus had his arms folded resolutely across his chest, and a resigned yet determined expression upon his face. The others appeared agitated, and Tonks looked as if she was holding back tears. Bill wore that angry, frustrated expression on his face once again, making the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand on end.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, striding into the middle of the floor and looking at each of them in turn.

"Umbridge strikes again," George said, scowling.

Harry started, not realizing George was there. He was hidden in the doorway to the kitchen with Fred behind him wearing an identically sour expression.

"What has she done now?" Hermione asked, groaning.

"She's issued a Decree stating that all persons suffering from Lycanthropy are to be confined to Ministry-approved Holding Facilities until the current crisis is over," Remus said softly.

"What?" Harry asked, whirling to face his father's old friend. "You must be joking."

"Afraid not," Remus replied, grimacing.

Harry looked briefly at Bill, who scowled. "It doesn't mean me, since I'm not officially diagnosed with Lycanthropy...yet. I merely display some of the symptoms, but you've seen firsthand how my temper can become...irrational. Just give her some time. It won't be long before she reclassifies the restrictions."

"We're not going to let it come to that, Bill," Mr. Weasley said, grimacing. Harry knew it was a father's promise to his son, one he desperately wanted to keep, but not necessarily one he could control.

"What do you mean? Confined for every full moon?" Hermione asked, her brow knitting. "They're going to lock you up each month?"

"No. Confined as in permanently for an undetermined amount of time, regardless of whether it's a full moon or not," Mr. Weasley said, casting an anxious glance in Remus's direction. Remus averted his eyes. "The penalty for disobeying the Decree is immediate termination."

"She can't do that," Ginny cried, glancing desperately between her father and Remus. "You're just like everyone else except at the full moon. She can't just put you down like an animal."

"Umbridge has always had a prejudice against 'dangerous half-breeds'. Look at the anti-werewolf Legislation she passed four years ago," Tonks said, her face twisting into an ugly scowl. She turned towards Remus, tugging on his arm imploringly. "This is her own personal and misguided campaign."

"How does she propose to manage this facility?" Hermione asked, her arms crossed indignantly.

"She doesn't, and quite frankly, people don't care right now," Remus said tiredly, taking a step away from Tonks. "Even those that might ordinarily take up the plight are too concerned with the war, right now. The vast number of those afflicted with Lycanthropy have already sided with Voldemort. People are afraid, and in desperate times, they'll take desperate measures."

"How does she propose to supply Wolfsbane to all those people?" Hermione asked, glaring at Mad-Eye as if it were all his fault.

"Who says she will?" Mad-Eye asked gruffly.

"She can't just lock you all up together," Hermione cried, staring at Remus scandalized.

"Why not? I don't think the fate of anyone afflicted as I am is one of her concerns," Remus said wearily. "Honestly, the only ones who are going to turn themselves in are the ones attempting to live a normal life amongst wizards. The majority of Voldemort's followers won't pay any heed to this Decree. The ones who do turn themselves in will most likely kill each other off during the full moons. By the time this is over, there won't be anyone left to complain."

"And Umbridge won't stop there," Bill said, firmly squaring his jaw. "She has it in for Centaurs, Merpeople and the Goblins, too. This is going to get ugly."

"This is barbaric," Ginny cried, her eyes glittering.

"This is war," Moody snapped. "The sodding bint is using that to her advantage."

"What do you plan on doing?" Fred asked Remus.

It was then that Harry noticed Remus had a small bag at his feet. Hermione must have noticed it at the same time.

"You're not going to turn yourself over to them," she said, panicked.

"Not bloody likely," Harry said, feeling his anger beginning to boil. The thought of losing Remus now was clawing at his insides with fevered intensity. First Sirius, then Dumbledore, and now Remus...

"No. I'm not," Remus said, squaring his shoulders. His eyes were very sad, and he looked at Harry as if there was no one else in the room. "I'm going to go underground like I did for Dumbledore. Perhaps I can learn something about what the others are planning. If anything, this

gives me an excellent cover for why I'm turning my back on wizarding society."

"No," Harry said, his breathing hard. He felt Ginny slip her hand into his and thread her fingers with his own. "There has to be another way."

Remus placed his hands on Harry's shoulders and squeezed them gently. "Harry, there is no choice."

"It's suicide, Remus," Tonks said, her watery eyes finally starting to spill her tears. They rolled down her face in fat drops as her hair lost its pink color and turned a mousy brown. "They'll kill you if they even suspect what you're doing."

"I'll be all right, Nym," he replied, gently brushing her cheek with the back of his hand. "We all have to do what we have to do."

"No," Harry said again, determined to Stun Remus if he had to in order to keep him from walking out that door.

"It's my way to fight in this war. Certainly you, of all people, can understand that, Harry," Remus said gently.

Harry looked away, desperately trying to think of an alternative. Vaguely, he wondered if this was how Ginny felt when he'd tried to leave her behind. Unable to come up with an answer, he briefly nodded, his throat closing.

Remus patted him on the shoulder, his voice choking. "Good boy. I'm very proud of everything you've accomplished, Harry. I've always been extraordinarily proud of you. Sirius and your father would be, too. I'll be in touch as often as I can."

Remus's glanced at the others standing in the entrance hall and gave them all a brief nod. He took Tonks by the hand and led her towards the door to say his farewell in private. As he stepped by Ginny, he leaned down and whispered to her, loud enough for Harry to hear, "Take care of him."

"I will," Ginny murmured, a single tear making a silent track down her cheek.

Unmoving, Harry watched Remus lead Tonks out the front door, an aching hole growing in his chest. Rage bubbled inside, making his stomach roil. Voldemort had to be stopped before any more lives were ripped apart. He had to find the remaining Horcrux; and then he had to end this once and for all, regardless of what that meant for him.

Harry sat in a chair beside Ron's bed, staring out the window at the lightly falling snow. It had begun only minutes earlier, and he watched, lost in his own thoughts, as the swirling flakes appeared to dance on the windowpane. He'd fled the entrance hall after Remus's departure, unable to face everyone's concerned stares, or Hermione's desire to discuss the decree in detail.

He wished Ron would get on with it and wake up, but his friend remained unresponsive. Harry idly kicked his foot against the leg of the bed, watching the rubber of his trainer as it peeled back each time his foot made contact.

"I wish you'd stop this and wake up, Ron. The girls are driving me mad with only me here to hassle," he said, lightly snorting. "If you're so bored with our company, maybe I'll ask Lavender Brown to come and stay awhile. I'll bet you'd love that."

Harry grinned as he imagined the horrified expression on Ron's face had he been awake to hear that comment. He absently wondered what Lavender and the others were doing now, without Hogwarts to occupy their time.

"We've been waiting for you to wake up before doing anything about finding the next Horcrux, but I can't wait any longer, mate. Too much is happening. Umbridge is trying to take control and fix everything. I'm certain you can remember how well that worked the last time," Harry said, rolling his eyes.

"Hermione is going to look through the Pensieve again. I don't know what she's hoping to find, but I suppose it gives her something to do.

"You're going to have to wake up soon, mate. If I manage to find this last Horcrux in a reasonable amount of time, I'm not waiting to confront Voldemort. He has to be stopped, Ron, and I'm the only one who can do it. Ginny and Hermione don't want to hear it, but I know you understand. I need you to keep them out of the way, so I can do what I have to do. When are you going to wake up, Ron?"

Harry's throat was sore, and he had to stop talking to ease it. He continued absently kicking at the bed, staring at Ron's pale face.

"Remus left," he said, his voice sounding strange in the stillness of the room.

He watched the steady rise and fall of Ron's chest. "He could have stayed hidden here, I suppose. He would have been trapped here like Sirius, though."

Harry blinked, staring out the window again.

"We all know how badly that turned out, and I don't think Remus wanted to be reminded of how miserable Sirius was at the end," Harry said, his breath hitching. "I didn't like it when they did it to me, so I suppose it wouldn't have been right to try it with him.

"I need for it to end differently this time, Ron," he whispered, dropping his head.

He was startled when a warm arm wrapped around his shoulders. "It will be different this time, Harry," Ginny said gently.

He looked up into her warm brown eyes and opened his arms, shifting over and allowing her to snuggle onto the chair with him. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair, feeling his heart rate slow as his breathing evened.

"How is he?" Ginny asked, nodding at Ron.

"The same," Harry replied, shrugging. "I don't know, I just felt I should keep him in the loop on stuff, you know?"

"Yeah, well, even when he's conscious, Ron's not usually aware he's in the loop, anyway," Ginny said, tucking the blanket over Ron's shoulder.

Harry felt his lips start to twitch and although he tried to suppress it, he couldn't help the chuckle in the pit of his belly that grew until he couldn't contain it. Somehow, she always made him feel better.

"I miss him," he said, his smile faltering.

"I know you do. I do, too. He's certainly taking his own sweet time about waking up, isn't he?" Ginny asked, a slight catch in her voice.

Harry pulled her closer. "Sorry," he whispered. "You came in here to make me feel better, and now I've gone and made you sad."

"Yeah. You're a bit of wet blanket," Ginny replied, nuzzling her nose into his cheek.

Harry snorted, slouching back on the chair and resting his feet on top of Ron's bed.

"Here," Ginny said, pulling a Chocolate Frog from her pocket. "I nicked this from Bill, and I think it's the last bit of chocolate in this house. Remus always says it makes you feel better."

Harry smiled, remembering how Remus would always have a supply of chocolate in his desk when he taught at Hogwarts. He took the frog from Ginny and snapped it in half.

"Share?" he asked.

"Thanks," Ginny replied, popping the sweet into her mouth. She leaned back and placed her legs on top of Harry's outstretched ones.

"I wish he could have stayed here, but I know he would have been miserable. I would be. I suppose it's easier to feel as if you're doing something rather than just sitting back and waiting for someone else to do it," Harry replied, chewing his chocolate while not quite meeting her eyes.

"I know that's how I feel," Ginny said softly.

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry, Ginny."

"Don't be. It's not your fault, it's not Remus's fault. It's not anyone but bloody Tom Riddle's fault," Ginny said, grabbing his chin and forcing him to look at her. "Remus doesn't want to hurt you any more than you wanted to hurt me. These circumstances are beyond our control, and everyone is doing what they have to do in order to survive it."

"I know that. He's doing exactly what I would do in his place," Harry said, gritting his teeth. "But that doesn't make me worry about him any less."

"I know," Ginny said, stroking his hair.

"We need to find that last Horcrux," Harry said, throwing his back against the chair.

"I've been thinking about that," Hermione said, entering the room. She moved to the opposite side of Ron's bed and leaned over to kiss his forehead before sitting down.

"Great! Where is it?" Ginny asked brightly.

"Ho, ho, very funny. Professor Dumbledore suspected that the other Horcrux would have some connection to either Ravenclaw or Gryffindor, so we need to begin researching the Founders," Hermione said.

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard. There's loads printed about them," Ginny said.

"Do you think we should go back and look at Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"I don't think so," Hermione said, rubbing her chin. "I've already read everything about them in the library there, and I don't remember seeing anything that couldn't be bought at Flourish and Blotts. We need to find more random information, I think. Writing about just them and not their Hogwarts connections. Rowena Ravenclaw was born in England, while Godric Gryffindor came from Wales. I think we need to start in the libraries in the towns where they were born."

"Gryffindor was Welsh?" Harry asked curiously.

"Of course he was Harry. You went to Godric's Hollow," Hermione said, rolling her eyes as if he was daft.

Maybe he was, because he hadn't made the connection. "That's where Godric Gryffindor was born?" he asked.

"Of course. Didn't you know?" Hermione asked, sounding scandalizing that he'd even gone to Godric's Hollow without knowing that information.

"No," Harry replied, shaking his head. He did feel rather slow, now that he thought about it. Godric Gryffindor. Godric's Hollow. It made perfect sense.

Hermione's voice drew his attention back to the conversation. "Helga Hufflepuff was Irish, while Salazar Slytherin came from Scotland. Therefore, each of the Founders represented the four quarters of Great Britain."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Harry asked.

Hermione threw her arms in the air, exasperated. "Simple. I read, Harry. You ought to try it sometime. If you'd ever taken the time to read *Hogwarts: A History*, you'd know this, too. It was all detailed in the first few chapters."

Harry rolled his eyes this time and ignored Hermione completely. "So, where should we start? I'm not too keen to return to Godric's Hollow, but I'll be glad to get out of this house for a while."

Hermione shrewdly narrowed her eyes. "What about your Occlumency lessons?" she asked.

"I haven't really had any recently," Harry replied, shrugging. "I think we all agree that they aren't doing any good. I haven't made any progress on blocking Malfoy, and I'm tired of his sneering over memories of Dudley chasing me around Little Whinging."

"Have you been trying to clear your head at night?" Hermione asked, frowning.

Harry clenched his teeth. "I've done everything they've asked of me, Hermione. I can't do Occlumency. I told them I'd try again, but if I thought it was still pointless I'd end it. It's not working."

Hermione opened her mouth as if to argue when Ginny interrupted. "Professor Dumbledore didn't think it was imperative for you to learn, anyway. He said so last year. I can't imagine it's pleasant having Malfoy in your head and sneering about your childhood memories," she said, rubbing Harry's arm.

"No. The tosser can get really shirty about it, actually," Harry said.

"I don't know how you can stand even being civil to him," Ginny said.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. When I watched how Lucius treated him when we were at Azkaban, I felt kind of bad for him. It didn't last long - he went right back to his normal git of a self quickly enough, but still...I don't understand how a father can treat his son that way. I mean, I don't like him, either, but he's not related to me."

"So, you're not planning on getting the sod a Christmas gift, then?" Ginny asked, smirking.

Hermione huffed at the language, although Harry noticed her lip twitching as if she was fighting a grin.

"Heh, it'd be worth getting Malfoy a present just to see the expression on Ron's face," Harry said, envisioning the scene. "What are you supposed to get for a walking, talking ferret, though?"

"How about a lead?" Hermione said, snorting. "We could get a pink one with a little rhinestone collar and Pansy could parade him around like a show dog."

"That's not what she does already?" Ginny asked, and both girls shrieked with laughter.

Harry shook his head, grinning. He was still thinking about Draco's and Lucius's row, and it led him back to thoughts of his own so-called family. "D'you suppose that Cheering Charm is still working on Dudley?" he asked.

Hermione shifted her eyes to stare at the window. The snow had begun to pile against the glass.

"You did do one, right?" he asked, watching her closely.

"I did," Hermione said, nodding.

Harry knew there was something she still wasn't saying, but didn't feel he needed to press the issue. If she and Ron had done something to torment the Dursleys after they'd all left, well, it couldn't be more than they deserved. Harry's thoughts often turned to Dudley, however. He wondered if Dudley had been thinking about his suppressed magical ability, and if he were at all curious. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia might have succeeded in making the idea so abhorrent to Dudley that he truly didn't want to know any more. If it were Harry, though - he'd be curious.

He decided he was going to send Dudley a Christmas present this year. He still has his copy of First Year Spells. Dudley might just toss it in the bin, but he might be curious...

At the moment, there were more pressing matters, however.

"Where in England did Ravenclaw come from?" he asked.

"Canterbury," Ginny answered promptly.

Both Harry and Hermione stared at her, surprised.

"How'd you know that?" Harry asked.

"What? I read, too, Harry," Ginny said with a straight face. When Harry cocked his eyebrow, she giggled and said, "Well, Canterbury isn't too far from Ottery St. Catchpole, is it? Some of my ancestors were around back then, too. In fact, Auntie Muriel's tiara - the one Fleur wore at her wedding - is a replica of one Rowena Ravenclaw wore."

"So, d'you think you're a descendent of Ravenclaw?" Harry asked.

"No," Ginny replied, shaking her head and making her hair swish around her shoulders. "Weasleys have been Gryffindors for as far back as I can remember. The Prewetts, too, on Mum's side. I had a great-uncle several generations back who married someone from Ravenclaw, and she had the tiara made. It's only a replica, not the real thing, but its Auntie Muriel's pride and joy. Fred and George used to tease Ron with it when we were little by making him wear it whenever we visited."

Both Harry and Hermione snorted. It always fascinated Harry to hear stories about the Weasleys' childhoods.

"Ron thought the pattern of the gems looked liked spiders, and he'd throw a wobbly whenever they started chasing him with it," Ginny said,

laughing. "He used to scowl and get all grumpy and say something like, 'The ruddy thing looks like it's got spiders all over it.'"

"Well, since it's not too far, why don't we start in Canterbury, then?" Harry asked, feeling pleased with having made a decision.

Hermione had wrinkled her brow and appeared in deep thought. "Ginny, that tiara..." she began, but was interrupted by a groggy voice that sounded scratchy and raw.

"I'm hungry," Ron said, attempting to pull himself into a seated position.

"Ron!" Hermione squealed, jumping up and assisting him to straighten. She arranged the pillows behind his head, and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Ron! You're awake. You're finally awake."

Ron's eyes had widened in surprise, and he used his tongue to try and remove some of Hermione's red hair from his mouth. "H'mione," he said, grunting.

"Oh!" she cried, pulling back and pouring him some water from the bedside table.

Ginny had grasped Harry's hand when Ron first spoke, and she now gave it a small squeeze before turning and running from the room.

Harry remained frozen on the spot, staring at Ron and resisting the urge to fling his arms around his mate the same way Hermione had done.

"Ron," he said hoarsely.

"Hey," Ron said, glancing around the room as if trying to make sense of his surroundings. "We're back at headquarters, yeah?"

Harry nodded, not trusting his voice. Hermione clung to Ron's hand, sniffing. She appeared unable to speak. Ron was confused by the reactions of the two of them.

"What day is it?" he asked.

The question was enough to push Hermione over the edge. She burst into tears, ranting incoherently in between great gulps of air. Ron's expression became alarmed.

"Is it after Christmas? Have I missed presents?" he asked, horrified.

"No," Harry replied, grinning - his amusement finally snapping him out of his daze. "You haven't missed presents. Of course, now I'm going to have to go shopping again to get you something. Thanks, mate."

Ron grinned sleepily. "We got out of Azkaban all right, then. What happened?" he asked.

"Azkaban? Ron...do you remember the Inferi? And getting cursed by Bellatrix Lestrange?" Harry asked, hoping Ron's memories were just confused.

"Oh! Right...We got Wormtail, right?" Ron asked, although he appeared rather uncertain.

The door burst open and Mrs. Weasley came rushing through, followed closely by Ginny, Bill, and Fleur.

"Oh, Ron," Mrs. Weasley said, throwing her arms around him. "When Ginny said you were awake, I felt as if all my Christmas prayers had been answered. Don't you ever do anything like that to me again!"

Ron's eyes widened as he was crushed within his mother's tearful embrace.

"It's good to see you back among the living, little brother," Bill said, patting Ron's arm affectionately. "I'll Floo Dad and the twins. They'll want to know."

"Oui, and I will zend owls to Charlie and Percy," Fleur said, smiling brilliantly at Ron before following Bill from the room.

Ron blinked dazedly before trying to extricate himself from Mrs. Weasley's arm. "Erg, Mum, gerroff me. Are you trying to put me back into unconsciousness?"

Mrs. Weasley promptly burst into tears.

"Nice one, Ron," Ginny said, scowling as she began patting her mother's back. Harry could see amusement glistening in her eyes however, and he knew she was thrilled to have Ron back, whether she'd admit it or not. She stood there, rubbing her mother's back while beaming at her brother. Harry stood and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"It's good to have you back, mate," Harry said. "Are you all right, Hermione?"

Hermione remained in her chair, watching all the Weasleys with wide, tear-filled eyes and still sniffing on occasion.

"I think we should all give Ron and Hermione an early Christmas present by clearing out of here and giving them some privacy," Ginny said, her eyes sparkling knowingly.

"I'll go make you some soup, Ron. You must be starving. Poppy should return soon, and I'm going to send her right up here to take a look at you," Mrs. Weasley said, bustling about the room as she shoed Harry and Ginny towards the door. A thoughtful expression crossed her face as she turned back to Ron and Hermione, who were staring silently into one another's eyes. "I'll be right downstairs...and I'd like you to leave this door open, just so I can hear if you call, mind."

Harry and Ginny tried to cover their sniggers as they hurried down the corridor and away from Mrs. Weasley. They burst into the library and collapsed on the couch, laughing madly. Suddenly, everything seemed much brighter in the world. Ron's recovery had brought some hope back when it had been desperately needed.

Chapter Eighteen

Christmas with the Malfoys

Harry stood on the landing at Grimmauld Place, enjoying the holiday activity buzzing around him. It was Christmas Eve, and for this night they had all decided to leave the war and their troubles on the other side of the door. The stair railing was wrapped in evergreen with ribbons of maroon and gold plaited into the pine. It looked festive and elegant as Harry ran his hand along it, breathing in the heady scent of Christmas.

Mrs. Weasley had been in high spirits ever since Ron had awoken. Madam Pomfrey had checked him over twice and declared him fit and healthy, although his short-term memory still had some lapses. She credited Neville's *Mimulus Mimbletonia* as having a lot to do with Ron's recovery. She said that she'd detected his awareness right below the surface on several occasions while checking his vital signs, and each time she'd placed the plant next to his pillow. Every time she'd done this, his stats had grown stronger.

Mrs. Weasley had made a huge tin of fudge and sent it over to Neville as a Christmas gift. Headquarters had been decorated as cheerfully as could be managed, and Mrs. Weasley hadn't left the kitchen for several days as she prepared a huge Christmas Eve feast. Harry had opened accounts with several of the domestic shops in Diagon Alley, so Mrs. Weasley was able to shop at will.

Harry felt torn between happiness about Ron's recovery and sadness that Remus wasn't with them to celebrate. He'd only seen Tonks once since Remus had left. She'd stopped at headquarters for an Order meeting, but she'd looked tired and sad, and her hair was still mousy brown. She and Harry had commiserated over the fact that neither of them had heard a word from Remus. They each tried to make the other feel better by saying it was a good sign, and it meant that Remus was working on infiltrating Greyback's den, but worry gnawed at both of them.

Hagrid had brought an enormous evergreen from the Hogwarts grounds, and they'd decorated it in the entrance hall. Several Order members had joined them for the Christmas Eve feast, and Harry noticed Mad-Eye Moody and Madam Pomfrey admiring the tree together. Harry smirked, suspecting that Moody's presence at headquarters had a lot to do with Madam Pomfrey's quick decision to stay while Ron recovered.

He could see Hagrid wearing an enormous apron full of frilly ruffles while helping Mrs. Weasley to carry platters of delectable-looking food into the formal dining room. Harry hadn't been aware that Grimmauld Place even had a formal dining room until Mrs. Weasley had told them they'd be eating in there since there was such a big crowd. The door to the dining room was located directly opposite the kitchen, but it had always been closed, and Harry had assumed it was a broom cupboard.

The doorbell rang, and Harry moved to answer it, wondering who it could be. As far as he knew, everyone who'd been invited had already arrived. Professor McGonagall had arrived with Hagrid, and Tonks had declined the invitation. The Weasleys were all staying in the house, and none of them ever used the bell, anyway. He cautiously opened the front door,

holding his wand tightly just in case, and found Percy Weasley standing there with an armload of gifts.

"Percy!" Harry said, surprised. He hadn't seen much of Percy since they'd returned from Albania, and the prodigal Weasley son still kept a stiff distance from the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry knew that Percy and Mr. Weasley spoke frequently at the Ministry, and Percy had kept his father informed of any new decrees that might affect them all. Mrs. Weasley spoke often of Percy, but none of his siblings appeared too eager to mend fences. Harry supposed it was up to Percy to take that first step on his own.

He helped the stray Weasley brother inside, relieving some of his burden.

"Hello, Harry," Percy said stiffly, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. "My father mentioned that everyone would be here tonight to celebrate the Yuletide, and that I was welcome to drop by."

"Of course you are," Harry said, sharing a grin with Ginny behind Percy's head. She'd just come out of the kitchen, and Harry could clearly read her amusement about Percy's formal tone.

"Hi, Percy," Ginny said, walking over to the two. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas," Percy replied, leaning down to peck Ginny on the cheek. "Ah, I see Mother over by the tree. If you'll excuse me."

Ginny nodded, and they watched him hurry toward Mrs. Weasley.

"Glad to see he loosens up for the holidays," Ginny said with a wry smirk. She was wearing a long black velvet skirt with a shimmering green blouse that that was lined with gold flecks. She'd pulled her hair back from her face with a shiny gold hairclip.

"You look very festive," Harry said, kissing her lightly.

"Thanks. It's my Christmas present from Hermione. She let me open it early so I could wear it tonight," Ginny said, spinning around. "Do you like it?"

Harry ran his hand along the sleeve, enjoying the soft texture of the material. "I do," he said, smiling. He leaned over and whispered so only she could hear, "but I'd like it even better on the floor."

Ginny's eyes widened in surprise and a pretty pink blush spread across her cheeks. Harry grinned cockily, feeling very bold. It wasn't often he could make her blush anymore, and he enjoyed being the one to tease her for a change.

"Do you?" she asked, raising her eyebrow.

Harry grinned wolfishly.

"Exactly how happy a Christmas do you think you're going to get, Mr. Potter?" she asked, walking away from him while sashaying her hips as she moved toward Ron and Hermione.

Harry gaped for a moment before shaking his head and following her. He loved their verbal sparring matches even if he didn't ever get the best of her. He didn't mind. Really.

Ron and Hermione sat by the fire, Ron propped comfortably in a big, overstuffed easy chair. He held a gift on his lap and was shaking the box enthusiastically. Hermione sat next to him with a fond smile playing on her lips. She appeared more relaxed than Harry had seen her in weeks, although he noticed that she kept irritably scratching her head.

"Come on, Hermione, just give me one little hint," Ron said, shaking the box again.

"No, Ron," Hermione said, giggling. "You'll just have to wait until morning."

"Oh, he'll never last, Hermione. He'll do what he did when we were kids and open up all the gifts once everyone goes to sleep and wrap them back up again before morning," Ginny said, laughing.

"You knew?" Ron asked, his face dropping.

"Of course I knew," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "We all did. You never wrapped them back up very well."

"Ron, you didn't," Hermione said, sounding scandalized while absently scratching the back of her head.

"Did Fred and George slip some itching powder in your wig, Hermione?" Ginny asked, watching the other girl fidget.

"No," Hermione said, exasperated. "It's my own hair starting to grow back, but it's driving me mad."

"You could always just shave it again," Ron said, tossing a piece of chocolate in his mouth.

Hermione scowled while Ginny whacked her brother on the arm. "Oh, that's real helpful, Ron. You know, the twins might actually be useful for something. They have tons of products that make you itch, and they test all their products on themselves. I bet they've got some powerful anti-itch remedies stocked by now."

"Oh, Ginny, that's a wonderful idea," Hermione said, craning her neck in search of Fred or George.

"Yeah, if you can trust anything they give you," Harry said warily.

All of their expressions sobered for a moment.

"Well, they did help me with that bruising remedy last year, and I have to do something. I'll just have to risk it," Hermione said, shrugging.

"That's my girl – live on the edge, Hermione," Ron said, grinning. His grin faded slowly as they all laughed, however. "Why did you need a bruising remedy?" he asked, clearly confused.

"A telescope of Fred and George's punched me," Hermione replied easily. She was the only one who didn't constantly get disconcerted by Ron's frequent memory lapses. She would gently explain and move on as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Why did it punch you?" Ron asked, struggling with the memory.

"Sirius!" Ron said suddenly.

Hermione glanced nervously at Harry. "That's right, Ron. We were worried about Harry."

Ron smiled, pleased, and Ginny squeezed Harry's hand

Harry looked up as a sudden silence fell across the rest of the room. Slowly descending the stairs was the group of Slytherins in residence at Grimmauld Place. Narcissa Malfoy led the way, her nose held loftily in the air. Harry noticed that even Draco, Pansy and Iris were dressed in robes, while Harry, Hermione and the younger Weasleys were all dressed in Muggle attire. Only the adults wore robes.

Narcissa had Transfigured her robes into black velvet ones with a silvery thread running through them. All of the Slytherins robes appeared rather tattered and frayed, despite the Transfiguration. The Malfoys and the Parkinsons had left their wealth and the vast majority of their belongings behind when they'd gone into hiding, and their few remaining clothing items were beginning to show the strain.

"Narcissa, Anastasia," Professor McGonagall said, walking towards them. She wore her traditional black robes, but Harry noticed a tartan scarf wrapped around her neck. "How nice of you to join us. Please come in and sit down. I believe Molly is about to serve dinner."

"Thank you, Minerva," Anastasia Parkinson said graciously. "I've always enjoyed socializing a bit at Christmastime."

"Yes. We've always hosted a grand affair at Malfoy Manor each year," Narcissa said, her eyes glazing slightly with nostalgia. "And we always made certain to visit little gatherings just like this one on Boxing Day. The Malfoy family has always been known for our charity."

"Yeah, that's always the first thing that comes to my mind when I hear the name Malfoy," Harry said under his breath, but still loud enough to be heard.

Narcissa turned toward Harry, her eyes glittering dangerously. "Mr. Potter, how nice you can keep your wit as sharp as ever. You'll need a sense of humor in the coming days."

"It's always helps to keep laughing," Harry said, smiling tightly. "With half your guest list either already imprisoned in Azkaban or soon

to be on their way there, it's not looking bright for your future Christmas party guest list, is it?"

"I wouldn't count on that. The Malfoys always land on their feet – most Slytherins do. Take Severus, for instance," Narcissa said, raising a finely-arched eyebrow. "He's very good at choosing which side suits his best interests. He's a natural survivor."

"Can I offer you a drink, Narcissa?" Professor McGonagall asked, moving to stand between Harry and Mrs. Malfoy. She shot Harry a stern look before taking the woman's arm and steering her away from the teens.

Harry's blood boiled. Natural survivor or not, there was no way he'd allow Snape to slip away the next time.

"I can't believe she has the nerve to insult you about charity when she's a guest in your home," Hermione said, seething.

"Harry," Ginny said, touching his arm, "it's Christmas. Ignore her for tonight. Enjoy the fact that you can lavishly spend the Black family fortune while the Malfoys have no access to their funds."

Harry looked at her, startled for a moment, before a slow grin crossed his face. She was right, and that fact must be eating Narcissa alive since she'd insisted the Black fortune rightfully belonged to her. Suddenly, the party seemed much more festive. Fred and George stood nearby, taking the mickey out of Percy from what he could see, while Bill and Fleur were tucked cozily in the corner. Mr. Weasley was happily fiddling with the wireless and making the volume of Christmas carols rise and fall dramatically at random intervals.

Harry was celebrating Christmas with his friends and family, and he'd be damned if he'd let Narcissa Malfoy spoil it.

Draco moved toward the fire, Pansy and Iris draped on each arm. Iris had coiffed her hair in an elaborate knot. It appeared as if Pansy had tried to imitate the style, but it hadn't quite worked, leaving stray tendrils to pop out in various locations.

"This is quaint," Draco drawled. "Is this usually how you celebrate Christmas, Potter? I suppose that family of yours doesn't have any desire to see you, not that they could enter an entirely magical home such as this one, anyway."

"His cousin could if he wanted," Ron snarled without thinking. A sharp glare from Harry caused him to snap his mouth shut, his eyes wide.

"You have a magical cousin?" Iris asked. "I thought your family was Muggle." She sounded bored, as if she was only looking for a topic of conversation. Pansy, however, had narrowed her eyes shrewdly, listening intently to the conversation. Draco, too, appeared keenly interested.

"They are," Harry replied tersely, noticing that Percy had also turned toward their conversation. "Since this is my home now, I suppose I'll have to find a way to allow Muggle access."

Harry was desperate to switch the subject the topic away from the Dursleys, and if he could infuriate Malfoy in the process, that was all the better.

"I've got loads of plans for this place after the war. I think there is a lot that could be done to improve Wizard/Muggle relations."

"Ooh, Harry, that's a great idea," Hermione said, sitting up straighter. Harry wasn't certain if she was playing along, or he'd really set her up on yet another campaign. "I have some ideas on what we could do."

"You must be joking," Malfoy said, his face growing pink. "This home has housed one of the most distinguished pureblood lines in all of Britain. My mother will never stand for it."

"Your mummy really doesn't get a vote," Harry said cheekily.

"You're a disgrace to your heritage," Pansy said, glaring at Ginny. "How can you lower yourself to his level?"

"The Weasleys have long been blood traitors, Pansy," Iris said in that same bored voice. "You know that."

"I'd take him and all the people in this room over you and your prejudiced, narrow-minded view any day, Pansy. You're a cow - always have been, always will be," Ginny said, lifting her nose in the air.

"A cow?" Pansy shrieked, causing several in the room to turn and stare at them. "How dare you?"

"Oh," Ginny said, smiling sweetly. "Happy Christmas."

Pansy reached for her wand, but apparently thought better of it, perhaps remembering Ginny's fondness for the Bat-Bogey Hex.

"Dinner is served," Mrs. Weasley said, sticking her head out of the kitchen. Harry expected this would be the longest Christmas dinner of his life.

Harry entered the dining room with Ginny on his arm, and they both took seats at the massive table. Candles glowed softly within glass candelabras ensconced on the walls. The centerpiece on the table was an elaborate floral arrangement amidst several more glowing candles. Harry paused a moment to happily take in all the decorations. They were beautiful and festive, and he enjoyed seeing Grimmauld Place looking so nice for once. This was what Christmas was supposed to be, and he thought Sirius would be proud.

He struggled against the dark thoughts that fought to turn to the idea that this would probably be his last Christmas. He was truly happy with the progress they'd made in finding the Horcruxes, but he couldn't help feeling that each one destroyed was yet another nail in his coffin.

He swallowed heavily, the creamy eggnog suddenly not tasting as sweet.

"Are you all right?" Ginny asked, leaning close to whisper in his ear. Her warm breath caused a shiver to run up his spine. He looked up to find her concerned brown eyes watching him intently.

"I'm all right," he replied, nodding resolutely. If it truly was to be his last Christmas, he'd better make it one worth remembering. "Happy Christmas," he said, leaning over and kissing Ginny on the cheek.

"I saw Fred and George enchanting some mistletoe earlier. If we're lucky we can find it after dinner," Ginny said, grinning.

Harry wagged his eyebrows. "Yeah, but with my luck they enchanted it to stay away from you."

Ginny giggled. "Nah, that's more the kind of prank they'd play on Ron."

"Who's playing a prank on Ron?" Fred asked, taking the seat across from Ginny.

"Yeah, and how come they didn't let us help?" asked George, seating himself across from Harry.

"And why are they bothering with Ron when Percy is here and makes a perfectly delightful target?" Fred asked, nodding toward Percy who was seated next to Mrs. Weasley.

"He only sat there because he thinks we wouldn't dare do anything while he's so close to Mum," George said, grumbling.

"Well, he's right, isn't he?" Ginny asked, raising an eyebrow at her brothers.

"Aww, come on now, Ginny. Do you really think we'd let a little thing like Mum's temper get in the way of our pranking abilities? This is serious business," Fred said, his eyes sparkling.

"A little thing?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"Okay, so maybe a formidable thing, but still, there are always ways around it. You know the secret to Mum is to never let her build up her rant, right? Well, there are a few other little tricks we've learned through the years," George replied, folding his arms behind his head.

"Tricks such as knowing the moment to strike with something really good is right when she's the most pleased with us," said Fred.

"Such as right after you gift her with a bright blue traveling cloak that she's been fancying at Gladrags for several months," George said with a wink.

"Uh oh," Ginny said, grinning. "So, Percy can expect it right after presents, I suppose?"

Harry leaned back in his chair, grinning while he watched the siblings interact. He was eager to see what they had in store for Percy come

present time. Harry wasn't certain he'd take Mrs. Weasley's wrath so cavalierly. She was downright scary when she was upset.

"You two certainly spend a lot of time on your little tricks, don't you?" Iris asked, entering the dining room behind Fred and George. She was dressed in red, and her eyes were sparkling. Harry thought she looked rather festive.

Fred started, taken aback, as if it had never occurred to him that someone might not find him truly funny.

"Did you get cornered by our mistletoe?" he asked, wagging his eyebrows. "Better not let your sister know if you were standing with Malfoy."

Iris rolled her eyes. "I prefer my men a little bit...older," she said, tossing her head and taking a seat with her family.

Fred watched her, mouth agape. Giggling, Ginny leaned across the table and pushed his chin upward to close it. Fred swatted her hand away.

"Better not let Mum see that," Ginny said, chuckling.

A tinkling of laughter from the other end of the table caught Harry's attention. He could see Pansy Parkinson giggling as Draco kept scooping up his green beans and transferring them to her plate.

Harry shook his head, feeling disconcerted seeing Draco act so...well, so normal. He didn't like it. His ears perked up as he overheard the conversation taking place at that end of the table.

"You work at the Ministry, don't you, young man?" Mrs. Parkinson asked, nodding at Percy. She was seated between her daughters, but Harry gave her credit for at least attempting to make conversation with the other dinner guests. As usual, Narcissa Malfoy was ignoring everyone but the Parkinsons and her son. Aside from Professor McGonagall, she rarely spoke to anyone else at headquarters.

"I do," Percy replied, sitting up straighter. His gaze briefly flickered to his father, and Harry knew he was perplexed about what the Slytherins were doing there. Obviously, Percy hadn't been included in everything going on at headquarters.

"How is Dolores managing? I know she had quite a traumatic time during her stint at Hogwarts. It's nice to see how well she's done for herself. She's always been ambitious," Mrs. Parkinson said, sipping her wine.

"Yes, some nasty business with the centaurs, wasn't it?" Mrs. Malfoy asked, her nose held high in the air. "Dreadful creatures."

"Yes, it was," Mrs. Parkinson said. "I always thought Hogwarts allowed more leniency about certain things than they ought. I'd wanted to send Iris and Pansy to my own Durmstrang, but their father didn't want them so far away."

"And a good thing that was, too," Iris said, her eyes filling as she dropped her fork on her plate, "or else we wouldn't have had the time with Daddy when he was here. Excuse me." Her voice choked up on her last few words. Covering her face with her hands, Iris stood and fled the table.

Fred watched her departure, frowning.

Mrs. Parkinson stood, nodding apologetically. "If you'll excuse me. She's having a difficult time without her father this year."

"Of course," Professor McGonagall said, nodding understandingly.

Pansy watched her mother and sister leave the room with a hardened expression upon her face. Draco leaned over and whispered something in her ear, but she shook her head emphatically.

Harry looked back at his own plate, his appetite suddenly gone. He certainly could understand how Iris felt. She'd only lost her father a few months ago, and she'd had loads of Christmas memories with him to haunt her. Harry only had the one here with Sirius and a few with Dumbledore at school, but somehow, both their losses seemed more painful at Christmastime.

The conversation became more subdued after Iris's abrupt departure, but gradually, the remaining guests recovered. Harry could hear Hagrid telling Bill and Fleur a story of his adventures with Madam Maxime. Fleur laughed heartily, obviously sharing Hagrid's fondness for her former Headmistress.

At the other end of the table, Percy continued to cast curious glances at Narcissa, Draco and Pansy, but he appeared unable to catch his father's eye.

Narcissa placed another scoop of vegetables on her plate, then daintily shifted them around without actually eating them. "Tell me, how is Dolores handling the pressure? She's always been one to have a plan. How does she propose Wizarding society deal with the Dark Lord?" she asked, addressing Percy.

Harry snorted angrily, but he held his silence, pushing his plate away.

Percy looked uncomfortable. He kept adjusting his glasses and tugging at the collar of his robes as he shifted in his chair.

"She's ah...she's attempting to come up with a compromise," he said, pushing his glasses up so tightly that Harry could see a red indent on his skin.

"What does that mean, exactly?" Mr. Weasley asked, looking up sharply.

"She hasn't done anything yet, but she's compiling a list of compromises the Ministry would find acceptable," Percy said, his voice dropping.

"Comprises to Voldemort?" Harry asked loudly, dropping his silverware to the table with a clang and causing several other conversations to stop as they looked toward him. To their credit, none at the table save the Slytherins cringed at the name. Harry watched as Moody's eyes narrowed with disgust as he folded his arms across his chest.

"She says his problem is with Muggles, and that he feels their influence is contaminating the wizarding population. She's hoping to come up with some guidelines that he'll find acceptable," Percy said, undoing the top button on his shirt collar.

"The only thing he'll find acceptable is his word being made the ultimate authority and being able to kill anyone who stands in his way. She can't be serious," Harry said incredulously.

"She's very serious," Percy said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Some of the procedures she's put in place are fantastic and a long time in coming. I think she's capable of getting some things in order that have really been let go, but this... I'm not certain this is a good idea. She's not listening to anyone who's arguing against it, however. She even accused the current Head of the MLE division of treason when he voiced his concerns."

"I'm not surprised that she's looking into ways to strike a compromise. She's always been partial to the purebloods, despite the fact she's only a half-blood herself," Narcissa said with a slight sneer.

"What kind of compromises does she feel are acceptable? Blocking Muggleborns from attending Hogwarts when it reopens or getting jobs at the Ministry?" Hermione asked, scowling. "More oppression and elitist attitudes, no doubt. It appears the Wizarding world can't get enough of them."

Percy winced. "I haven't been privy to her list," he said stiffly.

"I don't believe this," Hermione said, fuming. "She's deemed herself some kind of modern day Neville Chamberlain."

The vast majority of witches and wizards at the table stared at Hermione blankly, but Harry saw Professor McGonagall nodding, a pleased expression crossing her stern features.

"Who?" Pansy asked scornfully, jabbing her mashed potatoes with her fork.

Hermione waved her hand in the air. "He was a Muggle Prime Minister who tried to peacefully negotiate with a madman. It didn't work then, and it won't work now."

"A Muggle, you say?" asked Mr. Weasley eagerly.

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said, nodding. "Miss Granger is correct. The Muggle to whom she's referring was called Adolph Hitler, I believe. Prime Minister Chamberlain tried to forge a peace treaty, but it ended up in tragedy with the loss of many lives."

"Fascinating," Mr. Weasley replied.

"Oh, really now, Arthur. We're all aware of your odd obsession with Muggles, but this really has nothing to do with them," Narcissa said disdainfully.

"There is nothing odd about my husband's fondness for Muggles," Mrs. Weasley said, her face growing alarmingly red. "It's called compassion. Maybe you ought to try it sometime."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed. "Why should I have compassion for the Muggles? They mean nothing to me. Let them handle their own business."

"It's that kind of attitude that causes all the problems," Hermione insisted. "Chaimberlain couldn't negotiate a compromise because Hitler was uncompromising in his hatred."

"What's madness is your assumption that Wizarding matters have any similarity to Muggle politics," Narcissa sniffed.

"I see tremendous similarities all the time," Hermione said, firing up. "In fact, Hitler bore a striking resemblance to another Dark Wizard who was terrorizing the Wizarding world at the same time. I'm certain you remember the story of Grindelwald."

"Grindelwald was a pureblood," Narcissa snapped

"Or so he said," Harry remarked lazily. "Voldemort likes to pretend he's a pureblood, as well, but we all know he's not."

"Don't speak such blasphemy," Narcissa said, clutching her chest.

"It's the truth; he's a half-blood. His mum was a witch, but his dad was a Muggle who abandoned him before he was born," Harry replied, noticing that several Weasleys looked up in surprise by that statement.

"How do you know that, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked. "Did Dumbledore tell you?"

"Well, we talked about it, but it was Voldemort himself who told me. He went on and on about it both that night in the graveyard and when we were in the Chamber. His real name is Tom Riddle. I am Lord Voldemort is an anagram for Tom Marvolo Riddle. That's his full name," Harry said, shrugging.

"He won't like you spreading that story around," Draco drawled.

"Since when have I cared what he likes?" Harry asked.

Using her wand, Mrs. Weasley made all the empty dishes float into the air and begin hovering in a line towards the sink, which begun washing them with assembly-line precision. Several platters of pudding suddenly appeared on the table, with a large treacle tart placed directly in front of Harry. Harry could tell that she was upset by the jerky movements of her wand, and he felt bad for bringing talk of war to her Christmas dinner. He knew she'd worked so hard on it.

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, beaming at the treacle tart.

"Don't you eat all of that in one sitting, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. "Errol was supposed to have delivered me another batch of vanilla extract, but he never arrived, so I could only make the one. Poor old thing, probably lying exhausted somewhere."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Is she trying to make up for your lack of mothering when you actually were six?" he asked, causing Pansy to snigger loudly.

"It's Christmas, Malfoy. Certainly even you have heard of doing something nice for someone you care about just because you can," Harry said, scooping up a large piece of the treacle tart.

"I would have loved to have done something nice for my mother or Pansy this Christmas, Potter, but since I'm stuck here with you and cut off from all my family's funds, it'll be a rather meager Christmas for us all this year," Draco said, his lip curled.

"There are worse things than no presents," Harry said quietly.

He noticed Ginny look up, her piercing gaze attempting to penetrate his very soul. He quickly looked away.

"Easy for you to say. You're spending the Black family fortune like water through a sieve," Malfoy spat.

"And I notice you're enjoying some of that generosity, as well, Malfoy," Ginny said, nodding toward his plate that was overflowing with different puddings. "You seem quick to scoff at Harry's spending, but I don't notice you feeling strongly enough to make a point and go hungry."

"Of course not," Draco said, sneering. "Why should I go hungry when there's perfectly good food here? Besides, rightfully it should all belong to me anyway."

"Oh, we're back on this again, are we?" Ron asked, his mouth full of bread pudding.

"Shut it, Weasel. You've got no right to say anything about me accepting Potter's charity since you've been living off it for years," Malfoy said.

"And giving it in return," Harry shot back, "seeing that it was his mum who made the treacle tart that started all this in the first place. It's called friendship, Malfoy. You ought to try it sometime. A few real mates might do you some good."

"I've got mates," Draco said, puffing out his chest. "More than I need and plenty more than you've got."

"Oh, ho, now that's mature," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

"Ignore them, Draco," Pansy said, cooing. "Let's retire upstairs and have our own Christmas Eve celebration. We don't need the likes of them."

"Oh, that just spoiled my appetite," Ron said, pushing away his half-eaten bowl of bread pudding.

"Why don't we all move into the drawing room," Mr. Weasley said, rising. "There's a trio of wizards giving a performance of Christmas carols on the wireless. We can listen whilst we sip our cordials."

Harry rose and followed the others into the drawing room, noticing Mrs. Malfoy had latched onto Draco's arm and steered him into the room with her, despite Pansy's irritated scowl. He and Ginny had hung back slightly, and Ginny stopped him at the dining room door beneath a sprig of Fred and George's roaming mistletoe.

"I was hoping we'd find one of those," Ginny said, grinning impishly.

"Hmm," Harry said. "This is turning into a Happy Christmas after all."

Before he could kiss her, however, Ginny placed her hands on his chest, a perplexed frown crossing her pretty face.

"Harry, what were you thinking when you said there were worse things than no presents?" she asked.

Harry shrugged, not certain where she was headed and really wanting to get back to the kissing.

"Just that I never had presents for Christmas before coming to Hogwarts, and it never really mattered all that much. I learned at a fairly young age not to expect them. What was worse was knowing there was no one to give them. D'you know what I mean?" he asked, feeling that old, familiar melancholy beginning to seep back into his thoughts.

"I think I do," Ginny said sadly, running her fingers through his hair.

"I mean, here, Malfoy might not have access to all his money, but his mum is here, and Pansy and her family, too. He's not alone," Harry said, trying to put his thoughts into words.

Ginny watched him quietly, her fingers continuing to play with his hair. It was soothing; her presence always made him feel better.

"That mistletoe hasn't run away yet, but we'd best make use of it before it finds another target," Ginny said, looking up at the ceiling.

Harry leaned in again and wrapped Ginny in his arms. He'd no sooner begun to deepen the kiss when the mistletoe began bellowing in a high-pitched shriek.

"Snogging! There's snogging going on here! This is a snogging alert, all persons engaged in snogging please keep your lips to yourself."

Harry's face turned scarlet as laughter erupted from the drawing room.

"Get on in here, Harry and Ginny," Fred shouted.

"We all know what you're doing down there, anyway," George said.

"One of these days, I'm going to strangle those two," Harry muttered, leaning his forehead against Ginny's.

"One of these days," Ginny said, sighing, "I'm going to help you do it. I think we could take them if we do it together."

Harry grinned against her forehead. "It's a plan, then."

"Oh, Harrikins, Gin Gin," George shouted, poking his head out the drawing room door. "We're all waiting."

"Harry, you're coloring is perfect for this festive occasion. However did you manage that shade? We'll have to bottle it and sell it for the holidays," Fred said, taking the mickey out of Harry.

"Eau de Mortification," George said.

"Does Ginny always have this effect on you, mate? Perhaps you should look into it. See a Healer, maybe. Does that color affect your entire body?" Fred asked, wagging his eyebrows.

Abashed, Harry kept his eyes fixed firmly on his feet, preferring to face Voldemort than look at either Mr. or Mrs. Weasley at that moment.

"Leave him alone," Ginny snapped, cuffing each of her brother's on the side of the head. She lowered her voice so only Fred, George, and Harry could hear her. "Or I'll give you a description of the exact effects on his body in minute detail."

"Oi, Ginny. That's not funny," George said, scowling.

"What's happened to you, squirt? You've lost your sense of humor," Fred said, aiming a withering look in Harry's direction.

Ginny took Harry's hand and led him away from the far less-exuberant twins. "One of these days," Harry said, "you're going to push them too far and get me beat up by the whole lot of your brothers. And I haven't even really done anything yet."

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," Ginny said, batting her lashes.

"My hero," Harry muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Besides, by then maybe you really will have done something worthy of getting beaten up over," she said, giggling as he choked on his drink.

Once again, Harry thought how much he enjoyed this verbal bantering with her; she could always make him smile. He briefly felt bad that he was enjoying himself while Remus was out there on his own somewhere, but he forced the guilt away. More than anyone, Remus would want Harry to enjoy his holiday and not spend it agonizing over things he couldn't control. He owed it to Remus to make the most of it.

Mr. Weasley turned on the wireless, and the conversations droned in the room as they all enjoyed the holiday cheer.

Ginny curled up next to Harry and pillowed her head on his shoulder as they listened to the music. Harry traced his hand along the gold threads of her blouse. Partially hidden by the immense Christmas tree, they had a small measure of privacy but could still hear the various conversations taking place within the room.

"Do you want your present early?" he asked quietly so that only she could hear.

Ginny sat up quickly, looking him up and down. "Do you have it with you?"

"Maybe," Harry replied, grinning. "You'll have to search for it."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Is that so? You're feeling rather cheeky tonight, aren't you, Mr. Potter? Do you think I won't just because the rest of my family is so close?" Ginny asked.

Harry cocked his eyebrow. "Will you?"

When Ginny made a move to search his pockets, Harry laughed and pulled out the small gold box. "All right, all right. You win. You're worse with presents than Ron," he said.

Ginny grabbed the box and shook it. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are," he replied, laughing as he watched her tear open the paper.

She crumpled the wrapping and tossed it at him. He ducked out of the way, and watched her closely as she unwrapped her gift, holding his breath slightly. She gasped as she opened the small velvet box. It contained a silver chain holding a circular pendant. Inside the circle rested an emerald-cut clear blue stone, appearing as if it was suspended there on its own.

"Harry," Ginny said, breathing heavily. "It's fantastic."

"Do you like it?" he asked, feeling unreasonably nervous. He'd never picked out jewelry for anyone before.

"I love it," Ginny said, sounding awestruck. "I've never owned anything so beautiful. Can you put it on me?" She sat forward and lifted her hair off her neck.

Harry clasped it for her, gently pulling some strands of her hair out of the way and kissing her neck before releasing her.

"The stone is an Aquamarine. I think the blue looks like the sea. According to Merpeople legend, it's a lucky stone that represents a love so big, it fills the entire ocean," he said, feeling his face heat as he recited the words the clerk at the jewelry store in Diagon Alley had told him. "I have the matching stone, and it's supposed to help me find you if we're separated."

Harry liked that part of the story best. He didn't really believe the folklore, but he liked the stone and thought it couldn't hurt to have a way to find her if he ever needed it.

"It's lovely, Harry," Ginny said, looking down to admire the stone. "Where is your stone?"

"It's in my pocket," Harry said. "I'll have to find a place to keep it safe."

Ginny jumped up and sprinted over to the tree. She dug underneath it for a few moments before returning to him with a thin, straight box. She handed it to Harry, biting her lip.

"Open this," she said.

Harry took the gift and began tearing at the paper at one end. Growing impatient, Ginny reached in and helped him to tear the paper away.

"Do you want to do this?" Harry asked, amused.

"You take so long to unwrap your gifts," Ginny said, pulling off the last of the wrapping.

Harry lifted the box to reveal a braided rope bracelet. Its colors were red and gold and it was plaited several times over making an intricate pattern.

"Did you make this?" Harry asked, admiring the handiwork.

"Uh, huh," Ginny said, still chewing on her lip. "I wasn't certain if you'd wear something like it."

"This must have taken you a long time," Harry said, running his fingers over the details.

"I've been working on it for awhile," Ginny said, nodding. "Here, look, the threads pull apart and you can keep your stone inside. That way, no one will know it's there, but you'll still feel its presence."

Harry removed his Aquamarine stone and tucked it inside the bracelet. Holding his wrist out to Ginny, he allowed her to secure it for him.

"Thank you, Ginny. Happy Christmas," he said, leaning over to kiss her.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," Ginny said, smiling happily. She played with necklace, admiring the way it reflected the lights from the tree.

"Was this terribly expensive?" she asked, in a small hesitant voice.

"It really wasn't," Harry said, shaking his head. He wasn't certain if Ginny would be as sensitive as Ron about Harry's money. "They called it a semi-precious stone. Besides, I wanted to give it to you, Ginny. It took me a long time to find it."

She continued to look at it. "I'm glad you took the time. That makes it mean even more. I'm never going to take it off, and you keep yours on, as well. Okay?"

"Whatever you say," he said, not really listening. He tugged her closer to share another kiss, wishing the rest of the family wasn't so near.

She curled back up beneath his arm, and Harry could swear she was almost purring. He enjoyed the time with her, snuggled together while they listened to the music and watched the twinkling of the Christmas lights, laughing at some of the others on occasion.

All too soon, midnight approached, and Percy said he had to go.

"Oh, must you leave?" Mrs. Weasley asked, disappointed. "It's so dangerous to go out at night. Why don't you just stay here until morning?"

"Actually, I have to work tomorrow," Percy replied. "The Ministry is keeping a skeletal staff on duty just in case. Besides, I have a waiver for the curfew."

Percy's words had a sobering effect on everyone, reminding them all that the war was closer than anyone would like. The room was silent for a moment before Fred began singing along with the wireless to the tune of Silent Night.

George joined him, their voices surprisingly good – soulful and sad, yet full of hope at the same time, somehow. One by one, all the others in the room joined in, clasping hands and staying together through the haunting melody.

Harry's chest filled with emotion as he held both Ginny's and Hermione's hands and sang carols with this rag tag group he called family. His gaze swept by Ron, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and everyone else in this room, and he knew that no matter what happened in the coming year, if he found the last Horcrux or not, if he lived or died, this same group of people would be here next year, still fighting, still struggling to go on. That, more than anything, gave him a renewed determination to move forward. Gatherings like this one must be allowed to continue. For the first time, Harry began to understand the power that Dumbledore had told him was his greatest strength. This feeling inside him was more intense than anything he'd ever experienced – more intense even than the Cruciatus – and it was something Voldemort had never known.

Chapter Nineteen

Tightening of the Noose

Two days after Christmas, Harry informed the Order that he, Ron, Hermione and Ginny would be leaving for several days. As expected, no one was particularly pleased. They all wanted to know where the young people were going, and what they were planning to do. Harry could tell that Mrs. Weasley wanted to put them all in full Body-Binds and lock them in the attic, but to her credit, she restrained herself – if only just.

As promised, Harry gave the other half of the mirror that Remus had charmed to Mr. Weasley. He'd struggled with anxiety over having to give it to someone else. He'd always imagined it would be Remus with whom he'd keep in contact, but that was not to be. He'd considered giving it to Mrs. Weasley but suspected the temptation to check on them and ensure they were eating would be too much for her. He felt Mr. Weasley was the better option.

They departed in the morning, resolutely steeling themselves against Mrs. Weasley's tear-stained face. Ron even hugged her twice as they said their goodbyes.

Hermione had done some research and found a small wizarding section in Canterbury around Rowena Ravenclaw's ancestral home. She'd booked them a room in a local inn rather than having to pitch the tent in the snow, and they Apparated directly there.

Entering the establishment, they found a dimly lit pub similar to the Leaky Cauldron. This pub, however, appeared to cater to a more family-oriented clientele as there were several mothers chasing young children around a buffet breakfast. The tables were covered with paper tablecloths, and each held a container filled with child-sized colored quills.

Several of the patrons looked up as the teens entered, but the foursome kept their heads down as Hermione went to collect their room key. Despite her red wig, they'd reckoned she was the least recognizable of the four, so she'd be the one to have all contact with the innkeeper. Harry really didn't want to be spotted immediately and have a crowd of reporters – or worse, Death Eaters – on his tail before he even began to search.

"I've got it," Hermione said under her breath, jerking her head towards the narrow wooden stairway beside the bar.

The others followed her upstairs where she stopped at room number three. She opened the door to find a comfortable-looking room with two full-sized beds and a long, dusty dresser. The blankets on the bed appeared clean, but rather old and faded.

"Well, it's not much, but it'll do," Hermione said, throwing her rucksack on one of the beds.

They'd only got the one room because they thought they'd be safer sticking together. Despite the fact they'd all shared a room when they'd used the tent over the summer, Harry felt apprehensive staring at the two beds. A burning warmth crept from his neck into his face, and he ducked his head so the others wouldn't notice.

He and Ginny hadn't done much more than some heavy petting – and he didn't think Ron and Hermione had done more than that, either – but they'd been under constant supervision from the entire Weasley family. Ginny had way too many brothers, as far as Harry was concerned, and he'd always kept a wary eye on the door while he and Ginny were otherwise engaged. The prospect of Mrs. Weasley's wrath had kept them all in line.

Still, he certainly didn't plan on doing anything with Ron in the same room, but the knowledge that the opportunity was there caused his stomach to flutter. He stole a quick glance at Ron and noticed the perplexed frown on his mate's face. Obviously, Ron's train of thought had gone down the same track as Harry's.

The girls, however, didn't appear at all concerned. Hermione continued to remove items from her rucksack, while Ginny had jumped on the bed Hermione was using and proceeded to test which pillow she liked better.

"So...you're both going to sleep there?" Ron asked, rubbing the back of his very red neck.

Hermione and Ginny looked up at him, blinking uncomprehendingly.

"Er...would you prefer this bed, Ron?" Ginny asked, her eyes suddenly sparkling. "Or would you just prefer my bed partner?"

"What? Of course not! Er...I mean...Hermione," Ron whined, staring at Hermione. "You know what I meant."

Her back ramrod straight, Hermione said, sniffing, "No, Ron, I don't know what you mean. Perhaps you should explain yourself."

Harry struggled not to laugh as he sat down on the other bed and looked at Ron with the most innocent expression he could muster.

"Shut it, Harry," Ron said, glaring.

"I didn't say anything," Harry yelped. Obviously his expression wasn't innocent enough.

"Since you've apparently got issues with me," Hermione said waspishly. "You and Harry can share that bed, while Ginny and I take this one."

"I'm not sleeping with Harry," Ron said, spluttering. If possible, his ears had grown redder.

"Would you prefer I sleep with Harry then?" Hermione asked, her eyes narrowing.

Harry could barely control his grin. He bit the inside of his cheeks to keep a straight face.

"I'm used to sleeping in cramped quarters, so I don't mind. Why don't both Ginny and Hermione share with me, and Ron can have the other bed all to himself," he said, barely containing his glee over the expression on Ron's face.

"Okay," Ginny said happily, leaping from her bed to Harry's and snuggling down next to him. She twisted her new necklace in her fingers as she continued to wind up her brother. "Ron always did have problems sharing."

"I don't have problems sharing," Ron said indignantly. "And you're not sleeping with Harry...and neither is Hermione."

"There are two beds, and four of us, Ron. You make the choice. You have to sleep with one of us, who's it going to be?" Hermione asked, her hands on her hips. Harry could hear the challenge in her voice and was very glad he wasn't in his friend's shoes at the moment. Of course, to Harry the answer seemed painfully obvious.

Apparently, Ron felt the same way. He looked between Hermione's cross face and Harry and Ginny sitting on the bed together, failing miserably at hiding their grins.

"Fine," Ron said, throwing his hands in the air and glaring at Harry and Ginny. "You two had better behave yourselves. I'm sleeping on this side of the bed to keep my eye on you. Believe me, Harry, if you try anything with my baby sister, I'll chuck you out the window."

"What I choose to do or not to do is no one's business but mine and Harry's, Ron Weasley," Ginny said, rising to her knees on the bed and glaring daggers at her brother. She reminded Harry of an angry sprite – beautiful and fiery, but dangerous to the touch.

"Not with me sleeping next to you, it isn't," Ron said, furiously.

"So you're sharing with me, then?" Hermione asked, her arms still folded across her chest.

Ron spun around to face her, perhaps detecting the frigid tone in her voice. "Of course I am. I'm not sleeping with Harry or my sister."

Harry shut his eyes, cringing. Ron never was very good at picking up subtle body signals.

"Oh, I see. So, I get you by default? Lucky me," Hermione said, her eyes suddenly bright.

"Don't be daft," Ron said. "If it were my choice, I'd always choose to sleep with you. I'd just rather they weren't in the room. You're always my choice, Hermione."

Hermione's face softened as her eyes glowed warmly at Ron. Sniffing slightly, she waved a hand in front of her face as if she was warm.

"All right, now that the sleeping arrangements are settled, let's get to work. We'll have to split up to cover as much ground as possible."

Ron stared at her incredulously. "The entire Wizarding section only covers about two streets. How much information could there possibly be?" he asked.

"It is Ravenclaw's hometown," Ginny said. "I imagine there's some kind of museum, and the rest of the village probably contains lots of references to everything about her life."

"Exactly," Hermione said. "The same way Liverpool is devoted to the Beatles."

Ron stared at her blankly. "They're devoted to bugs?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, huffing. "How you can be completely unaware of anything to do with Muggle history is beyond me."

"Yeah? Well, Muggles are completely unaware of stuff I know, too," Ron said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Yes, but that's only because they don't know wizards exist," Hermione snapped waspishly. "We don't have time to stand around arguing all morning. We need to get moving."

"What's the rush, anyway?" Ron asked, and Harry suspected he was simply being obstinate. He and Ginny sat on their bed watching their friends row with weary expressions.

"Everyone in the pub has given us at least a curious stare. It won't take long before someone recognizes Harry," Hermione said, jabbing her finger in Harry's direction.

Harry suddenly sat up straight, alarmed. "You're right. I wouldn't be surprised if Voldemort has an informant here somewhere, anyway. He has no way of knowing how much Dumbledore knew about the Horcruxes, so it stands to reason he's watching all of the possibilities."

"You're right; we'll have to be wary. Constant vigilance," Ginny said, smiling weakly.

"Let's search until we're spotted, then we'll make another public stop in Diagon Alley just in case anyone is tracking our movements. Your dad can help us alert the press there," Harry said, nodding at Ginny.

"You and Ron find out where the museum is," Hermione said bossily. "Ginny and I will do some deeper digging."

Harry and Ron spent the entire day in the Rowena Ravenclaw Museum. It hadn't been difficult to find, and Harry suspected the entire village had been built around it. Still, Harry didn't feel it had been a productive day. Perhaps because he really didn't know much about any of the Hogwarts Founders, he felt as if he was searching for a needle in a haystack.

He didn't notice any one particular item that was always with her in any of the portraits he'd seen, and none of the texts mentioned anything of great significance that might have been used as a Horcrux.

Running his hands through his very untidy hair – he'd been tugging at it all day – he slammed the book shut. This was a waste of time. It didn't have to be anything significant, it just had to belong in Ravenclaw. He doubted he'd ever find any written mention of Hufflepuff's cup, either, but that hadn't stopped Voldemort from using it as a Horcrux.

"Any luck?" Ron asked, his eyes red and bleary.

"This is hopeless – it could be anything," Harry said, feeling discouraged.

"Even if we find what we think it might be, it still doesn't tell us anything about where he's hidden it," Ron said, moaning. "We've been at it all day, and it doesn't help that I keep forgetting what I'm looking for in the first place. I'm starving."

Feeling his own stomach rumble, Harry decided to call it a day. Ron's memory was continuing to improve, but there were still lapses, and Harry didn't want to push it. "Come on. Let's go back to the inn and order some food. Maybe the girls had better luck."

Harry followed Ron through the door, but just as they stepped outside, he grabbed Ron's arm and pulled him back into a nearby alley.

"What the-" Ron started to complain, but Harry slapped his hand over Ron's mouth and dragged him behind a group of rubbish bins.

"Shh," Harry whispered, nodding his head in the direction of the street.

He and Ron watched as an enormous blonde wizard with a hardened face slowly strolled into sight. He moved carefully, his small eyes roving and peering into storefronts and around corners, as if he was looking for something.

"Who's that?" Ron asked, squinting his eyes. "I've seen him somewhere."

Harry nodded, motioning for Ron to keep his voice down. "He was with Malfoy the night...on the Astronomy tower," Harry replied, keeping his eyes fixed on the blonde Death Eater.

The brutal-faced man suddenly turned towards the open alleyway, as if he knew he was being watched.

Harry's blood chilled and his body tensed. He clutched Ron's shoulder tightly, prepared to fling him out of the way of any curses. He held his breath, hearing Ron's ragged breathing beside him. He worried that it sounded so loud in the darkening alley that the Death Eater was certain to hear him. Dusk was spreading over the village, at least offering Ron and Harry more shadows in which to hide. If the man chose to walk into the alley, however, there was no way he could miss them. Harry cursed himself for leaving his Invisibility Cloak back at the inn.

The huge Death Eater drew his wand. "Lumos," he muttered, causing the tip to illuminate. "Who's there? Show yourself or face the wrath of the Dark Lord."

Ron's eyes widened as the man began walking down the alley, kicking at stray bins along the way.

Harry clutched his wand, knowing there was no way out. He wished he knew where Ginny and Hermione were before he called so much attention to them. Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. He'd never been the best at wordless spells, but it was certainly worth a go, and he always performed better under pressure.

Covering both Ron and himself with his wand, Harry cast a Disillusionment Charm just as the blonde Death Eater reached their hiding spot. He felt a cold trickle down his back alerting him that he'd been successful. He waited a few more moments, letting the man continue a bit further into the alley, before grabbing Ron's unseen arm and tugging him out of the alley.

Once they reached the inn, Harry wordlessly removed the spell.

"Harry, that was brilliant. Where'd you learn to do that? I thought you were still struggling with wordless magic," Ron said. "Feels a bit strange though, doesn't it?"

Harry shrugged. "Practice. Let's get upstairs and see if the girls are there. I hope they didn't run into any trouble."

Both girls were already in the room, however, and from their anxious, angry expressions, Harry reckoned they'd been waiting for a while.

"Where have you been?" Ginny asked, stomping her foot in a remarkable impression of her mother.

"We've been worried sick," Hermione said, placing her hands on her hips. Harry thought she did a pretty good job of channeling Mrs. Weasley, too. "From now on, we have to set up times to check in with each other so we know when to worry."

"Yeah, timing our worry. That should be right high on the priority list," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

Harry cringed, knowing Ron was in trouble. Sometimes his friend just didn't know when to hold his tongue.

Hermione's face turned scarlet. "It is a high priority since we had no idea if you were in trouble or not, or if we should have gone for help. How would you like it if it was Ginny and me who'd been missing?"

"We would have just gone looking for you," Ron said, incredulously.

"All right, all right," Ginny said, moving in between the two of them. "Enough with the 'he said, she said.' You two can row later. I want to know what happened."

"We had a narrow escape from a Death Eater near the museum. I don't think he knew it was us, but he definitely noticed someone," Harry said. "The area is obviously being watched."

"Which is a good sign, right? If Voldemort is worried you'll find something here, maybe it is something of Ravenclaw's we're seeking," Hermione said, rubbing her chin.

"Maybe," Harry replied, shrugging. "I don't see how we're making any progress here, though. Ron and I spent all day in the museum, and we've got nothing."

"I don't think so," Hermione said.

"Why? Did you find something?" Ron asked, still looking rather disgruntled.

"Nothing specific, but in every portrait or description that we found, she's always wearing some kind of jewelry. Jewelry can be easily passed down and is strong enough to survive through the years. If there are Ravenclaw relics still around, I'd bet they're pieces of jewelry," Hermione said,

Harry scratched his head. That made sense, but it really didn't help them all that much. "I still think we're better off searching the places connected to Voldemort that Dumbledore showed me. Once we figure out the place, then we can watch for any kind of jewelry."

"Give me one more day here, Harry," Hermione said. "There are a few more shops I'd like to go to, and if we can narrow down the piece at all, it would certainly help."

"All right," Harry said, nodding. "I'm going to contact Mr. Weasley and ask him to drop a hint to the press that I'll be in Diagon Alley in two days. That way, even if the Death Eaters suspect that I'm here, it'll throw them off."

Harry opened his rucksack and dug out the mirror. After breathing on it heavily enough to create a fog, he said, "Mr. Weasley."

Nothing happened for several moments, and Harry was about to try again when Mr. Weasley's concerned face appeared.

"Harry? Are you all right?" he asked.

"We're fine, Mr. Weasley. We're all fine," Harry replied.

"Hi, Dad," Ginny said, peering over Harry's shoulder.

Mr. Weasley's face relaxed, his usual cheerfulness returning. "Glad to hear it. Hello, Ginny. Your mother will be so relieved. What can I do for you?"

"We're going to be in Diagon Alley the day after tomorrow. D'you think you could let one of your press contacts know?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley's face clouded. "Ah, I'll see what I can do, Harry."

"What's wrong, Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked, watching the older man shift uncomfortably.

"Several more reporters who've been critical of the Ministry and the idea of any kind of truce with You-Know-Who have gone missing. Most of those who've disappeared have been sympathetic to the Order," Mr. Weasley said, sighing heavily.

"Missing? D'you think Voldemort has had something to do with it?" Harry asked, his shoulders stiffening.

"No. I don't think so. There hasn't been a Dark Mark spotted over any of their homes, and the Death Eaters have been meticulous about using them all across Britain," Mr. Weasley replied.

"That could be intentional though," Hermione said, peering over Harry's other shoulder so she could see Mr. Weasley's reflection. "I mean, they could purposely not use it if they were doing something they wanted to keep quiet, right?"

"I suppose, but I don't think so," Mr. Weasley said, scratching his head. "There have been several Ministry officials who've opposed Umbridge who have also gone missing. She's tightening her grip on power and accusing anyone who disagrees with her of treason."

"The old bat," Ron said, scowling.

"Be careful of her, Dad," Ginny said, her brow knitting. "She's sadistic – just look at what she did to Harry's hand."

"I'm aware of her methods, pumpkin. Don't worry about me; you watch out for yourselves. I'm afraid of what's going to happen the next time there's trouble, and I'd prefer it if you four weren't anywhere in the vicinity," Mr. Weasley said sternly.

"Why, what else has happened?" Harry asked.

"There was another new Decree issued today detailing the rules Aurors must follow for engagement with Death Eaters. Umbridge is trying so hard to appease You-Know-Who that she's created so much red tape it's nearly impossible for the Aurors to act in a crisis. The first attack under these orders will be devastating," Mr. Weasley replied, his mouth set in a grim line.

"Great," Harry muttered under his breath. "All right, Mr. Weasley. Just see what you can do about alerting someone in the press that I'll be in Diagon Alley in two days."

"Will do, Harry. Take care of yourselves," Mr. Weasley said before his image faded.

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Harry awoke on the morning of their planned trip to Diagon Alley feeling so warm and peaceful that he didn't want to rise. He was spooned around Ginny and stray wisps of her hair were tickling his nose. They had been extremely chaste as they went to bed each night they'd been in the inn. Ron's presence in the room cooled Harry's ardor considerably. Still, sometime during each night his instincts would take over, and he'd awake to find himself wrapped in Ginny's embrace. It was something he could easily get used to, and he worried about it.

The closer he got to finding the last hidden Horcrux, the closer Harry got to having to make some painful decisions. He sometimes wondered if he was subconsciously putting off finding information on Ravenclaw. He knew he had to do it, but the idea terrified him. This little glimpse of what a life with Ginny could be like – waking up each morning wrapped in her arms – was both painful and sweet. Life had never been

exactly easy on him, but somehow, the idea of having to give up this newfound contentment was more than he could bear.

As if sensing his inner turmoil, Ginny shifted in her sleep, rolling over and snuggling up to him, her nose buried in his chest. Harry wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close and allowing his tension to abate. Professor Dumbledore had told him that his greatest strength was love. Harry didn't really understand how that would help him defeat Voldemort, but he did know that she made him feel better than he ever had. Perhaps this feeling she gave him inside – this intense desire to live – was what would aid him in the end.

He knew Voldemort feared death. He wanted to live simply because he dreaded the alternative, not because life was offering him something rewarding. Harry felt a brief flicker of sympathy for Tom Riddle, never having experienced the extraordinary fullness someone like Ginny could have made him feel.

Still, even if that would help Harry defeat Voldemort in the end, it didn't solve the problem of the piece of Voldemort's soul that still resided inside him. He knew Hermione was right – the objects containing Voldemort's soul could be left intact after destroying the Horcrux. He still had all the artifacts to prove it, except the locket. It had sunk to the bottom of the lake with the Inferi whose neck it had been wrapped around. Still, Harry had seen it as the Inferi slipped beneath the water and knew it had remained whole.

So, the artifacts had all survived, battered and worn, but he couldn't see a way to get a Horcrux out of him without taking his own life. He tugged at the rope bracelet he wore around his wrist. The aquamarine stone tucked inside was warm and comforting against his skin.

Harry sighed, the image of the Veil that had taken Sirius from him flickering in his mind. He wondered if it had been painless. The idea of using the Veil haunted his thoughts, but he was held back by the idea of leaving Ron, Hermione, and particularly Ginny behind with the same vivid nightmares he had of losing Sirius.

He glanced over at Ron and Hermione, both sleeping soundly in the other bed. Ron was sprawled with his arms open wide, taking up much more than his half of the bed. Hermione, wearing the blue kerchief she still used at night when she removed her wig, was snuggled next to him, using his arm as her pillow. Harry had watched her awake each morning, blindly reaching for her red wig the same way Harry reached for his glasses.

With time slipping away, Harry felt he really should write each of them a goodbye letter, explaining how much they all meant to him. It was something he would've liked to have had from Sirius, and he knew he'd never be able to vocalize his feelings for them. Still, putting his thoughts in writing made the whole thing so much more real and...close.

He shuddered involuntary, and Ginny's eyes fluttered open. She blinked a few times, orienting herself to where she was, before looking up at him with sleepy eyes.

"Morning," she said, burrowing into the warmth of his body.

"Morning," Harry said, leaning over to kiss the crown of her head. "Did you sleep well?"

"Um-hmm. I like sleeping with you," she said.

Harry felt a flush of warmth fill his chest. "I like sleeping with you, too – even if we really are sleeping," he said cheekily.

He felt Ginny's body tremble as she chuckled. "Don't let Ron hear you, he'll jump into this bed and lie between us."

"Eww," Harry said, screwing up his face. "Nice way to ruin a fantasy, Ginny."

"A fantasy," Ginny said, laughing. "Am I in your fantasies, Harry?"

"You've been starring in my fantasies since long before we even started dating," Harry said, chuckling as he remembered fervently hoping he hadn't talked in his sleep while sharing a dormitory with Ron.

"Hmm," Ginny said, looking extraordinarily pleased. "Good."

"Good?" Harry asked. "Good? So, you like that, do you?" He rolled over so she was pinned beneath him and began tickling her sides until she was gasping for breath.

"Harry!" she squealed, trying to squirm away. "Stop! I mean it, stop!"

"Not until you admit I won this round," Harry said, laughing at her protests.

"Stop it," Ginny shrieked. "Harry, get off me."

Harry was about to release her when he felt himself being bodily flung through the air, his arms flailing. He landed on the floor in a heap and before he could even get his bearings, he was lifted up and pinned against the wall with an arm digging into his throat.

"What the bloody hell did you think you were doing?" Ron's livid face loomed above his.

Dazed, Harry struggled to remove Ron's arm, finding it impossible to catch his breath.

"Ron!" Ginny shouted. "Let him go right now."

"Ron, he can't breathe," Hermione said, hastily adjusting the red wig on top of her head.

"Ron," Ginny said, reaching up to pinch Ron's ear between her fingers and twisting it with a wrench.

"Ow!" Ron yelped, releasing Harry so suddenly he again fell to the floor.

Rubbing his neck, Harry struggled to regain his breath as he scowled at Ron.

"What are you doing?" Ginny asked, finally releasing Ron's very red ear.

"Ginny, that hurt," Ron whinged, rubbing it.

"What are you on about?" Harry demanded, finally finding his voice. He pulled himself to his feet, clenching his fists.

"What were you doing to my sister?" Ron asked, as if suddenly remembering why he'd been angry.

"It's called tickling, Ron, and most people don't get flung across the room for it," Harry said, snapping. He'd had enough of Ron's over-protectiveness, and quite frankly, was rather hurt. Certainly, by now, he'd proved his intentions towards Ginny were honorable.

"Tickling?" Ron said, dumbfounded. "I heard her shouting at you to stop."

"Of course I was shouting," Ginny said, exasperated. "He was winning."

"Oh," Ron said, deflating a bit as he glanced warily at Harry.

Harry grabbed his jeans and a t-shirt and stalked towards the door. "I'm going to have a shower. I'll try not to accost anyone on my way," he said irritably.

"Harry," Hermione called, but he ignored her, slamming the door shut on his way out. He knew he was the one being irrational now, but he was on edge, and Ron's assumption bothered him. The other Weasley brothers he could understand, but Ron should know him better than that.

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They arrived in Diagon Alley later that afternoon. Their interaction had been stiff and uncomfortable all morning with each boy stubbornly nursing his own pride. Ginny and Ron also weren't speaking, leaving Hermione acting as a go-between among all of them. Harry was just as happy to leave the inn; he was tired of feeling confined.

Diagon Alley was quieter than Harry remembered. Several more of the shops had been closed and boards covered more windows since the last time he'd been here. Fewer people were on the street, and those who had ventured out appeared wary and skittish, hurrying along with their errands without making eye contact.

Harry hadn't given Mr. Weasley a specific location where he'd appear, and they'd decided to use this rare freedom to do some window-shopping. It was bitterly cold, however, causing Harry to wish he'd made a more specific plan. Pulling his cloak tightly around his body, he turned his back towards the wind.

"Let's head towards Fred and George's shop," Ginny said, raising her voice above the frigid blast of wind that suddenly gusted. "There's usually a crowd there and you'll probably be spotted fairly quickly."

"Brush your hair off your forehead," Ron said crossly, tugging Hermione's arm as he began walking. "Your scar is barely visible. Don't hide it if you want to be seen."

Harry scowled at Ron's back, but moved his fringe aside, feeling suddenly vulnerable.

Ginny pulled her scarf up so she could bury her nose, and slipped her hand in his. "Come on," she murmured. "It's just for a little while."

The four walked towards Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes hunched from the chill. The pit in Harry's stomach grew as he noticed the abundance of closed shops. The combination of Voldemort and Umbridge was wreaking havoc on the Wizarding world, and the worse part was they were allowing Umbridge to do it.

"Harry, you're hurting my hand," Ginny said, trying to pull her hand from the death grip he had on it.

"Oh!" he said, starting. "Sorry, Ginny. I wasn't paying attention."

"Obviously," she said, working her fingers in and out inside her fuzzy yellow mittens. "What're you so cheesed off about, anyway? Is it this nonsense of Ron's? He's just being Ron - it takes awhile for his brain to catch up with the rest of him sometimes."

Harry snorted. "Nah, I don't know what's bothering me. Something just doesn't feel right-

"Oi, Ron! Ginny!" Fred shouted, poking his head outside the door of his shop. "Dad said you lot might stop by this afternoon. What's happening?"

Harry craned his neck to peer inside. There were a few scattered customers in the aisles, but nothing like the crowd he'd seen the last time he'd been here. "How's business?" he asked.

Fred shrugged. "It's been slow, but the mail order catalog is booming. People are afraid to go out."

"Probably a good thing or Um-bint might make a decree declaring it illegal to shop here next," George said, scowling.

Ron, Ginny, and Harry sniggered at the insult, and even the corner of Hermione's mouth twitched.

"We're not her favorite people," Fred said, scratching his chin. "I can't imagine anyone not loving us, can you?"

"Pansy and Iris don't seem to care for you much," Ginny said, sniggering. Fred scowled and looked away.

"Dad said you needed to be spotted somewhere public. The shop next door sells coffee and has a big open window. Care to take a stroll and grab a cuppa?" George asked.

"All right," Harry replied.

"Can you watch the store for a tic, Shannon?" George called to the pretty girl behind the counter. She nodded and the twins led them outside.

"Who's she?" Ginny asked. "She's new."

"Yeah. We keep losing employees. We suspect some of them are being pressured by the Ministry to disassociate themselves with us. Apparently, Um-bint holds a grudge," Fred replied. "Shannon can be a bit flaky, but George likes her."

George flushed and kept walking.

It wasn't difficult to get a large table by the window because the shop was nearly deserted. They'd just placed their orders when the entire shop shook from the force of a blast somewhere down the street.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, alarmed.

"Dunno," Fred said, standing up to peer out the window. The second blast knocked him to his knees. Coffee cups rattled on the table, and Harry heard something shatter in the kitchen.

The few patrons in the shop glanced at each other warily, uncertain whether or not to flee. Harry helped Fred to his feet and looked outside. To his horror, he could see half the street in flames. Death Eaters were walking unhindered, blasting spells at various shops along the way. They appeared to be gathering around the shops near Gringotts.

Harry turned around. Their waitress had backed against the counter, a panicked expression on her face.

"Do you have a Floo connection here?" he asked.

The girl merely stared back at him, her eyes flicking to the chaos outside.

"Listen to me," Harry said, speaking softly but firmly. "Do you have a working Floo?"

The girl nodded, her eyes wide.

"I want you to go right now and make an emergency call to the Ministry. Have them send Aurors here straightaway," Harry said.

The girl nodded again but didn't move.

"Now," Harry said, louder this time.

She jumped, casting Harry a terrified expression. Whimpering slightly, she turned and fled towards the kitchen. Harry turned back to the door where Hermione was standing, peering outside.

"Hermione, I need you to go back into the twins' shop and use their Floo to alert the Order," he said, swallowing heavily. "Be careful and keep your eyes open. They haven't come this way yet, but if they do, I'd expect Fred and George's shop to be a prime target. Take Shannon and get out if they come this way."

Hermione nodded, her eyes meeting Ron's briefly before she turned and slipped out the door.

"Be careful," Ron called after her.

"What do you want us to do, Harry?" George asked.

"We've got to try and slow them down until help arrives," Harry said, gripping his wand tightly. "Ginny, keep these people inside. Use the Floo or take them out the back if the Death Eaters move this way."

Hearing the words 'Death Eaters' confirmed to the handful of other patrons what was happening outside. There were several screams as people pushed back their chairs and started running towards the door.

Harry stood in front of it, blocking their exit. "Listen to me. You're safer in here than out there right now. You have to remain calm. Help is on the way."

Grumbling, the patrons retook their seats, staring nervously between Harry and the window.

"I'm not staying behind here, Harry," Ginny said.

Harry turned his attention towards her and realized too late how livid she was. Her jaw was set in a determined scowl, and her eyes flashed brightly, daring him to argue with her.

"If you try and leave me behind, I'll be out that door two steps behind you. I can handle myself, and the four of you are no match for all those Death Eaters. You need all the help you can get," she said fiercely.

Harry knew she was right. He did need the help, and she could handle herself. Knowing that didn't help with the more primitive side of himself that wanted her safe and protected at all costs, however. He twisted his lips, struggling.

Finally, he turned toward the door and swore violently. "Fine, follow me and stay together."

"Harry!" Ron said. "You can't let her come. She'll get hurt."

"Shut it, Ron," Ginny said, pushing her brother aside. "I've helped carry you out the last two times we've had trouble."

The twins' each covered a smirk as they moved out of the way, allowing Ginny to pass. Clutching their own wands, they followed Ginny out the door. Harry quickly joined them, leaving Ron to follow in their wake, spluttering.

"Harry!" he said.

"We don't have time for this," Harry snapped. "We all stick together. We're going to stay on the right side of the street, it's more shadowed. The Death Eaters are focused on their destruction, and they don't appear to expect any resistance. When we're close enough for our spells to hit them, we need to take cover first. Understand?"

The others nodded, their faces grim but determined.

Crouching low, Harry led them down the suddenly deserted street, ducking his head against the icy wind. New explosions shook the ground every few moments with alarming frequency. He could hear the laughter and crude jokes from the Death Eaters, but the street itself was eerily deserted. When they'd walked this way less than an hour ago, there had been a few scattered shoppers and several open shops, now it resembled a ghost town. Harry imagined everyone was inside, seeking cover.

As they neared the first burning shop, Harry could feel the heat on his face from the burning buildings. The temperature outside seemed to rise the closer they got to the bank. Heavy smoke filled the air, making it difficult to see what was happening. He jerked his head towards an alleyway where several rubbish bins lay scattered. The Weasleys took cover behind them.

"Back in the rubbish again," Ron muttered.

"Ron, get down," Fred shouted, pushing Ron to the ground as a jet of green light came speeding down the alley.

Muffled shouts and curses sounded from the street ahead. Fred dragged Ron behind the bins.

"Bloody hell. Thanks, Fred," Ron said, looking slightly dazed.

"I saw someone go this way," a harsh voice sounded ahead.

The air was suddenly filled with the sounds of Apparition. Multiple cracks and pops filled the air as witches and wizards dressed in Ministry uniforms arrived on the scene. The flashes from curses being fired became brighter and more intense.

"Stupefy," Harry shouted.

A beam of red light shot from his wand and Stunned the Death Eater who had followed them into the alley. Peering around the corner of a building, Harry could see Ministry Aurors fanning out and taking cover all along the street. The Death Eaters were casting spells at them with fierce intensity, and it took a moment for Harry to comprehend that the Aurors weren't returning spells at all.

"What are they on about?" he asked no one in particular, horrified to see the Aurors being slaughtered.

"What's happening?" Ginny whispered behind him.

"The Aurors have arrived, but they aren't casting any spells. The Death Eaters are making it look like child's play," Harry said, stunned.

He watched as the lead Auror made several attempts to negotiate with the Death Eaters, the majority of which were holed up on the steps of Gringotts. He felt his stomach clench in disgust as several of the Death Eaters used the Levicorpus spell to dangle the bodies of dead Aurors in the air.

"Stupefy," George yelled, his face contorted in rage.

One of the Death Eaters who'd been desecrating the bodies slumped over, but his victim fell to the ground in a heap as well. George's Stunning spell alerted the others to their location, and a barrage of curses began pelting off the walls and against the bins in the alleyway.

"Back, move back," Harry shouted, pushing Ginny out of the way.

Ron, Fred and George took one side of the alley, while he and Ginny backed against the other. If the Death Eaters swarmed, they were trapped. Harry's eyes scanned frantically, finally settling on a rusty, metal fire escape located several meters above their heads. He was startled by a loud crack not far from where he and Ginny were standing. Several more cracks followed in rapid succession.

"Potter," Mad-Eye Moody said, appearing suddenly alongside Hestia Jones. "What's the situation?"

Moody and Jones volleyed several spells back and forth with the attacking Death Eaters. They were the first spells to be aimed at the Death Eaters directly since Harry had arrived on the scene. He saw Bill and another witch he didn't recognize joining Ron and the twins. They all began aiming spells towards the steps of Gringotts. Several other Order members had also joined the fray.

"Those Aurors aren't using any spells. They're trying to negotiate with them," Harry said, ducking as a stream of purple light was shot near his head.

Moody returned fire, taking out two Death Eaters before lowering his wand again.

"What do you think you're doing?" an Auror asked, crouching low as he ran up to them.

"We're saving your arses," Moody snapped. "Why aren't you trying to stop them? They're using Unforgiveables."

As if to prove his point, the screams of an Auror obviously being subjected to the Cruciatus filled the air.

The Auror eyes flickered before his stony expression returned. "We're following new Ministry guidelines to attempt to achieve a peaceful settlement to the crisis," he said in a monotone.

"Bollocks," Moody replied. "This is more of Umbridge's mess."

The Auror clenched his jaw tightly. "We have our orders. There are strict, Ministry-sanctioned guidelines that must be followed. There is to be no spell-use until we receive the appropriate signal from our commander."

"And who is your commander?" Moody asked, growling. "Can't he see that your people are being devastated?"

"Dawlish," Kingsley Shacklebolt said, approaching them. His eyes briefly glanced at Harry, but he gave no sign of recognition. He turned to the Auror standing with Moody. "Sir, Bradford and Hennessey are down, leaving you the next in command. What do you want to do?"

Kingsley's jaw was tense, as if he were barely restraining himself. His hand clenched his wand tightly, as if forcing himself not to use it. Harry could see reflections of color from various spells reflected in the gold of Kingsley's earring.

"You want to protect yourselves from those Death Eaters," Harry said when the Auror hesitated. "Dolores's decree obviously isn't working."

The man's gaze flickered to Harry, freezing when he noticed the scar. He swore under his breath. "We haven't been given the order to engage from Dawlish," he said through clenched teeth. "The bigwigs at the Ministry were adamant that we follow procedure."

"We don't know that Dawlish is still alive," Kingsley said stiffly. "And our people are dying, sir."

When the Auror still hesitated, Moody swore in disgust. "Look, you do whatever you have to do, and we'll do what we have to do. Harry, get up on that roof and see if you can get a good aim at the Death Eaters on the top step at Gringotts. They appear to be the ones in charge."

Harry nodded. Using his wand to lower the ladder, he took Ginny by the arm and maneuvered her to climb ahead of him. The metal was very cold, and it stung his hands each time he grasped a rung. As they ascended, he could hear Moody and Shacklebolt still arguing with the Auror. The smoke grew heavier, and he lost sight of them, but he heard the Auror finally agree to Moody's demands.

Harry sighed in relief; at least that was something.

As the Aurors finally began battling the Death Eaters in earnest, the sky burst with a symphony of colors from various spells. Just as Harry and Ginny reached the roof and climbed off the fire escape ladder, a spell was fired into the air. Harry gaped as the Dark Mark filled the sky above Gringotts. A cold thrill of dread ran down his back. That spell hadn't been fired from the ground. Turning around slowly, he stared into cold dark eyes behind a Death Eater mask. The wizard held a wand aimed directly at Harry's chest.

Hermione turned from the fireplace after making the emergency call to headquarters to find Shannon, the clerk at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, standing nearly on top of her. The girl was a few years older than Hermione, but appeared much younger at the moment. Tears leaked from her pretty, bright blue eyes, and she wrung her hands while waiting for Hermione to tell her what to do.

Hermione instinctively straightened her wig, rolling some of the hair between her fingers, absently noting how different it felt from her own hair. Her heart thudded in her chest now that she didn't have a specific task to do.

"It's going to be all right, Shannon," Hermione said, hoping it was true. "Help is on the way."

Shannon sniffed. "Where are Fred and George?" she asked tremulously.

Hermione's eyes drifted to the door, and she had to take a deep breath to control her own rising panic. "They went to see if they could help."

"Why?" Shannon moaned. "Those are his followers down there. They'll be killed."

"They can handle themselves. They've done this before," Hermione said firmly. Something about Shannon's terror settled Hermione's nerves. She could handle this. She had to keep Shannon calm and that would help her remain calm, as well.

"But what if You-Know-Who is there, too?" Shannon asked, her eyes nearly bugging out of her head.

Hermione bit her lip, praying that wasn't true. They weren't ready. They needed more time. There was still one more Horcrux to find, and Hermione still hadn't completely worked out her plan to save Harry.

She was close, but she wasn't there yet. The hardest part would be getting Harry to agree to it, but she thought Ginny might be the better choice to do that. Although she hated to admit it, Hermione knew Harry tended to listen to Ginny more than he did to her. It irritated the older Gryffindor to no end, but that's the way it was. Still, if Voldemort was among the Death Eaters attacking, all her careful plans might be for naught. They weren't ready.

Hermione's thoughts turned toward Ron. They'd been bickering all morning and hadn't really settled anything when he'd left with the others. She'd been angry over the way he'd treated Harry that morning. He really could be such an insufferable prat sometimes. He meant well, though. He was only trying to protect his sister. His infuriatingly male brain simply hadn't caught on to the fact that Ginny neither needed nor wanted his protection.

Hermione had noticed the hurt that had flashed in Harry's eyes, even if Ron hadn't. She knew Ginny had seen it, too. Ron might have obliviously stomped all over Harry's feelings that morning, but if it came down to

it this afternoon, Ron would give his life for Harry. Hermione knew it, and it terrified her. She had to find a way for both her boys to come out of this – whole and intact – no matter what she had to do.

Another blast shook the shop, knocking various items off the shelves and sending them crashing to the floor. Hermione grabbed onto the fireplace in the back of the shop to steady herself.

Shannon screamed and began to lunge for the door, but Hermione grabbed her arm, stopping her. "We're safer in here," she hissed.

The sound of the door at the front of the shop opening caused both girls to freeze. They stared at one another warily, clutching each other's arms.

"Lookee, lookee at all the toys," a sinister, singsong voice sounded at the front of the shop. "Is anybody home? Come out, come out wherever you are."

Hermione slapped her hand over Shannon's mouth before the girl could scream. The shop was no longer safer than the street.

Ron stood with his brothers and watched as Harry and Ginny climbed the fire escape to the rooftop. He could see Mad-Eye Moody shouting something to them, but the noise from the battle drowned his words. After the Order had arrived, Bill led Ron and the twins through a door in the building opposite the one Harry was now climbing, and they'd remerged onto the street.

"Where're Harry and Ginny going?" George asked, covering Bill as he moved closer to a group of Death Eaters.

"Dunno," Ron shrugged. He really wasn't all that concerned about it. He knew Harry would protect Ginny with his life, and he could get out of just about anything. He'd proved that many times in the past. Ron suddenly felt guilty for the way he'd treated Harry that morning. Ron knew that Harry would give his life for any one of the Weasleys – even Percy. He should've known that.

Suddenly, the Aurors finally started to do what they'd arrived to do and began casting spells back at the attacking Death Eaters.

"'s about time," Fred said, shaking his head in disgust. "The Aurors finally quit yakking and have decided to join the fight." He ducked as a red beam of light zoomed alarmingly close to his ear.

"Bugger!" Ron shouted as the ground shook beneath his feet. Raising his eyes, he could see a massive green skull forming in the sky with a hideous green snake slowly oozing out its mouth.

"That spell came from the rooftop," George said uneasily.

Ron swallowed resolutely. "Harry can take care of himself, and he'll take care of Ginny, too."

They continued moving forward until they joined a group of Aurors huddled together.

"Wotcher, Ron," a familiar voice said.

"Tonks!" Ron said, startled.

"Bloody mess, innit?" Tonks said, tossing her head. "Umbridge is a daft idiot. We must have lost close to twenty Aurors before Kingsley got Melanson to agree to stuff her orders."

"Have they got control of the bank?" Ron asked.

"Nah. They'll never get inside. The Goblins have their own kind of protection. This is a form of intimidation. People will panic when they hear about it. It's Voldemort's way of showing everyone exactly who's in charge," Tonks said, shaking her head.

Ron aimed his wand, firing repeatedly at the Death Eaters, who were now pulling back and taking cover.

"Some of them got past us, so some of the shops further down could still be in trouble," Tonks said. "We'll have to worry about that later. Right now, we've got to try and get to the top steps of Gringotts. The Death Eaters calling the shots are holed up there."

"How are we supposed to do that?" Fred asked incredulously. "There's no cover."

"That's why they chose it," Ron snapped. "It's good strategy."

Ron watched as Bill attempted to get closer, his ravaged face covered in soot and grime. Suddenly, something bright and enormous illuminated the sky overhead, moving toward Gringotts.

"What was that?" George asked, but there wasn't time to contemplate as the Death Eaters began attacking with renewed intensity. The fighting was fierce, and Ron struggled to focus on the battle at hand and not on what might have happened to Hermione.

From the corner of his eye, Ron saw a large, masked Death Eater emerge from an adjacent building. He watched curiously as the man barked something at his cohorts standing nearby. The other Death Eaters began moving away from the building while the one who'd emerged and aimed his wand directly at the door.

"What the-" Bill never finished his sentence.

"Morsmordre," the man cried.

"Bloody hell, he fired that inside the building," Fred shouted.

"Fleur!" Bill shouted, suddenly moving out from behind his cover and running towards his wife, who was standing directly across from the building.

Fleur turned, her beautiful face contorted in concentration. Her eyes widened in surprise seeing Bill barreling towards her before the world began to shake.

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On the rooftop, Harry froze, swallowing nervously as he faced the Death Eater holding him at wandpoint.

"Well, look who we have here," the Death Eater said. Harry didn't recognize the voice. "My master will be so pleased with this added bonus."

Before Harry could respond, Ginny spun out from behind Harry's back, brandishing her wand. "Stupefy," she shouted.

The Death Eater took the spell directly in the chest and slumped to the ground. Harry had no time to congratulate her before two other Death Eaters emerged from the stairwell onto the roof.

Harry and Ginny both fired several spells, but the Death Eaters had the door to the stairwell to use as cover while they were out in the open. Harry took Ginny's hand and pulled her towards the building's ledge.

"Come on," he shouted.

He sprinted toward the ledge with Ginny on his heels, dodging spells the whole way.

"What are you doing?" Ginny asked, breathless.

"Don't think, just jump," he shouted.

As he neared the ledge, he took a deep breath and simply leaped across to the rooftop of the next building. There was a moment while in the air that gave him that heady rush flying always did. He landed with a thud, but bounced back up, exhilarated and prepared to catch Ginny.

She stood on the other side, fixed in one spot and wide-eyed while the Death Eaters ran towards her.

Harry felt panic rising in his chest. Aiming his wand, he shouted, "Stupefy!"

The Death Eaters were still too far away, and he missed. "Ginny, you have to jump," he said, holding out his hand. "I promise I'll catch you."

Ginny stared at the gap between the buildings then turned to see the Death Eaters running towards her. "Harry," she cried, her lip trembling. "Your legs are longer than mine."

"You can do this, Ginny. Do it, now," Harry demanded.

Ginny nodded resolutely, keeping her watery eyes on Harry. She backed up a few steps, took a running start, and bolted towards the ledge. She

would have cleared it fine if she hadn't faltered slightly before jumping. That fraction of hesitation caused her to fall just short of the mark.

Harry leaned over and grabbed her around the waist before she slipped off the edge. His shoulder took the brunt of the strain, and he heard an awful popping sound before an unbearable agony swept down his arm. The pain was nauseating, and he had to clamp down on his teeth to keep from crying out.

Ginny screamed as his right arm dropped limply, releasing his hold on her. He leaned from the waist, keeping a tight grip on her with his left arm, straining to pull her up. They were out of the field of vision of the Death Eaters at the moment, but it wouldn't take them long to reach the edge.

Ginny wrapped her arms around his neck, clingingly tightly as he pulled her back onto the ledge. He could feel her nails digging into his skin and knew she wouldn't let go for anything. She was trembling violently and could barely catch her breath through her tears. He dragged her away from the edge and behind a half wall, shielding them from the Death Eaters spells.

Leaning against the wall, he gasped in pain, holding Ginny's shaking body close to his. "Ginny," he said softly. "You're okay. We're okay."

Ginny took a deep breath, pulling herself together. Her eyes widened, as if realizing Harry was in pain. Swiping her eyes, she leaned over him to peer around the wall.

"Petrificus Totalis," she shouted.

Harry watched as a Death Eater dropped, immobilized, onto the rooftop they now occupied.

"Take one more step and you'll get the same thing, only I promise you, it'll be while you're still in the air," Ginny snarled at the other Death Eater, who was preparing to jump.

The man's determination wavered. He hesitated a moment before backing away from the ledge.

"Wise decision," Ginny mumbled, turning back towards Harry. "Are you all right?"

Harry wiped a trickle of blood from his lip. He'd bitten through it when he'd hurt his shoulder. "Yeah," he gasped clenching his teeth. "We need to help the others."

Ginny nodded, helping him to stand. They moved quickly towards the opposite ledge where they had a clear view of Gringotts. The steps were littered with fallen Death Eaters, while many Aurors lay prone in the street. Fires burned uncontrolled in several of the buildings and thick smoke filled the air.

Harry could see two Death Eaters on the top steps of Gringotts, issuing orders to the others. The door to the bank must have sealed against the attack, for no one even bothered trying to open them.

Harry had to grasp his wand in his left hand because his right was dangling uselessly at his side. Focusing all his energy on the two huddled Death Eaters creating all this destruction, he aimed his wand and shouted, "Expecto Patronum."

Prongs sprang from his wand and floated gracefully through the air and landed on the steps of Gringotts. Lowering its head, the stag charged the Death Eaters. Startled, they jumped out of the way, leaving their cover and giving Harry a clear aim. With his wand in the wrong hand, he felt some uncertainty about the success of the spells, but he aimed and concentrated anyway.

"Stupefy! Stupefy!"

The two Death Eaters stopped, their bodies jerking violently before collapsing on the steps. Ginny aimed at several of the masked attackers on the street.

As if realized their numbers were dwindling, the remaining Death Eaters began Disapparating, leaving only the Order and a group of unorganized Aurors on the street below.

Before he had time to speak, a great rumbling shook the building where Harry and Ginny were standing. The tremble forced each of them to their knees, causing Harry to cry out as his shoulder jerked in a painful spasm. Their eyes widened as the building next to them – the one from which they'd jumped – suddenly collapsed in a swirling cloud of dust and smoke. Clenching his eyes shut, Harry threw his body over Ginny's and tried to shield her from the debris flying through the air.

Chapter Twenty

Treason

Ginny gasped, struggling to catch her breath with Harry's weight pinning her to the ground. The roar from the destruction of the building was so loud that she wanted to clasp her hands over her ears to block it out. Her body was covered with cuts and bruises from the falling debris, and she felt sore and abused.

"Harry," she said, shifting beneath him. "Are you all right?"

He groaned, but rolled off of her and lay panting on the rooftop. She pushed herself to her knees to take a good look at him. He'd shielded her from most of the blast, and he bore the marks to prove it. He was bleeding from several spots, although nothing appeared life-threatening. The worst wound still appeared to be his shoulder. Ginny could see the ball joint sticking out grotesquely while his arm dangled limply at his side. He'd obviously dislocated it when he caught her.

Ginny's heart had dropped to her shoes when she'd watched him leap across the gap between the buildings. She'd seen his face – the jump had exhilarated him. She liked flying as much as the next person – probably more – but she preferred to have a broom under her when she

did it. The jump had terrified her, although she had to admit that she was proud of herself now that she'd done it.

"I'm fine," Harry said, barely able to get the words out.

Ginny rolled her eyes. He was anything but fine. Honestly, what was his problem admitting something hurt, anyway? His vivid green eyes were clouded with pain, and she knew he was holding his breath to silence his groans. Letting the air out through her nose, she tried to relax.

"My brothers!" she gasped, pushing onto her feet, suddenly remembering that most of them had been involved in the fight. They'd been on the street below the collapsed building. The air was still thick from smoke, making it impossible to see the ground properly. She could hear voices, but no sign of spells, indicating the fight was over. Ginny fought her rising panic. She couldn't see any of her brothers and couldn't even distinguish which side had won.

Her chest felt tight as the fear clawed at her heart. They had to be all right. They just had to be. She didn't know what she'd do if she ever lost one of them. Overbearing or not – they were still hers.

"We've got to get back down and see what happened," Harry said, gasping as he rose to his feet.

"Harry, you're hurt. At least let me go first," Ginny said, annoyed by the few stray tears that leaked from her eyes.

Harry shook his head. "We can Apparate to a spot up the street a bit to take a look," he said. "Just give me a minute."

Stumbling over to the brick wall, he took a deep breath. Before Ginny had even realized what he was going to do, he slammed his shoulder into the wall with brutal force. Ginny heard a sickening 'pop' as his shoulder was forced back into the socket. He screamed, dropping to his knees.

"That's better," he said shakily before his eyes rolled back in his head, Ginny managed to catch him before his head hit the ground.

"Oh, Harry," she said, cringing. Merlin, that had to hurt. She ran her fingers through his soft hair, shaking him gently and trying to rouse him. She knew she should go and check on the situation below, but she couldn't just leave him here like this. "Come on, love. Wake up."

She tapped the side of his face lightly, hating herself for doing this to him. He moaned, but his eyes didn't flicker.

"Okay, Harry. I'm going to go down and get some help," she said, sniffing. "I'll be right back."

Harry eyes flew open wide as if she'd doused him with cold water. "Ginny," he croaked.

"I'm here," she said, shaking her head slightly. Was there no end to that boy's stubbornness? "Can you stand?"

"Yeah," Harry replied automatically. He tried to rise, but only managed a sitting position before groaning as he cradled his arm. "Erm...maybe with a little help," he said sheepishly.

Ginny snorted and slung his left arm over her shoulder, straining to help him to his feet. He wobbled and for a brief instant Ginny thought he was going to go back down, but he managed to steady himself.

"Can you Apparate?" she asked, worried he'd end up splinching the two of them together. "My long-term goal is definitely to merge with you, Harry, but I don't fancy having your arm sticking through my forehead."

Harry chuckled. "Ha, ha, very funny. Just grab my arm, and we'll see if the only part we leave behind is your smart mouth."

Ginny grinned and grabbed hold of his good arm, keeping her eyes fixed on his face as she felt the tight squeeze of Apparation. He looked tired and bloodstained, but magnificent all the same. That quiet power was emanating from him again. It always happened whenever they were in a dangerous situation, and she didn't think he was even aware of it.

She knew she wasn't some sort of scarlet woman, but she couldn't help that she felt incredibly attracted to him when he was like this. That odd mixture of quiet confidence with a hint of insecurity was intoxicating. It was all she could do not to grab his face and snog him senseless whenever he took control of a situation. He was really good at it, too. He'd make a remarkable Auror one day.

Ginny's feet slammed to the ground mere centimeters from one of the burning buildings. She stepped back from the heat, steadying Harry as she did. Glancing at his face, she realized he'd grown alarmingly pale during their Apparation.

"All right, Harry?" she asked, wrapping her arm around his waist and pressing her body close. She knew he'd allow her to help him more easily if he thought he was the one actually comforting her. Boys were so silly.

"Yeah. Is that Ron up ahead?" he asked, straining his eyes to see through the smoke.

Ginny turned in the direction he was pointing. She could distinguish Ron's shock of red hair towering above the others a short distance away. There were several Death Eaters being gathered together, but most of them had apparently Disapparated. She and Harry moved towards her brother.

"Ron," she called when they were close enough for him to hear her.

"Harry! Ginny!" Ron said, obvious relief washing over his dirty face. "Are you two all right?"

"Harry's hurt," Ginny said at the same time Harry answered that he was fine.

Ron wasn't really listening to either of them. "Was that your Patronus I saw before the building came down?" he asked.

Harry nodded.

"I thought so. I didn't realize what it was at first. Everything happened so fast. Most of the Order are trying to clear out of here since the Ministry officials are arriving now that it's all over," Ron said, shaking his head.

"Are Fred and George okay?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah. They were trying to convince Moody to leave before anyone wanted to take him in for questioning. Bill and Fleur both got pretty banged up, but they've already been sent back to headquarters. You should go and get that arm looked at, mate," Ron said, nodding at Harry, who was still cradling his arm.

Ginny barely listened to Ron and Harry as she watched a delegation of Ministry officials march down the street led by a squat, toad-faced woman. Ginny groaned inwardly. Her heart gave a sudden lurch as she recognized the lanky redheaded wizard who was walking behind her, a notebook clutched in his hands. Percy looked extremely uncomfortable, but he followed Umbridge's orders just the same.

"Harry, let's just Apparate back to headquarters, now. Umbridge is here, and we don't need to deal with her," Ginny hissed, jerking her head in Umbridge's direction.

"You two go ahead," Ron said, standing with his back to Umbridge, thus blocking Harry from her view. "I need to check on Hermione."

Ginny could see Umbridge shouting at Kingsley Shacklebolt, her face red with fury as she shook her fist in the air. Harry didn't need further prompting. Taking her by the arm, he Apparated them both back to headquarters.

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Harry groaned as he slowly drifted back to consciousness. His body felt stiff and achy, and his mind struggled to hold on to the last vestiges of sleep. He blinked several times, attempting to remember where he was. Finally giving up, he reached out and fumbled on the nightstand for his glasses. Finding them at last, he put them on and his room at Grimmauld Place came into focus. He furrowed his brow in concentration, but it was futile; his memory was foggy at best.

He and Ginny had arrived back at headquarters to find Madam Pomfrey treating a wide array of injuries. He'd seen Bill and Fleur, both heavily bandaged but sitting up and talking while Mrs. Weasley fussed over them. Madam Pomfrey had fixed up Harry's arm in no time, but she must have slipped him some kind of sleep potion because the next thing he remembered was waking up here.

Sitting up and throwing his legs over the side of the bed, he stretched and reached for some clothes. He had no idea how much time had passed since his return, but he wanted to find out what had happened after he'd left Diagon Alley, and exactly how many Aurors had been lost. He

remembered that Umbridge had been in a fury, and she usually lashed out when she felt cornered. All in all, not a good situation for anybody.

He walked slowly down the stairs, craning his neck from side to side, attempting to work out the kinks. He could smell a delicious aroma wafting up from the kitchen and knew it must be around suppertime. He couldn't have slept for very long.

Pushing open the kitchen door, he found the table crowded with many sober faces. Ginny sat next to her dad, her hand clasped tightly on his arm. Tonks was next to her, looking very pale as she worried her lip with her bottom teeth. Mrs. Weasley muttered under her breath as she continually poured tea for everyone, whether their cups were empty or not.

Hagrid, Moody, Professor McGonagall and the twins were also at the table, but there was no sign of Ron or Hermione.

"Harry!" Ginny said, noticing him standing in the doorway. She jumped up and grasped his arm, leading him to a chair.

"Oh, Harry, dear. How are you?" Mrs. Weasley asked, placing her hand gently on the side of his head. "I thought you'd sleep longer."

"What happened?" Harry asked, unconsciously leaning into her hand.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt's been sacked," Fred replied grimly.

"It's worse than that," Mr. Weasley said. "He and Peter Melanson, the Auror in command of the troop in Diagon Alley have been accused of treason. They're awaiting trial in Azkaban."

"What? Why?" Harry asked, spluttering.

"Because they listened to me and didn't wait for Dawlish to give the orders," Moody said, taking a liberal draught from his flask. "I knew I should've stayed behind and taken the heat instead of him."

"No. You did the right thing, Alastor," Professor McGonagall said wearily. "If you'd stayed, Dolores would've had an excuse to blame the entire thing on the Order immediately. This gives us time to prepare."

"Prepare for what?" Harry asked. "What do you mean? How can she blame the Order for this? Dawlish wasn't even around, and if he was, he certainly should've seen the negotiations weren't working."

"Ezriah Dawlish doesn't care if it was working or not; he only cares that his authority was usurped. He's a bully, Potter. You know the type," Moody replied. "He's risen through the ranks riding on other people's success and taking credit where credit wasn't due. He likes being in charge and is convinced everyone is trying to take that power from him, because he's trying to take it from everyone else."

"The Daily Prophet released an evening edition detailing the attack," Tonks said sourly. "In it, they quote Interim Minister Umbridge as saying the Aurors were killed because a vigilante group took control of the negotiations and tried to subdue the Death Eaters on their own."

According to the article, the Death Eaters had been working with the Ministry up until that point."

"What?" Harry shouted, jumping from his chair and looking at the group wildly. "That's rubbish."

"It's true. I'm afraid she's going to pin the blame for the death of the Aurors on the Order's 'interference'," Professor McGonagall said, sighing.

"I'm worried for Percy, as well," Mr. Weasley said. "Someone is bound to report the number of redheads that were involved today. Even Umbridge can make the connection, and she'll lean on Percy for information. It's an awful position for him."

Mrs. Weasley sniffed loudly as she continued to pour the tea. "Do you think I should send him a note?" she asked, looking towards the empty perch near the window. "Oh, that foolish owl is gone again. We're really going to have to invest in a new one. Errol has just become so unreliable in his old age."

"You can use Hedwig, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said.

"Oh, thank you, Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, standing between Harry and Ginny and crushing both of their heads to her bosom in a bone-crunching hug. "I just want all my children to be safe."

Harry's face reddened as he felt his glasses tilt sideways. He was crushed against Mrs. Weasley's breast, and he had no idea where he was supposed to look. He could see Ginny in the same predicament on Mrs. Weasley's other side, but she was struggling to control her laughter at Harry's obvious embarrassment.

"I don't think that's a good idea right now, Molly," Mr. Weasley said, clearing his throat. "Hedwig is very distinctive, and I think it might be better for Percy if we separate ourselves at the moment."

Mrs. Weasley released Harry and Ginny, and her face paled. She nodded solemnly and returned to her seat, her lower lip trembling.

"She's going to try and disband the Order," Professor McGonagall said.

"Well, she can't do that, can she?" Hagrid asked, slamming his meaty fist on the table. "Won't matter if she do. Dumbledore created the Order, an' I'm stayin' with it. The Order's fought You-Know-Who in both wars. She can't just break it apart."

"Maybe not in actuality, but she can make it extremely difficult for us to operate," Mr. Weasley said, sighing.

"Codswallop!" Hagrid roared.

"Take it easy, Hagrid," George said, patting Hagrid's massive shoulder. "None of us want this."

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked.

"They haven't returned yet," Tonks said. Then, noticing the alarm on Harry's face, she waved her hand in the air. "It's nothing to worry about, though. The Ministry detained everyone and is conducting interviews. I've got a contact that will let me know if there's any trouble. For now, they're probably just awaiting their turn to be questioned."

"So, what happens when Umbridge does try and disband the Order?" Harry asked. "She can make us illegal, but she can't find us, right? I mean, headquarters is still under a Fidelius Charm, isn't it?"

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips, her cheeks reddening slightly. "It is, and it will protect us for the moment, but not forever," she said. "The Department of Mysteries keeps a register of all Fidelius Charms in place and has a way to dismantle any that are used without proper authorization. Ordinarily, anyone performing the charm has to register it with the Ministry, otherwise anyone hiding from the law would use it. Since our relations with Rufus Scrimgeour were shaky at best, I performed the charm without the proper authorization. From what I understand, it's very complicated to undo, but with time it can be done."

"Sounds as useless as it ever was," Harry mumbled.

A disturbance at the front door caught everyone's attention, and Professor McGonagall waved to Mrs. Weasley to continue what she was doing, while she went to check what it was.

"We all should pack a getaway bag of our personal items in case we're forced to flee," Mr. Weasley said, adjusting his glasses. "My contacts should be able to give me some advance notice if headquarters is to be raided, but I can't guarantee a lot of time. I suspect Umbridge will be keeping her eye on me, as well."

"You might lose your job, Arthur," Mrs. Weasley said tremulously.

"Yes," Mr. Weasley said, patting Mrs. Weasley's hand, "but if the Minister gets any solid proof of our involvement in the Order of the Phoenix, I think we'll have bigger worries than my job."

Before anyone had time to respond to that ominous statement, the kitchen door swung open and Professor McGonagall returned, followed closely by Ron, Hermione and Shannon, the clerk at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. All three of the new arrivals looked cold, tired and windblown, as if they'd been outside for a very long time.

"Shannon!" George shouted, pushing out his chair with so much force it scraped across the floor, causing everyone to cringe.

Shannon's face burst into a wide grin, and she threw herself into George's arms. He lifted her off her feet and swung her around in a circle. "Oh, I'm so happy you're all right," she said breathlessly.

"What are you doing here?" George asked, his usual buoyant grin replaced with a soft smile that Harry had never seen on the exuberant twin.

Apparently, most of the other Weasleys hadn't ever seen it, either. They sat motionless, gaping at George, who appeared oblivious to their stares. Everyone but Fred, that was. Fred rolled his eyes in disgust, as if he alone had seen this coming long ago. He ignored the whole display and proceeded to slather his bread with an obscene amount of butter.

"Ahem," Mr. Weasley said, clearing his throat.

Professor McGonagall retook her seat, the side of her lips twitching suspiciously. Harry caught Ginny's eye, and she shrugged imperceptibly.

As if just realizing everyone else was still there, George pulled away from Shannon, running a hand through his hair as he quickly glanced at Fred.

"Er...everyone, this is Shannon Larkin. Shannon, meet the family," George said, beaming.

Shannon's cheeks colored, but she smiled engagingly at the Weasleys. "Hello, everyone," she said, pushing a strand of chestnut brown hair behind her ear.

"Hello, Shannon," Mrs. Weasley said, as if awakening from a fog. A bright smile spread across her face as she led Shannon to a chair. "Sit down, dear, you must be tired. I'll fix you up something to eat."

"Hi, Mum," Ron said, guiding Hermione to an empty chair across from Harry and sitting down next to her. "We're fine. Don't worry about us."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes widened. "Sorry, Ron...Hermione, dear. I'll get you something to eat, as well," she said, blushing furiously. She handed plates to both of them, but her eyes remained fixed on Shannon, who cast sly glances back and forth with George every few moments.

"What happened?" Harry asked. "What took you so long?"

"What didn't?" Ron asked, scowling as he shoveled a huge mound of mashed potatoes into his mouth. "First, I went back to Fred and George's shop to find Hermione, but she wasn't there when I got there."

Harry looked over at Hermione as she took a long draught of her pumpkin juice, nodding all the while. "Where was she?" he asked, noticing her torn clothing and a scratch on the side of her face that he hadn't seen when she'd first sat down.

"Shannon and I had an unexpected caller at the shop after I'd Floored the Order," Hermione said, glancing at Shannon.

"It was really scary," Shannon said, shuddering, "but Hermione was brilliant."

"What did you do?" Ginny asked, leaning toward Hermione.

"Well, we were too far from the door to escape without being seen, and the Death Eater knew there was someone there. He started knocking

things over and making a right mess of the shop, taunting us the whole time," Hermione said with a disapproving frown.

"So Hermione created a window," Shannon said, beaming at George. "It's right above your desk and it's fantastic. You'll probably want to keep it there."

"A window?" Harry said, looking askance at Hermione.

"Well, I thought I could do it, but I wasn't really certain. I read about the spell in this redecorating book that I found in one of the rooms upstairs. I'm certain the Order used it when they were fixing up this place-

"Hermione," Ron said, smiling fondly, "the Death Eater..."

She waved her hands in the air. "Oh! Right! Well, we opened the window, and Shannon climbed outside-

"But before Hermione could get out, the Death Eater entered the back room," Shannon said.

Hermione frowned, derailed. "Right. Well...at first I couldn't think what to do, and I rather panicked."

"You?" Ron asked, nudging her shoulder playfully. "I can't imagine that."

Hermione glared at him. "No, it's true. I had my wand aimed right at him, but for the life of me, I couldn't think of the spell I wanted."

Harry shook his head, able to appreciate the humor since she was obviously all right. Leave it to Hermione to be in a life threatening situation and being delayed because she wanted a particular spell.

"So, what did you do?" Ginny asked.

"Shannon did, actually," Hermione said.

"I leaned in the window and stuffed a Puking Pastille in his mouth," Shannon said, nodding. "It was the first thing I could reach on the desk."

"Ha!" George said. "That's a girl! Way to use those Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products, too, eh, Fred?"

Fred rolled his eyes, although a grin had spread across his face.

Shannon nodded, obviously pleased. "And while he was retching, Hermione kicked him where it counted and scrambled out the window."

All the males in the room cringed, twisting in their chairs.

"Hermione!" Fred said, shocked. "I'm impressed."

Hermione's cheeks pinkened, but she defiantly stuck out her chin. "I had to get away, didn't I?"

"She got him good, too," Shannon said, smiling approvingly at Hermione. "He doubled over and went down like a rock, clutching his bits."

Harry winced again, but noticed Ron beaming with pride at Hermione. He'd obviously heard this story already.

Mrs. Weasley coughed delicately. "More potatoes, dear?" she asked Shannon.

"Good work," Moody growled. "But you shouldn't have allowed him to sneak up on you. Constant vigilance! These are dangerous times, and it's about to get a whole lot worse."

"Alastor," Professor McGonagall said, smiling at Hermione and Shannon. "Everyone in Diagon Alley was 'sneaked up on', today. These witches did an admiral job of escaping."

"Not only that," Ron said, pulling a wand from his robes. "Hermione took the Death Eater's wand before she climbed out the window. We thought it would be better for you to trace it rather than give it to the Ministry."

He handed the wand to Tonks. "I can do that," she said, examining the wood with her fingertips. "As far as I know, I haven't been sacked yet. Once the Minister realizes how often I've been partnered with Kingsley, however, I think my number will be up."

This sobered the table again. Everyone stared at each other warily.

"We stayed until we'd given a statement to the Ministry. Of course, you must have seen the Prophet by now, and how they've twisted everything," Ron said, his lip curling.

"Yes. We've seen it," Professor McGonagall said briskly.

"Load of rubbish, that's what it is," Hagrid said, grumbling.

"I managed to avoid Umbridge, but I heard her questioning Percy," Ron said hesitantly.

"What did she say?" Mr. Weasley asked, concerned.

"She asked him about the rest of us. Why there were so many Weasleys in Diagon Alley this afternoon," Ron said. "He told her that two of his brothers own a shop there, and the rest of us were probably all helping them out. She was still suspicious, though. She asked a lot of questions about Bill and how the wounds Fenrir Greyback gave him were affecting him. It didn't sound good."

Hermione shook her head. "Percy really tried to convince her that Bill was fine, but I could see the wheels turning in that evil bat's head. I think she's going to try and go after Bill next."

"Damn it," Mr. Weasley said.

"Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley cried, glancing toward the door. Harry assumed Bill and Fleur had been given sedatives the same way he had.

"Don't worry, Molly," Mr. Weasley said, patting Mrs. Weasley's hand once again. "It'll be all right."

"What's comin' will come, an', we'll meet it when it does," Hagrid said.

"So, I reckon you're the vigilante group Minister Umbridge is complaining about, right?" Shannon asked, looking around the table at the various faces.

Professor McGonagall nodded. "Yes, Shannon. We're the Order of the Phoenix, or what's left of it, anyway. Professor Dumbledore started this group during the last war."

"So, how do I join?" she asked.

"Shannon," George said, standing up straight. "There's no guarantee there will even be an Order after Umbridge gets through with us."

"I don't care. I was there today; I saw what happened. You lot were the only ones doing anything, and I saw how the Ministry twisted that. I want to help," Shannon said, her blue eyes flashing.

"It's dangerous work," George said, looking to Fred for support. Fred was steadfastly ignoring them both.

Shannon pulled herself up to full height. "Just because I'm a Hufflepuff doesn't mean I run from danger, George Weasley, and don't you forget it. I left the Ministry because I didn't like what they were doing, and I'm joining the Order because it appears the right thing to do. We all have to do our part."

"Well said, Miss Larkin," Professor McGonagall said, her lips twitching again. "I always thought you had a bit of Gryffindor in you."

Shannon flushed, pleased, although she shook her head. "No. I'm loyal to the core – just like all Hufflepuffs."

"You were at Hogwarts, then?" Harry asked, curious. She wasn't at all familiar to him.

Shannon nodded. "I was in Fred and George's year, but I remember you. I'm sorry to say I wore one of those awful badges during the Triwizard Tournament until Cedric asked me not to do it," she said, staring directly at Harry. "Sorry about that."

Harry grinned, remembering how much those badges had bothered him at the time. "No problem. Everyone wore them."

"That's because they were amusing, and everyone enjoyed being able to admit that Potter stinks," Draco Malfoy said, entering the kitchen with a swagger.

Harry noticed that Mrs. Weasley didn't jump up to make him a plate as she had done for the others. She sat at the table, scowling, with her arms folded across her chest. His heart swelled with affection for Mrs. Weasley just then.

"Shut it, Malfoy," Ron said, growling.

"You're in the Order?" Shannon asked, stunned. "Weren't you the one who made those badges?"

"I did," Draco said proudly as he began putting food on his plate.

"He's not in the Order," George said. "He's just hiding here until it's over."

"I'm not hiding," Draco said, his face flushing.

"No? What do you call it, then?" Fred asked.

"I call it protecting my best interests," Draco replied, sneering. "I have a bright future ahead of me. I do, that is, if Potter can ever get his act together and end this thing."

A chorus of angry voices met this response, all of which Draco ignored as he began eating his meal.

"Enough!" Hagrid boomed, startling everyone into silence.

"My mother and the Parkinsons are reading the evening edition of the Daily Prophet," Draco drawled, as if there hadn't been any interruption. "We're concerned about what this means. If the Order is arrested and chucked in Azkaban, what's to happen to us? You know that there are ways to find this place."

"The Malfoys and the Parkinsons – you might remember Iris – are staying here as well," George said, clarifying for Shannon.

"I do remember Iris. She was all right, I suppose...for a Slytherin," Shannon said.

"Iris is all right. Nothing like this one," Fred said, glaring at Draco.

"We're working on a contingency plan, Mr. Malfoy," Professor McGonagall said, glaring at the others to keep their silence. "No one is going to Azkaban."

"That doesn't appear to be Minister Umbridge's plan," Draco said lazily.

"Be that as it may," Professor McGonagall replied, peering over the top of her glasses. "We shall see to it that you and your family are protected."

"What do you think Voldemort will do next?" Moody asked, his magical eye zeroing in on Draco, who flinched at the use of the name.

"He'll use the Minister's desire for a truce to his advantage," Draco replied. "He'll plant the seed in her head about dismantling the Fidelius Charm and make her think it was her idea. Then he'll have people testing the wards to see if they're weakening."

"How will he do that?" Harry asked. "How will he test the wards if no one can reveal where headquarters is located."

Malfoy rolled his eyes and spoke slowly, as if to a very small child. "He'll find someone whom he believes knows the location and torture them until they can tell. When they start to give answers, he'll know the wards are failing."

Harry swallowed, his anxiety for Remus increasing. If either Voldemort or the Ministry caught him now, neither would hesitate to use him.

"We're seeking an alternative safe house. I'll let you all know when we've found something suitable," Professor McGonagall said, adjourning the meeting. "We might have to split up for a time. Perhaps it'll be better that way."

The conversation at the dinner table was extremely subdued after that, particularly for Weasley standards.

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Dear, Ron

Well, I suppose if you're reading this it means I'm dead not there. I hope I took him with me. I want you to keep my Firebolt - I know you'll put it to good use. Get the carpet to Fred and George, perhaps they can invent their own line of trick ones, or something...

I don't really know what to say. I wanted to write this letter to be able to say goodbye, but that's hard to do when I know you're just downstairs with Hermione. I'm glad you two finally worked things out. Take care of each other for me.

I hope the Cannons are playing well.

Crumpling up his parchment, Harry tossed it in the bin with several other rolled-up pieces. This was impossible. It was much harder to write a goodbye letter than he'd originally thought. As if the Cannons would ever play well, anyway...

He pulled out another piece and decided to try again. He sat on his bed, leaning on a book and trying to collect his thoughts. Mrs. Weasley had noticed him rubbing his arm after dinner and frog-marched him up the stairs, insisting he wasn't to get up again until morning. Honestly, he'd been too tired to argue with her.

He looked up as his bedroom door creaked open, and Ginny slipped inside, wearing a frayed yellow dressing gown. Harry's eyes were immediately drawn to the worn spots and the faint glimpse of flimsy blue material he could see beneath the thinning fabric.

"Hi," she whispered, nudging him aside with her hip so she could sit down. "Ron and Hermione are saying goodnight in my room, and they kicked me out."

Harry obliged by shifting over, gathering his parchment so she wouldn't see what he'd been doing.

"What are you writing?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "Just some notes," he replied vaguely. "So, they gave you the boot, huh? Lucky me."

Ginny grinned. "Why aren't you asleep? I thought I was just going to come in here and make certain you were snug and covered."

"You were going to tuck me in?" he asked, quirking his eyebrow, a pleasant warmth spreading through his body. He couldn't remember anyone ever doing that unless he was in hospital.

Ginny kissed his forehead softly, a somewhat sad smile playing on her lips. "You're supposed to be sleeping. Mum will have kittens if she knows you're in here working."

"Couldn't sleep," Harry said. "My body's tired, but my mind's still racing. You were fantastic today, you know."

"I was?" Ginny asked, staring at him blankly. "Harry, was that a compliment?"

Harry poked her in the ribs. "You were! I was so proud of you when you jumped across that ledge despite your fear. You were brilliant. Do I not compliment you enough, Ginny?"

"Here's a newsflash for you, Harry. You do tend to be a bit...reserved," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

Harry pulled a face. "Let me make up for that, then," he said, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her back so she was lying alongside him. "I think you're beautiful."

Ginny's hand instinctively reached for her shorter hair, a pretty pink blush spreading across her freckled cheeks. Harry grabbed her hand and pulled it away, playing with her hair. "I think all of you is beautiful, Ginny – inside and out. I think you're fun, and fiery, and you can always make me laugh."

"Great!" Ginny said. "I can tell a good joke. Just what I want my boyfriend to feel when he thinks of me."

"No," Harry said, continuing to play with her hair. "Laughing is good. Sometimes, it's the only way I can cope, and you're always there with a ready smile. You show me a different life – what I want my life to be. When I wake up in the morning, I get this funny feeling in my stomach just because I know I'm going to see you."

Harry looked away, embarrassed.

Ginny grabbed his chin and pulled it back. "Tell me more," she whispered huskily, a soft yet blazing look in her eyes that made Harry swallow heavily.

"You don't try and make me talk when I'm not ready, but when I am ready, you're always the first person I want to talk to," he said, suddenly finding it very hard to concentrate.

His every nerve ending was tingling, and he kept being distracted by the column of her throat and a thin trail of freckles that disappeared beneath her dressing gown. Suddenly, the urge to count those freckles seemed of the utmost importance.

He felt his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed again, his mouth very dry. He could smell that sweet, flowery scent that hinted of lazy summer days in the sunshine.

"Ginny," he whispered.

"Harry."

Suddenly, they were in each other's arms and rolling around his bed as if there were no tomorrow. The war, the battle, his sore shoulder, Umbridge and the Ministry's shenanigans all melted away as Harry allowed himself the moment. This was what he'd promised after he'd learned about The Seventh Horcrux – that he'd take the time to live while he could, and give Ginny as much time as possible.

After several moments of sheer, unchecked bliss, Ginny pulled back, panting. "Harry, we have to stop. Ron will be in here in any minute."

Harry didn't want to stop, and he moved to continue blazing a trail of wet kisses down Ginny's throat. Ron could just sod off as far as he was concerned.

"Harry!" Ginny said, laughing as she pushed him back and slid off the bed, moving to take a seat on Ron's empty bed. "I'm serious. Ron will be here any minute, not to mention Mum. I'm certain she'll peek in to check on you, too."

Harry scowled, disgruntled. "Fine."

Ginny giggled, attempting to straighten her impossibly tangled hair. Her dressing gown had come loose, and Harry appreciated the view of a very short blue nightgown before she wrapped it around herself again.

"You need to keep your rucksack packed. Expand the inside so you can keep Dumbledore's Pensieve inside it, too. You never know if we'll have to leave in a hurry, and you'll want to keep that with you," she said. "Put all your most important things in there."

Harry patted the bed next to him where she'd been sitting. "Okay. Why don't you come back over here, and we can discuss it," he said as innocently as he could.

"Don't be such a cad," Ginny said, scowling in mock disapproval just as the bedroom door banged open, and Mrs. Weasley escorted Ron inside with a firm grip on his earlobe.

Harry noticed a distinctive red mark on the front of Ron's neck and had a hard time schooling his features. Ginny shot him a triumphant look as if to say I told you so.

"Ginny! What are you doing in here?" Mrs. Weasley asked, glancing from Ginny to Harry in alarm, but appearing to relax when she realized they were sitting on separate beds.

"I just came in to say goodnight to Harry, Mum. I was surprised to find him still awake. He was working," Ginny said, frowning her disapproval. When Mrs. Weasley turned to look at Harry with the same disapproving expression, Ginny gleefully stuck her tongue out at Harry behind her mother's back.

Mrs. Weasley released Ron, her attention now fully focused on Harry. "Harry! I told you I wanted you to get a full night's rest. You'll make yourself sick if you don't get some decent sleep, particularly after an injury. I want you in bed with the lights out this instant, young man.

"Ginny, I want you back in your own room and in your own bed, now, please. Ronald...get to bed. I'm going to have your father speak to you tomorrow."

Ginny scrambled from the room, blowing a quick kiss to Harry while Ron stomped to his own bed, a furious tic in his cheek. Mrs. Weasley put the lights out and firmly closed the bedroom door.

Harry waited for a few minutes in the thick silence. With everything that had happened in Diagon Alley that day, he'd forgotten that he and Ron had been rowing earlier that morning. Somehow, it all seemed rather pointless now.

"What happened?" he asked.

Ron grunted and rolled over noisily. Harry could hear him take several deep breaths before snarling, "She treats me like I'm seven, not almost eighteen. I'm bloody sick and tired of it."

Harry's body tensed, not certain he really wanted to know, but reckoned he should be a good friend and ask. "So what happened this time?"

"She came into the girls' room and caught Hermione and me snogging," Ron said, disgruntled. "Well...maybe my hands were a bit where they shouldn't have been, but that's beside the point. I'm of age! And this isn't even her house; it's yours."

Harry grunted noncommittally. He definitely didn't want to have this conversation or hear anything about what Ron and Hermione did when they were alone. Ever.

"Mum went storming in that room and dragged me out by my ear. Hermione was mortified. She probably won't even look at me, never mind kiss me, for a week," Ron said, moaning.

"Oi, Ron," Harry said, craning his neck away from Ron's voice. "Must you talk about that with me?"

"Harry, you're the one snogging my sister," Ron yelled, incredulously.

"I know, and you don't like hearing about it. I feel the same way about you and Hermione. You're...It's...You're both... It's just not right," Harry exclaimed.

Ron snorted. "Hypocrite."

"Wanker. What will your dad do to you tomorrow?" Harry asked curiously. Mrs. Weasley had threatened Ron with a talk with his father.

"Nothing," Ron said, snorting. "He'll be proud, if anything. But don't tell Mum. She's the only one who gets bent out of shape about it. Of course, with Ginny that's different. You'd best watch your step, mate."

"Yeah, thanks," Harry said, grumbling.

"Anytime," Ron replied, and Harry could hear the grin in his voice.

Harry punched his pillow and drifted off to an uneasy sleep.

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Percy Weasley sat in a nondescript interrogation room at the Ministry of Magic in the early hours of the morning following the attack on Diagon Alley. Percy hadn't yet been able to return to his flat to get some sleep, and he was exhausted. Things had gone from bad to worse as the day progressed, and Percy was left feeling utterly let down by everything he'd once believed.

Sighing heavily, he let his head fall onto the wooden table where he was sitting, resting it on his arms while he awaited whomever he was supposed to meet. He'd arrived in Diagon Alley earlier that day – or was it yesterday now – with Interim Minister Umbridge in order to assess the situation. What he'd found had been complete chaos.

Twenty-three Aurors were dead. Aurors! They were supposed to be among the best and brightest that Wizarding society had to offer. They were the elite, and twenty-three of them had been killed in one battle as if it were a day in the park. From the eyewitness reports Percy had obtained, it had been the Order of the Phoenix and Harry Potter who had actually succeeded in containing the situation. Not the Ministry, not the Aurors, but the same people Percy had turned his back on several years ago.

He ran a hand through his short hair and readjusted his glasses.

Of course, the official reports that were printed about what occurred in Diagon Alley contained nothing of the truth. Percy had watched as Dolores Umbridge altered all the facts and blatantly twisted everyone's

words to fit her own agenda. And everyone had stood uncomfortably aside, allowing her to do it. No one wanted to be the one to voice an objection, most likely knowing it would only mean a ticket to Azkaban.

Percy couldn't understand how everything had gone so wrong. After he'd become Head Boy and begun his lifetime dream of working for the Ministry, everything had spiraled out of control. He'd chosen the Ministry over his family, and at the time had been certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that he'd been doing the right thing.

He'd been shocked and dismayed when Cornelius Fudge had been forced to admit that Professor Dumbledore and Harry had been right all along. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had returned. He was back, and the Ministry had wasted precious time denying it. After Fudge's resignation and the appointment of Rufus Scrimgeour, Percy's faith had been restored. Scrimgeour was a Ministry man through and through. He played by a clear set of rules; everything was by the book, just the way Percy liked things.

That hadn't gone to plan, either. Scrimgeour had become obsessed with Harry Potter and swaying the public to believe he was doing the right thing. Percy reluctantly had to admit that he really wasn't doing much of anything, however. Then, shockingly, horrifically, the unthinkable had happened. Scrimgeour was murdered in his own home in the dead of night. All the security of the Ministry behind him, and they couldn't even guard the life of the Minister for Magic.

By then, Percy had reconciled with his family – well, with his parents, anyway – and even supplied them with information that might aid them. Percy wasn't stupid. He could see the Order was fighting You-Know-Who and had been doing so for a very long time. They knew how he worked, and they were making progress. It didn't take a genius to see that – only someone blinded by their own ambition. Ashamed, Percy had to admit that he had been just such a person.

He knew Dolores Umbridge personally. She, like him, craved rules and order and expected everyone else to act accordingly. He'd truly believed she'd make an excellent Minister. Perhaps he'd grown cynical by watching the demise of all his former heroes, but it didn't take long for Percy to see that Umbridge, too, was making loads of mistakes. Huge mistakes.

When he'd learned of her plans to incarcerate Ron, it was the final straw for Percy. He'd become an earnest informant for the Order, alerting them to anything that could possibly help them in their campaign. He'd resigned himself to the fact that it would be the Order who regained control. He only hoped that after the war, the Ministry could be reformed into the great institution it once was.

He'd listened today with a heavy heart as Dolores Umbridge painted a completely false image of that same Order. She was going to go after them and try and disband them. Percy knew that he had to try and stop her. He couldn't let her ruin the best chance of defeating You-Know-Who they had. She'd also started asking him questions about Bill, and any effects of Lycanthropy he might be exhibiting. The questions had sent a chill down Percy's spine.

After spending hours on-site collecting statements, he'd spent the evening back at his desk compiling them and preparing reports, dismayed by the way the statements had been misrepresented. Then, just as he was preparing to go home, Dolores Umbridge herself had visited his office.

Although wary, Percy couldn't help but feel pleased that she'd chosen him specifically for an assignment. He was a dedicated worker and knew the way the Ministry worked in and out. He appreciated when those in positions of authority noticed all his efforts. Minister Umbridge had asked him to speak privately with a visiting dignitary about a possible alliance.

Percy assumed in was a delegate from either Switzerland or France, as both countries had, as yet, refused to ally themselves with Britain in the fight against You-Know-Who. If he could succeed in forging this treaty, he would finally succeed in doing something great for the Ministry and the wizarding world at large. It was an opportunity he couldn't resist.

So, here he sat at three in the bloody morning waiting for an unknown dignitary for over an hour. Percy's patience was wearing thin. He jerked and sat upright when the door swung open, but the person who strode into the room was the last person Percy had ever expected to see there.

"Good evening, Mr. Weasley. My apologies for the lateness of the hour," Severus Snape said silkily.

"P-Professor S-Snape," Percy said, swallowing heavily. "What are you doing here?"

Professor Snape dusted off the only other chair in the room and gingerly sat down. "I believe Minister Umbridge informed you that I'd be here to discuss a possible truce between the Ministry and the Dark Lord."

Percy's jaw sagged. Certainly he couldn't be serious. What exactly was Umbridge offering that interested the Dark Lord? And how could she ever consider striking a bargain with Severus Snape? The man had murdered Albus Dumbledore, for Merlin's sake. He should be arrested and sent to Azkaban immediately to await trial.

"Erm..." Percy said hesitantly, uncertain what to say.

Professor Snape smiled coldly in that same calculating way Percy remembered from his Hogwarts days. A smirk that used to send students walking in the opposite direction just to avoid passing him in the corridor.

Percy had never had trouble with Snape the way Ron, Ginny, and the twins had – most likely because he was a very good Potions student and also appreciated the strict rules and guidelines involved with potion making. Professor Snape never liked him because he was a Gryffindor, but he never went out of his way to target him, either, the way he'd done with some of Percy's classmates.

"Minister Umbridge is interested in cooperating with the Dark Lord in order to cut down on the number of losses the Wizarding world had been experiencing," Professor Snape said in an oily voice.

"Losses for which he's responsible," Percy said hotly.

"That may be," Snape said, smiling coldly, "but Minister Umbridge appears willing to make some concessions."

"C-concessions?" Percy asked. "What kind of concessions?"

"She's agreed to provide us with some information. The end result of our having this knowledge will prove beneficial to both the Dark Lord and the Ministry," Snape said, his fingers held in a steeple in front of his lips. "I need your help to retrieve this information, Mr. Weasley."

The hairs on the back of Percy's neck suddenly stood on end. He licked his dry lips, trying to calm the frantic beating of his heart. "What information are you seeking?" he asked.

"The location of the Headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix," Snape replied, his eyes glinting.

Percy swallowed again, feeling a drop of sweat roll down his back. "Headquarters," he repeated numbly.

"Yes," Snape replied, drawing out the word as he ran a long, thin finger along his lip. "I believe you're aware of its location."

"Th-there's a charm," Percy said.

"Yes, I'm aware of the Fidelius Charm, and how it works, Mr. Weasley. I'm also aware that there are ways to counter it. I've taken certain steps, and now I'd like to see what you can tell me," Professor Snape said.

Percy folded his hands on his lap in order to hide their trembling. He was truly afraid. He'd promised to do what he had to do in order to inform the Order before Minister Umbridge acted against them, but now that he had to act, he felt very alone. He'd sworn an Unbreakable Vow to Alastor Moody, swearing not to reveal anything about the Order to anyone. If he merely said one thing about the location of Headquarters or anyone involved, he'd forfeit his own life.

He knew his mother kept the Weasley family clock with her wherever she went, and he also knew it would alert her instantly of his death. It would be all the warning the Order needed. But Percy didn't think he had the nerve to do it. He glanced at Professor Snape warily, uncertain what to do. Percy suddenly felt very young and over his head.

Snape smiled that cold, dangerous smile again. "Minister Umbridge believed you'd be eager to aid the Ministry in their endeavors, but perhaps you need some persuasion."

Raising his wand as if in slow motion, he snarled, "Crucio."

The pain was so intense, so all-consuming that Percy could think of nothing else. He could hear someone screaming from far away and only the rawness of his throat let him know that he was the one doing the screaming. Finally, the pain ceased, and he was left panting on the floor. He must have fallen from his chair at some point, although he couldn't recall doing so.

"I'll ask you again, Mr. Weasley. What is the location of the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix?" Snape said calmly, as if he were merely teaching one of his lessons.

"Don't you know?" Percy asked, gasping. He was amazed by his own cheek. Torture did strange things to people, he supposed.

"I believe there must be a new Secret-Keeper, for the knowledge eludes me," Snape said, showing the first sign of irritation.

"If you can't remember, than certainly you must know that even if I knew, I couldn't tell you," Percy said, finally rising to a sitting position.

"Mr. Weasley, you're trying my patience. If I could simply look into your worthless mind and retrieve the information I desire, I'd do so. Legilimency doesn't work against the Fidelius, however. As the charm weakens, it's the unconscious mind that becomes aware of the information first. Now, we've had more time for the wards to further weaken. Tell me the location of the Order's Headquarters," Snape said, moving his foot to step on Percy's fingers.

Percy whimpered as the pressure increased, certain his fingers would break. He knew what he should do, but he was afraid, so very afraid. The Sorting Hat had placed him in Gryffindor for a reason. Certainly he must have the courage somewhere deep inside him to do what he must. It was the difference between doing what was right and what was easy. Wasn't that what Professor Dumbledore had said once?

"Crucio," Snape hissed again.

Percy screamed, unable to stop. When Professor Snape released the curse, Percy vomited on the floor. He had to protect his family. They'd been right, and he'd been wrong. He only hoped that one day they'd know that he'd realized his mistake in the end. What could he do to ensure that his family wasn't hurt, however? What could he tell Snape that he'd already know? What could he say that would break his Vow but still not add more risk to his family?

Inspiration struck Percy like a lightening bolt-shaped scar.

"Harry Potter is working with the Order," he said, staring directly at Professor Snape.

"I'm aware of that, you incompetent fool. I asked you the location of their Headquarters. Where is Potter hiding?" Snape asked, showing his teeth.

Percy's felt a tightening sensation in his chest. It suddenly became very difficult to breathe, as if all the oxygen were being compressed

from his lungs. He looked up to see a startled expression on his former Potion master's face before his eyes rolled back in his head, and he knew no more. Percy's last thought before the darkness took him was relief that there was no pain at all.

Chapter Twenty-One

Loss

Harry awoke to someone roughly shaking him. He tried to turn away and burrow back into his pillow. He'd been having a very pleasant dream for once, involving chocolate Easter eggs, broomsticks, and giggling Snitches. The shaking only increased and soon a loud voice bellowed in his ear.

"Get up, Potter, and do it quickly. Weasley, get out of that bed."

Harry's eyes snapped open as he struggled to clear his head and recognize the voice. The room was shrouded in darkness, the only light coming from the dim glow of a lantern in the hallway. The big old house seemed abnormally silent, almost as if there had been a silencing charm placed outside his door.

Harry fumbled for his glasses, realizing it still must be the middle of the night or just before dawn, at best. He could hear Ron cursing sleepily from his own bed, groaning about the rude awakening. Finally locating his glasses, Harry shoved them onto his face, and his vision sharpened. Sighing, he realized that although he'd managed to eliminate the blurriness, he still couldn't see a thing.

"Who's there?" he asked, continuing to try and clear the sleep from his head.

"Whazzit?" Ron mumbled.

"Ooomf," Harry grunted as something bulky - yet not exactly hard - hit his head. He heard another thud before Ron made a similar sound.

"Pack those rucksacks with whatever you can in two minutes," Moody growled from somewhere near the door. Harry could see Moody's shadow as he moved into the hallway. "Get yourselves down to the kitchen. Keep the lights to a minimum; we're evacuating. Move."

Suddenly wide-awake, his adrenaline pumping, Harry leaped out of bed and yanked open the wardrobe. Using his wand for light, he magically expanded the rucksack Moody had tossed at him. He carefully put Dumbledore's Pensieve inside, along with the strange silver instrument, the Horcrux containers, and his most prized possessions. He'd just begun to throw some of his clothing inside - he was fortunate that he hadn't yet had the opportunity to shop, so he still didn't own very much - when his head burst with excruciating pain.

It was as if someone had suddenly clamped it in a vise and proceeded to squeeze at full force. He fell to his knees with a grunt, grasping his head in his hands as he laid his forehead on the cold floor. A wave of pure, unmitigated fury washed over him before the pain ended nearly as soon as it had begun. If it weren't for the fact that he was on his knees with his head on the floor, he would have thought he'd imagined

it. One thing he did know for certain: Voldemort was angry about something - very angry.

"Harry, are you all right, mate?" Ron asked groggily. He'd finally pulled himself out of bed and had nearly tripped over Harry.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Harry said, pulling himself to his feet and shaking his head.

He picked up his wand and resumed stuffing clothing into his backpack, feeling troubled. He hadn't had any kind of vision or felt any emotion from Voldemort in over a year. Dumbledore had suspected he was using Occlumency to keep Harry out. Why now? What had happened that would enrage Voldemort so much that he would temporarily drop his Occlumency shield? Did it have anything to do with the reason they were evacuating headquarters in the middle of the night?

"What are you doing on the floor?" Ron asked, beginning haphazardly to stash items into his own rucksack.

"Tripped," Harry mumbled, not wanting to alarm Ron just yet with the revelation that Voldemort had been in his head again.

"I wonder what happened," Ron said, beginning to look worried. "It must have been something big."

"Yeah," Harry said, zipping up his bag. "Are you finished?"

"I suppose," Ron said, staring at the messy room helplessly. "I can't see a bloody thing, anyway. How am I supposed to know what to take if I don't even know where we're going? Why does he want the lights out?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably just being Moody. Just take some extra clothing, your broom and anything really important to you. Come on, let's get downstairs. I want to find out what happened," he said, his hand instinctively touching the rope bracelet Ginny had given him to be certain he had it.

Ron shrank his broom before zipping his bag and following Harry from the room. They hurried down the dark stairs and into the kitchen where the lights blazed brightly. Harry had to blink and shield his eyes from the sudden glare.

Bill and Fleur were the room's only occupants. Standing near the large fireplace, they had their heads bent and appeared to be in the middle of a deep discussion. Fleur had her arm on Bill's shoulder, the side of her face still swathed in bandages from the wounds she'd received in Diagon Alley.

"What's going on?" Ron asked, staring back and forth between his brother and Fleur.

"It happened quicker than we thought it would," Bill said grimly. "The Order has been accused of treason against the Ministry. There are a handful of warrants out for arrests, and we believe the wards are already failing."

"Whoa," Ron said, sitting down heavily at the table. "Whose arrest? Dad's?"

Bill nodded. "And Moody's, McGonagall's and mine. Umbridge has had a grudge against McGonagall since her time at Hogwarts. We suspect there will be more names added as the day progresses. Our Interim Minister appears to have a source who's willing to talk."

"Percy?" Ron asked, grimacing slightly.

Bill winced and sucked in his breath.

"Non! Not your brozzer," Fleur said, once again gripping Bill's shoulder. "He's been giving information to us for months, now."

"Mum and Dad have gone ahead to Hogwarts, and we've already sent the owls along," Bill said, his face impassive. "Professor McGonagall is preparing for our arrival."

"That's where we're going? Hogwarts?" Harry asked, feeling both relieved and apprehensive about going to the school again. He hadn't been back since Professor Dumbledore's death.

"Yeah," Bill replied, nodding. "It's the safest location, and there are plenty of places to hide if the Ministry conducts a search. Hogwarts has a way of keeping things hidden. We've got the Floo open to the Hog's Head; Aberforth Dumbledore and Hagrid are expecting us."

"'Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it,'" Harry mumbled.

"Pardon?" Bill asked.

"Nothing," Harry said, shaking his head. "Just a memory. Where are Ginny and Hermione?"

"They haven't come downstairs yet. Moody is rounding up everyone," Bill replied.

"Move along quickly, girls," Anastasia Parkinson said as she pushed her two daughters through the kitchen door.

Iris stumbled in with sleep-filled eyes, still wearing her dressing gown, while Pansy was arguing with her mother and trying to turn back. Both she and Mrs. Parkinson had taken the time to put on robes, and they were all carrying small bags.

"Mother, I want to wait for Draco," Pansy whined.

"You let Draco's mother worry about him. If there's going to be trouble, I want you girls far away from it," Mrs. Parkinson replied firmly, her face pale and strained.

"Don't worry, Mother. Most likely it's just more of their melodrama," Iris said, yawning.

"I'm afraid not," Bill replied, ignoring the girls and looking directly at Mrs. Parkinson. "Our sources tell us that our location's been compromised. We have to move, now."

Mrs. Parkinson's hand shook as she pointed towards the fireplace. "Go on, girls," she said.

"Mother!" Pansy said. "We don't even know where we're going. I want to wait for Draco."

"The Floo will only let you go to one location," Bill said, handing Iris some Floo powder. "Just toss it."

Iris took the powder, a flicker of worry crossing her features as she glanced around the kitchen. She appeared to be looking for someone before she stepped into the flames and disappeared in a puff of green smoke.

"You next, Pansy," Mrs. Parkinson said, urging her daughter forward.

"Mother, I really think-"

"I don't want to hear what you think right now, young lady. This is serious, and I've had just about enough of your attitude. Get into that fireplace without another word," Mrs. Parkinson said sternly.

Pansy looked mutinous. She opened her mouth to reply, but her mother simply arched an eyebrow, and Pansy deflated. Breathing through her nose, she grabbed a handful of Floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace.

Once she'd gone, Mrs. Parkinson relaxed slightly. "She's just upset," she said, excusing her daughter's behavior.

"We're all upset, Madame," Fleur said, scowling at the fireplace. "Zome just handle eet better zan ozers."

Mrs. Parkinson's nose rose in the air as she took her own handful of Floo powder. "I wish you well," she said stiffly before she disappeared.

The kitchen door swung open again, and Fred, George and Shannon all hurried through. George kept his hand on Shannon's elbow.

"Did you see Ginny and Hermione on your way downstairs?" Bill asked, his gnarled face lined with tension.

"Hermione is looking for Crookshanks," Fred replied. "Want me to get them?"

"Yeah. Go hurry them along," Bill said. "Where's Moody?"

"I'm here," Moody replied, leading Draco and Narcissa Malfoy into the kitchen. Narcissa was dressed in a traveling cloak, and Harry noticed she'd taken the time to apply her makeup

"What is the meaning of rousing us at this indecent hour?" she asked imperiously.

"Zere eez a bit of an emergency, Madame. Please, we are taking ze Floo," Fleur said, waving her hand to hurry the Malfoys along.

"What emergency?" Narcissa asked.

"Death Eaters," Bill said flatly.

Narcissa's hand reached for her throat. "Here? You promised me you would protect my son," she said, spinning on Moody.

"That's what we're trying to do, ma'am," Moody replied gruffly. "As I recall, I banged on your door several times to try and hurry you along."

"Ze coloring you've chosen is zo exquisite. Eet eez always zo important to choose ze right colors. If you end up being killed because of ze time you've wasted, you will certainly be a beautiful corpse," Fleur said, blinking her long lashes.

Narcissa huffed indignantly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I'll go," Shannon said, stepping forward and looking as if she'd had more than enough excitement for one night.

"Bon," Fleur said. "Go, now."

Shannon glanced at George who nodded and handed Ginny's purple pet Pygmy Puff to her. "Go ahead and take Arnold. We'll be right behind you."

"I'll go check on the girls," Fred said, tearing his eyes away from Narcissa as if deciding she wouldn't pose any more of a problem.

"I'll come with you," Harry said just as the entire house shook from the force of a blast somewhere on the street. Harry had to grab the door jam to stay upright. Glasses and dishes fell from the shelves as cabinet doors opened wide, swinging on the hinges. Fleur stumbled with the Floo powder and would have dropped it without Bill's steadying arm.

"Looks like they're here," Fred mumbled, his eyes wide.

"Mother, go, now," Draco said, sounding panicked. He pushed his mother towards the fireplace and nearly jumped in after her.

"Ginny! Hermione!" Harry called, sprinting out the door, Fred on his heels.

The house shook again, knocking Fred and Harry to their knees. Harry was certain he heard the sound of the front door imploding. Looking up, he could see Ginny and Hermione on the stairs. The tremors from the last blast had caused both girls to lose their footing, and they had to grasp the railing to keep from plunging to the bottom.

"Who dares to disturb the sanctuary of my father's house?" Mrs. Black began screeching from behind the curtains that had been sealed over her portrait. They still hadn't managed to find a way to remove her from the wall, but the curtains had at least hidden their activity from her view. "Blood traitors, vermin, scum...Mudbloods! All invading the pristine beauty of the home of my ancestors."

Scrambling to his feet, Harry sprinted to the hallway where he had a clear aim at the entrance hall but could still remain behind the cover of the wall. He pointed his wand at the open hole where the door had once been and managed to Stun the first two Death Eaters who emerged. He kept his aim and continued firing, but it soon proved futile as there were entirely too many of them. They entered headquarters like a row of worker ants, demolishing anything in their path.

The house rattled and shook every few moments, and Harry wondered what was being done to the outside. Obviously the Death Eaters weren't trying to hide their activities from the Muggles, and he thought he could faintly hear police sirens in the distance.

He and Fred tried to cover the stairway from the attacking Death Eaters to give the girls time to regain their footing and continue their descent. A well-aimed Blasting Curse impeded their progress when it hit the railing, demolishing it. Harry felt his breath catch in his throat as he watched Hermione tumble over the side while Ginny fell down the remainder of the stairs. She landed with a thump at the bottom, clutching her knee.

Hermione managed to grab hold of the ruined railing, but she dangled precariously above the entrance hall, and several of the Death Eaters had already taken aim. Her legs swung wildly as she tried to reach the stairs to hoist herself back to the landing. Harry attempted to cover her with a Shielding Charm as he began firing hexes at the closest Death Eaters. Hermione screamed when a Blasting Curse exploded on the stairway near her left ear. Harry didn't think she'd be able to hold on much longer.

Battered and bruised, Ginny pulled herself to her feet just as Fred sprinted past her.

"I'll help Hermione, you just get to the kitchen," he said, nodding towards the door where Crookshanks had just sprinted.

Ginny nodded resolutely, dragging her leg behind her as she clutched the wall for support. Her gaze locked on Harry as she limped through the kitchen door. "Be safe," she mouthed before disappearing from sight.

Harry continued to fire spells as he tried to cover Fred and Hermione. Fred had scrambled up the stairs and grabbed Hermione's wrists, ducking beneath the stray spells that Harry was unable to block. Hermione was so panicked, however, she wouldn't let go of the railing and let Fred pull her over the edge. The Death Eaters continued to advance, and Harry was growing weary from the energy required to keep up his shield.

He leaned against the wall, wishing a stray curse would hit Mrs. Black's portrait and shut her up once and for all. She continued to shout orders and instructions at the incoming Death Eaters, despite the fact she couldn't see what was happening. Harry was flung backwards when a spell hit his shoulder, the same one that was still sore from the previous day. Pain radiated down his arm, causing him to grit his teeth to keep from crying out.

Suddenly, a volley of curses blasted towards the Death Eaters, catching them unaware and causing them to scatter for cover. Harry glanced up to see Ron standing in the kitchen doorway with a murderous glint in his eye. He kept one eye on Fred and Hermione as he blasted anyone who moved within striking distance.

Harry grinned, never so happy in his life to see Ron. Hoisting himself back to his feet, he once again renewed his powerful shield. He could almost feel the room crackling with magic, but knew he must be imagining it.

As if seeing Ron battling Death Eaters had given Hermione the courage to let go, she released the railing and allowed Fred to pull her to safety. She held onto his neck so tightly that Harry wasn't certain he'd ever be able to peel her off. Hermione had never liked heights very much. Fred wrapped his arm around her and half-carried her down the stairs.

"We'll cover you," Ron shouted, carefully watching their progress. "Just get her out of here."

"Come right behind us, little brother," Fred said, pulling Hermione through the kitchen door. Hermione leaned over Fred's shoulder and blasted two Death Eaters before the door closed behind her.

Ron and Harry continued to hold back the approaching herd with everything they had. Curses flew back and forth, creating rainbow-like reflections in the windows. Harry could see the flashing lights of Muggle police and rescue vehicles outside and wondered if they'd even be able to see the house. Had the wards and protections failed that completely?

Once they'd given Fred and Hermione the time to escape, Ron provided cover while Harry, again cradling his arm against his body, sprinted toward the kitchen. A Death Eater blasted a hole through the wall where he'd just been standing, forcing him to take a running dive through the air to reach the safety of the kitchen.

Another blast hit the ceiling above Ron, causing a barrage of debris to fall upon his head. A bright streak of blood appeared above Ron's eyebrow before he sprinted after Harry.

"You fools! Don't give them the opportunity to escape," Snape's voice sounded clearly from the entrance hall.

Harry froze, turning back. There was no way he was going to allow Snape to get away with this destruction of Sirius's house.

"Let it go, Harry," Ron said, grabbing Harry firmly by the shoulders as if reading his mind. "We're way too outnumbered here; the odds aren't in our favor. There'll be another fight on another day."

Harry knew Ron was right, but it galled him to admit it. Scowling and clutching his injured arm tighter to his body, he nodded curtly. Ron patted him on the shoulder.

The two friends stumbled toward the fireplace just as a large, unmasked Death Eater destroyed the kitchen door. Harry grabbed the Floo powder and tossed it as Ron pushed both of them into the fireplace. The Death Eater followed right on their heels, and Harry swore he could feel the man's hand on the back of his neck as the spinning sensation of Floo travel took him away.

Both boys fell out of the fireplace onto the floor of the Hog's Head in a tangle of limbs. Harry had just managed to roll onto his back and raise his wand before the Death Eater followed them out of the fireplace. He tumbled out, tripping over Ron's long legs and landing on the floor on top of him.

"Expelliarmus," Harry shouted, grabbing the wand as it sailed from the Death Eater's grasp before he could stop it.

Ron pushed him off his legs, scrambling backwards and away from the unarmed Death Eater, pulling Harry to his feet at the same time.

"Close the Floo, now!" Moody barked, raising his wand.

The tall barkeep that Harry recognized as Aberforth Dumbledore waved his wand toward the fireplace. Several more people standing around the center of the pub aimed their wands at the opening

"It's been sealed," Aberforth said, nodding.

Without another word or glance at the various people who had entered his pub with their wands drawn, he returned to his position behind the bar and began wiping glasses. The pub wasn't crowded at this late hour, but the scattered patrons who were inside watched the proceedings with interest.

"Amycus Carrow," Moody growled, glaring at the man who remained seated on the floor. "How nice of you to join us."

The lumpy-looking man glanced up and leered, his tongue lolling from the side of his mouth. "So, you've got me, eh, Moody? And what do you propose to do with me? You lot don't have the guts to kill me outright, and the Ministry isn't exactly cooperating with you these days, is it?"

He moved to stand, but Moody leveled his wand directly between the man's eyes. "Don't tempt me," Moody said, unblinking.

The man stared for a moment before sinking back to a seated position on the floor.

"He's right," Bill said. "We can't turn him over to the Ministry, so maybe we should just take care of him right here." Bill had a manic gleam in his eye that Harry had never before seen in him. He wondered how close it was to the full moon.

"You could," Aberforth said without looking up from the glass he was drying. "But then, you wouldn't much be following what my brother stood for, would you?"

Bill cursed beneath his breath. "What do we do, then?"

"I could take him to ze Ministry," Fleur said. "They haven't issued ze warrant for me, yet."

"No. I'll do it," a woman said, rising from her chair at the back of the pub and moving forward. She removed the cloak from her head to reveal herself as Rosmerta, the barkeep from the Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade's other pub.

"Madam Rosmerta," Bill said, surprised.

"Minerva asked me to be an extra pair of eyes here tonight," Rosmerta said, nodding at Aberforth. "I can take this scum to the Ministry."

Moody shook his head. "You can't. Umbridge will muck it up, and it will only implicate you as having ties to us," he said, growling in disgust.

"I won't take him to Umbridge," Rosmerta said, her eyes gleaming brightly as an ugly smile twisted her normally attractive face. "I have several friends in positions of authority on the Wizengamot. I know too many of their secrets for them to want me brought in for questioning."

Moody grinned, nodding his approval.

Carrow scowled at everyone. "It won't be enough to hold me."

Rosmerta put a hand to her head in an overly dramatized pose. "Why, sirs, I believe I've had some of my memory about the night I was placed under the Imperius come back to me. It must have been the shock of seeing his face again. I know how you've all been concerned about who did that to me, and what they might have learned when they did."

Moody chuckled. "I think that just might work, Rosie. You convinced me."

"Why thank you, dearie," Rosmerta said, batting her heavy black eyelashes. "You didn't think I'd allow that little stunt to go unchecked forever, did you?"

"You all think you're so clever," Amycus said, sneering. "You're no better than the rest of us. You gave up one of your own tonight without any qualms. Looks like he might have even been family to some of you."

"That's enough," Bill said, moving forward and holding his wand on the prisoner. "Shut your mouth. Okay, Rosmerta, take him in. Hagrid, let's get the rest of them up to the school."

Hagrid nodded, his eyes shifting as he wrung his cap in his hands. He nodded towards the table of Slytherins, indicating they should follow him.

"Wait a minute," George said, shoving Bill aside. "What is he on about?"

"Who did we give up?" Fred asked, moving to stand next to George.

"No one. He's trying to cause trouble. Don't let him," Bill said, attempting to pull the twins away so Rosmerta could reach Amycus.

Harry felt a knot of fear in his belly. He looked across the room at Ginny, whose eyes were wide and glued on her brothers. All the Weasley boys stood tensely, waiting with bated breath.

"The Ministry worker who gave us the location of your headquarters. Too bad about that Unbreakable Vow he took. Killed him right quickly, it did," Amycus said gleefully.

It wasn't so much the Death Eater's words as Bill's reaction to them that let Harry know it was true. The eldest Weasley brother appeared to sag, shutting his eyes tightly as if to block out the words. Fleur moved to him and began rubbing his back consolingly.

Harry had thought Bill had been acting strangely all night, now he knew the reason. Percy was dead; the Weasleys had lost one of their own.

"It's true?" George asked, staring at Bill as the color drained from his face.

"Oui," Fleur replied. "Your fazzer got word before we evacuated."

Ron and the twins all stood motionless, as if struggling to process this new information. It was Ginny who finally spoke.

"Does Mum know?"

Her voice sounded strange - not at all like her own. Harry moved across the room and stood behind her, resting his hand on her shoulder. She reached up and grasped his fingers, but kept her eyes firmly on Bill.

"I don't know," Bill replied. "I reckon Dad's probably told her by now."

"They're up at the castle. Professor McGonagall sent me ter bring yer all up ter Gryffindor tower. Yer folks are probably there," Hagrid said gruffly.

"You can all boo hoo over one less blood traitor later," Draco said, sneering. "For now, I don't fancy risking my own neck by staying here any longer than necessary."

"Shut your pie hole, Malfoy," Ron said, turning and shoving the Slytherin backwards. Draco stumbled several steps before landing on the floor.

The tone of Ron's voice let Harry know that his friend was close to exploding, even without his trademark red ears. Ron's skin was pale, and his eyes had a hard, deadened look to them that almost made Harry worry for Malfoy's safety. Not that he didn't think Malfoy deserved a good thrashing, but now wasn't the time, and he didn't think it would do any of the Weasleys much good, anyway.

"Take him out of here, Hagrid," Harry said, jerking his head toward Malfoy. "We're right behind you."

Hagrid nodded and quickly pulled Draco off the floor, lifting him off his feet in the process.

"Unhand me," Draco said, spluttering as he pulled free of Hagrid's grasp.

"I will not have my son mistreated," Narcissa said, jumping up to stand between Hagrid and Draco.

"I'd treat Hagrid kindly, if I were you, Mrs. Malfoy," Fred said, a dangerous glint in his eye, "since he's going to be the only thing standing between you and whatever else is out there on the walk to Hogwarts' gates. If your son insists on mouthing off to anyone older than a Hogwarts' second-year, he needs to learn to handle the fallout without his mummy's interference."

"But now isn't the time," Anastasia Parkinson said firmly, speaking for the first time. "Narcissa and Draco, follow Hagrid outside, please. Iris, Pansy, you, too." She began ushering all the Slytherins towards the door with a no-nonsense attitude. Hagrid gave a slight nod to the Weasleys before hurrying out the door.

"Ron," Harry said, keeping one hand on Ginny's shoulder while laying his other on Ron's and squeezing gently.

Ron jerked away and glared at Harry but appeared to deflate just as quickly. He stumbled more than walked towards the table where Hermione sat petting Crookshanks, watching him closely with tear-filled eyes. He slumped into the chair next to her, breathing deeply.

"We need to get up to the castle, as well," Moody said, glancing uncomfortably at all the Weasleys.

Harry wrapped his good arm around Ginny's waist, and helped support her as she limped towards the doorway. He struggled for a moment with their rucksacks before Fleur and Bill easily lifted them for him. Together with Ginny's family, they made the long, quiet trek up to the castle, each person lost in their own thoughts as they clung together. Harry didn't think the walk had ever taken so long.

By the time they'd entered Hogwarts' front doors, Harry was nearly supporting Ginny's full weight. She'd twisted her knee in the fall, and it was now swollen to twice its normal size. He could see it bulging beneath her jeans and knew the constriction of the fabric must be

hurting her terribly. She hadn't complained at all, and her silence worried him.

His concern for her and the rest of the Weasleys had overridden his apprehension about returning to Hogwarts, and now he was simply glad to be home. He might not be able to do anything for Ginny's deeper, emotional wounds, but he could at least alleviate the physical ones.

"I'm going to take Ginny up to the Infirmary," he said, addressing the group. "I think Ron and Hermione need some healing, as well."

Ron's head was still bleeding, and Hermione appeared ready to collapse on her feet. She wobbled as she leaned against Ron's broad chest.

"No," Mad Eye growled. "We've wasted too much time already. The Ministry could be here at any moment, and we all need to be safely tucked away. Go on up to Gryffindor tower. We'll get Poppy to treat you all there. Potter, that arm of yours needs tending, as well."

Harry couldn't argue that they had wasted lots of time, and his arm was throbbing painfully. The weary group of travelers climbed up to the seventh floor and found Professor McGonagall anxiously peering around the corner from her position in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Good Heavens! It's about time. What took you so long?" she asked, her gaze raking over them and lingering on Ginny and Hermione. Her eyes softened, and she rubbed her nose with a handkerchief while she counted heads.

"We were delayed, but we're all present and accounted for now," Moody said.

Professor McGonagall nodded, straightening her shoulders. "All right, then. I've told Filius to intercept the Ministry when they arrive. He'll tell them that I left on holiday and haven't returned. Hagrid said there were injuries; he's gone to fetch Poppy," she said briskly. Turning towards the Fat Lady, she said, "Sanctuary."

The Fat Lady swung open, admitting them inside Gryffindor tower. The fire was blazing in the hearth and despite the tense circumstances, Harry felt as if he'd come home. Mrs. Weasley sat by the fire, a well-worn lace handkerchief clutched in her hand. Her head rested on Mr. Weasley's shoulder as he absently ran his hand along her back, staring into the flames. The group of Slytherins sat huddled by the window, staring at the Gryffindor common room with open curiosity.

"Mum," Ginny whispered, sounding very young as she limped toward her parents.

Mrs. Weasley turned, startled. "Oh, Ginny," she cried, a flood of tears filling her eyes. She jumped up from the couch and ran to her daughter, enfolding her in her arms.

Harry stood back awkwardly, uncertain what he should do.

Mr. Weasley walked over to his sons, embracing each of them in turn before clapping Harry on the back. "You had trouble," he said, glancing at the various injuries.

"We're all okay," Bill said. "Death Eaters got inside Headquarters, but we all got out with only minor injuries. One of them followed Harry and Ron through the Floo, but we got him."

Shannon helped Hermione to a chair and sank down beside her. Harry moved to sit with them, hoping to give the Weasleys some privacy.

"Hagrid said you've all heard the news," Mrs. Weasley said, wiping her nose as she helped Ginny to the couch. Ginny kept her head on her mother's shoulder, tears streaming silently down her cheeks.

"The Death Eater told us that Percy was...that Percy was dead," she whispered, huddling closer to her mother.

Mrs. Weasley's face broke, and she buried it in Ginny's hair.

Fred and George each laid hands on their fathers' shoulders and led him to a chair while Fleur wrapped her arms around Bill. Ron moved towards Hermione, and although he silently took her hand tightly in his own, his face remained impassive. He stared straight ahead, but Harry didn't think he was really paying attention to any of them.

"I'm certain we'll have some more substantial information when Tonks arrives," Moody said, gruffly clearing his throat. He'd remained in the shadows by the portrait hole, speaking with Professor McGonagall in hushed whispers.

"You!" Mrs. Weasley shrieked, startling them all. She let go of Ginny and stood, pointing a shaky finger toward Moody. "I knew that Unbreakable Vow was a mistake, but you insisted. You made my little boy make that promise."

"Molly," Mr. Weasley said, moving to take her in his arms, but she jerked free.

"Don't you dare 'Molly' me," she snarled, her face crumpling. "He made Percy take that horrible Vow, and look what's happened to my baby. They probably tortured him to get their information."

Moody shifted on his feet and appeared as if he would respond, but Professor McGonagall placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"We don't know that, Mum," George said, although he couldn't meet her eyes. "Don't think about it now. For all we know, it could have just been an accidental slip."

"Unless he gave it to them willingly," Ron said darkly, his face turning scarlet.

Several of the Weasleys shouted in protest, but Ron stared back defiantly. "Don't tell me the thought hasn't crossed any of your minds. Percy hasn't exactly been the most reliable bloke, lately."

The others shifted uncomfortably without meeting anyone's eyes. The suspicion in the room - although unspoken - was palpable.

Mrs. Weasley collapsed in a puddle on the floor, sobbing hysterically.

Ron winced. His lower lip beginning to tremble, before he jumped from his chair and fled up the stairs towards the boys' dormitory. Hermione stood shakily, as if to follow him, but Bill stopped her.

"I'll go, Hermione; you need to see Madam Pomfrey," he said quietly.

Hermione sniffled and leaned her head onto Harry's shoulder, bursting into tears. Harry awkwardly wrapped his arm around her and patted her on the back, feeling extremely uncomfortable.

When Madam Pomfrey arrived in the tower, she walked straight toward Hermione, pushing Harry out of the way with her no-nonsense attitude. He moved to the couch where Ginny was seated, clutching her uninjured knee to her chest and looking so forlorn that it broke his heart. Wanting desperately to comfort her, but uncertain how, he spotted her rucksack lying on the floor where she'd dropped it.

He knelt beside it and unzipped the top, rummaging inside until he'd found what he was seeking. Ginny, he discovered, packed just like Ron with no order whatsoever. Moving back to Ginny, he sat down beside her and pulled her close, handing Snot to her with a sad smile.

Ginny sniffed but smiled tremulously as she took the bear in her arms. "He really is a stupid-looking bear, isn't he?" she asked with a small chuckle.

"Er...just a bit," Harry replied, tugging on one of Snot's lumpy ears.

"Oh, Harry. I don't know what to think. Percy could be a prat, but he was our prat. Poor Mum. I don't know what this is going to do to her," she said, putting her head on Harry's shoulder.

Harry remembered Mrs. Weasley's Boggart and shuddered, knowing she was living through her worst fear. He hoped she'd find a way to survive it, too. He hoped they all would.

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The next several days passed in a blur for Harry. Tonks had finally arrived at Hogwarts, informing them all of the sketchy details surrounding Percy's death. According to her source, Severus Snape was seen at the Ministry that night, and Percy had been called to a private meeting. No one knew exactly what went on behind the closed doors, but the meeting had ended with Percy's dead body and an enraged Severus Snape.

An examination of Percy's body had revealed that he had indeed been tortured, but from Snape's angry demeanor, it was suspected that Percy hadn't given up the information that the former Potions master was seeking.

This was both a relief and a new source of misery to the Weasley family. Percy hadn't betrayed them, after all. In fact, he'd apparently given his own life while trying to protect them, but he'd died before they'd ever truly had the chance to mend their row. Mrs. Weasley was taking it the hardest, and Madam Pomfrey had been regularly giving her a Calming Draught. The rest of the family was also struggling in their own way.

Charlie had arrived from Romania and attempted to get the Ministry to release Percy's body to him, but the Ministry had refused. They wanted to speak with Arthur and Molly and demanded to know their whereabouts. Charlie had insisted he didn't know and had barely escaped before a warrant was issued for his arrest, as well.

While Bill, Fred, George and Ginny appeared to be coming to terms with it, Ron was expressing his grief in anger. His temper boiled over quickly, and he constantly snapped at everyone. Fred and George were far less boisterous than usual, and Harry had spotted each of them blankly staring off into space on numerous occasions.

The one thing that had struck him most about the Weasley grieving process was the way they all clung together, apparently gaining support from one another's company. Even Ron, with his foul mood, chose to stay in the room and argue with his siblings rather than seek the solace of his room. Harry remembered how he had felt after Sirius died - he'd want company, but as soon as he had it, he'd feel the need to be alone. None of the Weasleys wanted to be alone at all.

Harry, Ron, Charlie, Fred and George were all sharing a single room in the boys' dormitory. Bill and Fleur were on another floor, with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley taking a third. Ginny had told him she was bunking in the girls' dormitory with Hermione and Shannon. Harry still hadn't figured out exactly where Moody was staying. The Slytherin women were all sharing one of the girls' dormitories, but Draco had refused to room with any of the Gryffindor boys. Instead, he'd taken the first-year boys' dorm all on his own.

One afternoon, after another row among the Weasleys over the Ministry's refusal to release Percy's body, Harry discovered the flying carpet that he'd found amidst Dung's belongings rolled up at the bottom of his rucksack. Pulling it out with a delighted grin, he gathered Ron, Hermione and Ginny and told them to follow him out to the Quidditch pitch.

"Honestly, Harry," Hermione said, grumpily blowing a stray lock of hair from her mouth. "I don't want to go to the Quidditch pitch. Whatever it is you want to show us, I'm certain we've seen you do it a hundred times already. We all know you can fly. I want to make use of our time here and do some research in the library."

"You haven't seen this," Harry said, continuing to smile as he marched toward the pitch. "We've been holed up in the library since we got here, Hermione. I think we all need some stress relief."

He could see that he'd piqued Ginny's curiosity, and Ron was always up for a trip to the pitch. It was only the fact that he hadn't brought

his broom that kept Hermione moving, however. He had the carpet wrapped in the Invisibility Cloak and tucked firmly underneath his arm.

"Of course I've been there a lot," Hermione said crossly. "The Hogwarts library is extensive, and now that I'm of age, I can get anything I want out of the Restricted Section."

"If you want to go back in an hour, I won't stop you," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "This is something that might interest you, Hermione. It's something I inherited from Sirius. I found it at Dung's place, and I nicked it back."

"You didn't nick it if it's yours," Hermione said, frowning her brow. "You didn't mention taking anything but the locket."

Ron's eyes opened wide, suddenly alight. "Blimey, Harry...I forgot. Can I have a go after you?"

"A go with what?" Ginny asked, her head moving back and forth between them.

Harry stopped when they reached the pitch. "With this," he said, removing the Invisibility Cloak and revealing the flying carpet hidden beneath.

"Wicked," Ron said, eyeing it appreciatively.

"Wow, Harry!" Ginny said, "How could you have forgot to mention this?"

"Those are illegal," Hermione said, but Harry could tell it was simply an automatic response. She ran her hands along the fabric inquisitively, examining each side.

"I know, but I can't imagine Sirius's family paid much attention to the laws, anyway. I think they were kind of like the Malfoys and thought they were above them," Harry replied.

"Sirius wouldn't have cared anyway," Ron said, sniggering. "Didn't you tell me he also charmed a motorbike to fly?"

"Yeah," Harry said, grinning. "That's how Hagrid first brought me to Privet Drive. I used to have dreams about flying motorbikes as a child, never imagining it might have actually been a real memory. The Dursleys forbade me to mention it."

"How does it work?" Hermione asked.

"No clue," Harry replied, grinning. "Should be fun to find out, though." He placed the carpet on the ground, laying it out flat. "I think we can all fit."

"I'm not getting on that thing! You don't even know how to fly it," Hermione said, exasperated.

"Never stopped me before," Harry said, dropping to his knees. It couldn't be that hard. When he'd learned to fly a broomstick, he'd simply had to say 'up' and the rest had come naturally.

"Up," he said.

Nothing happened, although he thought he detected ripple of power course through the fabric.

Ron sniggered while both Ginny and Hermione tried to suppress giggles.

"Give me a minute," he said. Remaining on his knees, he leaned over so his hands rested on the edge of the carpet. He shut his eyes, allowing his body to relax.

"Up," he repeated, and this time it worked.

The carpet rose in the air rather shakily, creasing and folding and causing him to almost lose his balance as he shifted his weight. It took him a few minutes, but he caught on rather quickly. Leaning from side to side controlled the movement and pulling the front up or down controlled the height. It wasn't nearly as streamlined as a broomstick, and it didn't react to his lightest touch the way his Firebolt did, but it was enjoyable nonetheless.

He whooped as he gathered speed, looping around and through the Quidditch hoops. Once he was certain he could control it, he sped down and pulled up short in front of his friends, grinning madly.

"How is it?" Ginny asked, her eyes glowing.

"It looked brilliant," Ron said, smiling in a way Harry hadn't seen since he'd been informed of Percy's death.

"It's not as good as a broomstick, but it certainly beats a Portkey," Harry said, grinning. "Climb on."

Ginny needed no further encouragement. She sat down next to him, resting her hand on his thigh and sending jolts of electricity down his leg.

Ron sat behind him and held his hand out to a reluctant Hermione.

"I don't know about this," she said, sitting down gingerly. "I'm really not very fond of heights."

"I remember," Harry laughed. "It's easier than Buckb...er...Witherwings, Hermione. At least the carpet won't bite your hand off."

"That's not very encouraging," Hermione said, yelping as Harry pulled on the edge of the carpet, causing it to rise sharply in the air.

She shrieked as Harry continued to increase the speed, soaring high above the pitch and zooming out over the lake. Ginny's laughter only encouraged Harry to climb higher.

Hermione shrieked again, burying her face in Ron's jacket. Ron wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, grinning from ear to ear.

"Just relax and enjoy it, Hermione," Ron shouted over the wind.

"Enjoy it!" Hermione screamed, her voice only slightly muffled as she clung to Ron's chest. "Enjoy it! I hate flying!"

Harry aimed the carpet at the top of the Astronomy tower, whooping with glee as they caught a strong wind that pushed them along. It wasn't nearly as fast as his Firebolt, but being able to share the experience with the others was new and exciting.

He soared around the castle, diving in and out of the turrets. He skimmed over the forest and waved to Grawp when they spotted the young giant pulling some trees out by their roots. Finally, conceding to Hermione's screams, Harry landed on the Quidditch pitch, feeling happier than he had in days.

"That was brilliant," Ginny said, her nose and cheeks pink from the cold. Her eyes were sparkling, and Harry felt pleased he could give that to her. When he'd been sad after losing both Sirius and Dumbledore, flying had always helped him feel better, too.

Hermione, on the other hand, appeared more than happy to be back on the ground. She'd scrambled off the carpet after they'd landed, straightening her wig. Harry half expected her to lean over and kiss the ground.

"Didn't you enjoy it at all, Hermione?" Harry asked, feeling a little disappointed.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Well," she said, shrugging. "I really don't like to be up so high, but it was nice to spend the time with all of you."

"But now you want to go back to the library," Ron said, finishing her thought.

Hermione crinkled her nose. "Well..."

"It's all right. I want to give it a go myself, then I'll meet you for supper," Ron said.

Hermione frowned, creasing her brow. "I suppose..." she said, trailing her words.

"Suppose what?" Ron asked, clearly confused.

"Well, it's a long walk back to the castle, and I am rather cold. Do you suppose you could give me a lift?"

Ron's face beamed with happiness. "You want me to give you a ride? On the carpet?" he asked, delighted.

Hermione nodded warily. "Only don't go as high as Harry did."

Harry took Ginny's hand and moved back. "It's all yours. We'll wait here," he said, grinning.

Ron and Hermione climbed on and began floating slowly toward the castle. Harry created a small fireball to keep Ginny and him warm while they awaited Ron's return. Ginny's smile slowly faded, and she grew quiet as she warmed her hands over it.

"All right, Ginny?" Harry asked quietly, gently nudging her with his shoulder.

"I'm okay," she said. "It's strange. Sometimes, I get so involved in whatever I'm doing that I forget. Then when I remember, I feel guilty for forgetting. Does that make any sense?"

Harry smiled tightly. "Perfectly."

Ginny nodded. "I suppose you would know."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Try not to feel guilty, Ginny. I know what that must sound like coming from me, but I also know the guilt can eat you alive, and there's still absolutely nothing you can do to change what's happened."

"I know that," Ginny said, throwing her hands in the air. "But I still wish I'd said something more to him before it was too late. We talked at Christmas, but just barely. He was my brother, and I was so angry with him. Now he's gone, and I'll never have the chance to set things to rights."

Harry watched, dismayed, as a single tear fell slowly down Ginny's cheek. Reaching out a finger, he gently wiped it away.

"I know," he said, his throat aching. "But you know what? No matter how much time you had, or how much you could have said, the ache would still be there now. I don't think there's ever enough time."

Ginny leaned her head on Harry's shoulder. "Thanks, Harry. I love my family to bits, but sometimes it's hard to get away from them."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I've noticed." A thought occurred to him, and he abruptly stood, holding out his hand to her. "Come with me. I've someplace I want to show you."

Ginny glanced at him curiously, but she took his hand and followed him, nonetheless. As they walked along the edge of the lake, they could see Ron soaring above. Harry chuckled watching as Ron's long legs dangled off either side of the carpet.

"He's having fun," Ginny said, smiling. "Thanks for doing that for him, Harry. I think Ron is having the hardest time of all, since he never really even spoke to Percy after he came back."

"I know," Harry said quietly. "Part of that is my fault."

"Your fault?" Ginny said, startled. "How could it be your fault?"

"Percy sent Ron a letter at the beginning of our fifth year, warning him away from me. He said Ron would do better to cut his ties. Ron

never hesitated and destroyed the letter," Harry said, smiling fondly. "He chose me," he whispered, blinking the sudden moisture from his eyes.

"Well, of course he did. It's not your fault Percy was being a prat," Ginny said, firing up at once. "Even Percy saw that at the end. That's what upsets me the most - that he did realize his mistake, but he wasted all that time that we could have had him in the family. It shouldn't have been that way."

"No, it shouldn't. Voldemort has a knack for destroying families. Here," he said, pointing to a spot by the lake that was well secluded with brush. It was a small, peaceful clearing with a nice view of the water.

"I came here a few times when I wanted to be alone after Sirius died," Harry said.

"It's beautiful," Ginny replied, looking around thoughtfully.

"I thought...er...maybe you'd like to use it if you...er...well, if you ever wanted some time with your thoughts," Harry said, running a hand through his hair.

"Thanks, Harry, Ginny said, her eyes filling. "D'you mind if I stay here a bit now? Just to think?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't mind. I'm going to go find Ron."

Harry had walked back to the Quidditch pitch and waited for nearly an hour with no sign of his friend. Finally deciding that Ron must have already gone back to the castle, Harry went to find him. He noticed the tense atmosphere in the common room as soon as he entered.

Shannon and George were sitting in the squishy armchairs by the fire. Harry nodded to them as he walked toward the stairs.

"I wouldn't go up there," George said. "Ron's in a right state."

"Why? What happened?" Harry asked.

"Same as always - another Weasley row. Mum and Moody went at it again, and Ron took Moody's side. Mum burst into tears, and Charlie laid into Ron for upsetting her. It was ugly."

Harry nodded. "Thanks for the warning. I'm going to go see him, anyway."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," George replied, shrugging.

When Harry entered the dormitory, he found Ron lying on his bed with his arms behind his head, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Hey," Harry said, carefully edging into the room.

"Hey," Ron replied, unmoving.

Harry walked over to his own bed and sat on the edge, glancing around uncomfortably.

"Why'd you leave? I thought we'd do some more flying," Harry said.

Ron shrugged. "I saw you and Ginny talking, and it looked pretty serious. I didn't want to interrupt, and I certainly didn't want to talk anymore about Percy, so I came inside."

"Ron..." Harry said, uncertain what to say. It wasn't as if he and Ron ever really discussed any of this emotional stuff with each other. That was usually Hermione's area.

"Don't, Harry," Ron said, snapping. "What? D'you want to say 'I told you so'? D'you want to remind me that you warned me about regretting not doing what was important when I had the chance?"

"No," Harry replied, stung.

"Then what? What can you possibly say that will change anything?" Ron shouted.

Breathing deeply to control his rising temper, Harry said, "Nothing. There's nothing I can say that will change anything, Ron. You're angry that you didn't get to have it out with Percy, but rowing with the rest of your brothers won't make it stop."

"Yeah, you're such an expert on this stuff, huh, Harry?" Ron snarled.

Harry flinched. "Unfortunately, I've had some experience," he said through clenched teeth.

Ron paled, deflating. "Shite, Harry. I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me - I keep snapping at Hermione, too. Merlin, I need a drink."

Harry pursed his lips and stared at Ron a moment before moving to his rucksack and digging through it. Pulling out his remaining bottle of Everlasting Firewhisky, he said, "That's one problem I can solve."

One corner of Ron's mouth quirked upwards. He grabbed the bottle and took a long swig, setting on the floor with his back resting against his bed. He folded his legs and handed the bottle to Harry, who also took a swig.

When he passed the bottle back to Ron, a brief flicker of concern crossed his friend's face. "Hermione is going to kill us. We haven't even had supper yet," he said. Despite his concern, he took a long draught of the Firewhisky, wincing slightly from the burn as it went down.

Harry shrugged, taking the bottle. "So? We are having supper - it's just a liquid supper," he replied, grinning.

"Yeah," Ron said, chuckling. "You tell Hermione that when she bursts in here and finds the two of us pissed."

Harry shook his head. "Nuh-uh. She's your girlfriend. You get to deal with it, while I quietly slink out of the room," he replied, laughing.

"Thanks a lot, you git," Ron said.

They sat on the floor trading the bottle back and forth for quite some time. If it had been a normal bottle, it would have been long empty by the time the winter sky had darkened, and the candles in the dormitory lit. Neither of them felt any pain, and the Firewhisky had long since stopped burning as they swallowed it. Both boys had uncurled their legs and sat sprawled on the floor - each kicking the other as they traded good-natured barbs.

It was only after they'd been drinking happily for some time that the conversation drifted back to Percy.

"I just wish I could have said 'Happy Christmas' while he was at Grimmauld Place, you know? What's so hard about saying Happy Christmas?" Ron asked, slurring his words.

For some reason, Harry found it very difficult to follow Ron's train of thought. He furrowed his brow, concentrating on enunciating his words. "Not hard at all. Happy. Christmas. Easy, see. Only two words."

"Exactly! Two words. So how come I couldn't say them?" Ron asked.

"Dunno," Harry replied. "But he didn't say them, either."

Ron blinked, nonplussed. "What?"

"You're beating yourself up for not saying 'Happy Christmas,'" Harry said, stressing each word to ensure he had his facts straight. "But, did Percy say it to you?"

"Well...no," Ron replied, "but he did show up for dinner."

"Yeah...well, he owed you the apology, right?" Harry asked, taking another swig.

Ron eyes widened to the point they were bugging out of his head. "We both made mistakes!" he shouted.

"'Course you did - you're Weasleys," Harry said, kicking Ron's leg.

Ron grinned, his eyes focusing somewhere beside Harry's head. "Watch out, or I'll tell my sister you said that, Potter."

Harry tried to control the grin he felt overtaking his face, but it was useless. He felt giddy and didn't care if Ron knew it.

"You're in love with my sister," Ron said, grinning.

"Yep," Harry answered unflinchingly, the grin remaining plastered on his face.

"You're serious," Ron said.

Harry shrugged. "She makes me happy. She makes me want things that I never thought were meant for me...and I could easily spend every waking moment snogging her senseless."

"Eww, Harry," Ron said, taking a long swig. "I'm not pissed enough to hear any details."

"I am," Harry said, resting the back of his head on the top of his bed. Realizing it made him nauseous, he quickly lifted it back up, causing the room to spin. "Whoa."

"Hermione is an extremely good kisser," Ron said, his brow furrowed. "I don't like to think that it was Vicky who taught her, though."

"Maybe it wasn't," Harry replied, trying to measure the size of a candle's flame with his fingers. "Maybe she's just naturally a good kisser."

"Maybe she just likes kissing me," Ron said, his head lolling to the side with a silly grin. "There's lots she likes to do with me."

Harry's eyes bulged. "Exactly how much does she like to do with you?" he asked, not certain if he really wanted to know.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Ron said, chuckling.

"Er...no, not really," Harry said, suddenly giving in to the uncontrollable urge to laugh. "I keep imagining you and Hermione getting carried away and her wanting to stop to pull out her notes."

Ron kicked Harry in the leg, hard. Harry began convulsing with laughter, falling to his side and finding it impossible to sit up again.

"If Hermione has read any notes on pleasing her man, I'm not complaining," Ron said. "That girl has always been good about doing her homework."

Harry began waving his arms in the air. "Stop! No more. I don't want to know."

"I thought you said you were drunk enough to hear this," Ron said, picking up his wand and using it to make the flame on the nearest candle alternately dim and flare.

"I'm drunk not," Harry said, staring at the ceiling. He furrowed his brow. That didn't sound right...did it?

"Yeah, you always lie on the floor with your feet on the bed, Harry," Ron said, suddenly doubling over laughing. In the process he dropped his wand, and it rolled under Harry's bed. "Oh...crap."

"I'll get it!" Harry shouted. He knew he could do this. He dove under the bed, grasping the wand in his fingers and rolling out on the other side. "Ha! Told you I could get it."

"Yeah, you're my hero," Ron said, snorting.

Harry flung the wand and pelted Ron off the head with it.

"Ow!" Ron cried, rubbing his forehead vigorously.

"Seriously," Harry said, peeking over the top of his bed, but keeping it between Ron and him like a shield. "Exactly how far have you and Hermione gone?" he asked, slurring his words.

"Are you drunk enough to know?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, I am," Harry replied, hiccupping in confirmation.

"We haven't gone all the way...but not from lack of trying on my part. Further than I did with Lavender, anyway," Ron said.

Harry pursed his lips without commenting.

Ron grimaced. "How about you and Ginny?" he asked, his entire body tensing.

Harry snorted, taking another sip of the Firewhisky.

"What? I told you," Ron said indignantly.

"Yeah, but I'm not telling you. You'll hit me," Harry said. The entire room was spinning, and he was having trouble focusing on exactly where Ron's voice was coming from.

"I won't hit you," Ron said, moving from a seated position onto his knees. "Just tell me quick - and no real details."

"I'm not telling you anything. You nearly choked me for tickling her. Who knows what you'll do if I tell you I've seen her naked," Harry said, swallowing heavily. "Well...almost naked, anyway."

"I told you not to tell me that!" Ron exclaimed, putting his hands over his ears.

"That's why I'm not going to tell you about the almost naked part," Harry said, exasperated.

"Well, someone told me because now I know. Now I have to do something about it," Ron said, his face turning alarmingly red. "That's my little sister, Harry."

"I know. That's why I'm not telling you that I know how much of her is freckled," Harry said earnestly.

Ron reached for his wand, but he fumbled, and it rolled under the bed once again. Ron dove for it on one side while Harry did on the other, each of them struggling on the floor to reach it first.

That was how Hermione and Ginny found them when they finally came up to the dorm to see why the boys had skipped supper. Ginny had spent a long time down by the lake lost in her own thoughts and returned to find Hermione feeling rather miffed that Ron hadn't joined her for supper. They'd shared a nice meal together before going in search of the boys, and Ginny felt better than she had in some time.

"What in Merlin's name are you two doing?" she asked, giggling at the sight of Harry's bed shaking as the two boys wrestled beneath it with their legs sticking out on either side.

Both of them jumped at the sound of her voice, cracking their heads on the bottom of the bed. After a considerable amount of time, they managed to extract themselves on opposite sides of the bed and sat on the floor rubbing their heads. Both wore glazed expressions and had high color on their cheeks. They'd obviously been drinking - heavily. Ginny giggled at the way their eyes refused to focus. Hermione, however, was not amused.

"Ron!" she shouted, stamping her foot. "You two have been drinking, and you haven't even had supper. I thought you were going to meet me."

Ron turned toward his girlfriend, his expression dazed. "Oh, yeah...I was. I said that after I gave you that romantic ride on the flying carpet, right?" he asked, obviously pleased he remembered.

"Ginny!" Harry exclaimed, an enormous smile spreading across his face. It was the kind of smile he usually only wore if he was flying, and Ginny always thought he was beautiful when he grinned that way.

His hair was tousled, and he ran a hand through it as he tried to keep up with the conversation. Turning towards Ron with an incredulous expression, he said, "It wasn't romantic. Hermione hates to fly."

Ron stuck out his chest, slurring his words. "Was so romantic. I wasn't like you just trying to make it go as fast as it would go so the girls would scream on the dives."

Harry looked crestfallen, and he turned wide eyes towards Ginny. "Did you think it was romantic, Ginny?"

The corner of Ginny's mouth twitched - she found him rather adorable in this condition. "Of course it was, Harry," she said.

"She's just saying that 'cuz it's you. Our flight was definitely more romantic, wasn't it, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Why is everything always a competition with you two?" Hermione asked, exasperated.

"I think it's a bloke thing," Ginny replied, giggling. "I remember Mum throwing a wobbly once when we were younger because all my brothers were rowing about who had the biggest scoop of mashed potatoes."

"Yeah! Mine was definitely the biggest. Charlie kept fluffing his with his fork to try and make it look bigger than it was," Ron said, looking rather put out with Charlie.

Hermione shook her head and picked up the bottle of Firewhisky. "You've had enough of this," she said, Banishing it.

"Hey!" Harry yelped, blinking. "That was my birthday present, and I'm not done with it."

"Then where is it?" Hermione asked, impressing Ginny with her quick thinking.

Harry looked perplexed. "I...You...I don't know, but I'm not done with it."

"Come on, off the floor with you, Harry," Ginny said, tugging him to his feet and pushing him back down on his bed. "The party's over."

"It is?" Harry asked, allowing her to manhandle him.

"Yeah. We've got some news," Ginny said, a chill running down her spine. She wished she could just leave him this way and allow him to continue his party with Ron, but this couldn't wait. She sat beside him, ruffling his hair.

"What news?" Ron asked, sitting on his own bed.

"I need you sober," Hermione said, waving her wand in the air. Both Harry and Ron shook their heads, blinking.

"Oi. I didn't like that," Harry said, slapping his hands over his ears repeatedly. "It made my ears pop."

"Why did you do that, Hermione?" Ron whinged, shaking his head.

"Because I have something important to tell you, and I didn't want you giggling through it. The Order is having an impromptu meeting downstairs about Umbridge. Apparently, she's called a press conference at the Ministry in three days. She claims to have struck a deal with Voldemort to ensure peace."

"What? Voldemort will never stick to that," Harry said, finally giving the girls his full attention.

"The Order doesn't think so, either," Hermione replied. "According to Tonks's source, Umbridge wanted to have a warrant issued for your arrest, Harry. She still doesn't have enough clout with the Wizengamot to push it through, but they did agree to bring you in for questioning."

"Have to find me first, don't they?" Harry asked, scowling.

"It gets worse, Harry," Hermione said, biting her lip.

"What do you mean?" he asked, and Ginny could feel his entire body tense.

Hermione took a deep breath before resting her hand on Harry's arm as if to keep him calm. "This bargain that she's supposedly struck with Voldemort is very dodgy. No one knows exactly what it entails, but as part of a show of good faith on her part, she released Wormtail."

"What?" Harry exploded, jumping from the bed and jerking his arm away from Hermione. His eyes were wild, and Ginny could feel the power radiating from him. It was almost frightening.

Hermione recoiled, stricken. "She's going to give all the details at her press conference. Tonks suspects she's going to use it as a push to have herself instated as full Minister and not just for the Interim."

"We'll see about that," Harry said, his voice deadly calm. Ginny moved toward him, resting her hand on his shoulder. He was so tense, she feared he was ready to snap.

"What do you mean? Harry, you can't be anywhere near there. She's got the order to bring you in for questioning, and if she succeeds in securing the Ministry, she'll have you arrested," Hermione said tearfully.

Harry's face hardened as a steely glint of power stole into his eyes. He looked fierce, and Ginny couldn't help feeling proud of the man he was becoming.

"Then maybe it's time for the Chosen One to tell the people what's really going on - whether they want to hear it or not," Harry said, his jaw clenched in determination.

Ginny slipped her hand into his and squeezed it gently. Whatever happened, she knew they'd all be by his side.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Treaty

Dear Hermione,

I really don't know what to say. I hope you and Ron both came through everything okay. I wish I could be there with you. The two of you meant more to me than you'll ever know, could ever understand, really. I probably should have told you that, but I could never seem to find the right words.

I'm leaving you the Marauder's Map. I'm certain that brilliant mind of yours will come up with some fantastic uses for it, if only to catch out-of-bounds students once you're a Transfiguration professor. Do me a favor and go easy on them, okay? Remember, we were those out-of-bounds students once upon a time.

If you don't use it as a teacher, at least give it to one of your and Ron's kids to carry on our legacy.

Take care of Ginny for me, Hermione. She'll need you

Harry put the letter aside, sighing. He was still having such difficulty writing them. Did he really sound like such an idiot when he spoke? Maybe it was because he just couldn't bear to say goodbye...

Running a hand through his mussed-up hair, he pushed the letters aside and let his head fall on the table. He'd been in the library all evening researching Rowena Ravenclaw but felt no closer to a revelation than he had when he'd started. Ron and Ginny had already retired, but Hermione was still somewhere in the library. Harry wasn't certain what she was researching. She loved having run of the whole place and tended to spread out her work on multiple tables, flitting from spot to spot as inspiration struck.

"Hermione," he called, packing up his parchment and quills and tossing them in his bag.

"Over here, Harry," she replied from somewhere in a darkened corner. He thought her voice sounded rather panicked, and he could hear parchment rustling. He knew it meant that tonight's research involved the damn bit of Voldemort's soul that was stuck inside him. Whatever she was doing, she obviously wasn't ready to share it, and Harry was feeling too discouraged to ask.

"It's late. I'm going to stop by the Owlery to see Hedwig before going to bed. Are you almost done here?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll be there shortly. Say hello to Hedwig for me," Hermione said, her voice noticeably relaxing.

"All right. Goodnight, Hermione," he called, leaving the library and winding his way toward the Owlery.

The castle was eerily quiet. Even though the corridors were normally empty at this late hour, something still felt different. The walls seemed to radiate a hollow loneliness as Harry's footsteps echoed on the cold stone stairs. Things had been tense amongst everyone since the revelation that Umbridge had released Wormtail and arranged a truce with Voldemort. The members of the Order knew her treaty was doomed from the start and were working on ways to covertly attend her press conference that was scheduled for the following evening.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all planning on attending, as well, but Mrs. Weasley was adamant that Ginny stay safely behind. Percy's death had unhinged Mrs. Weasley completely, and she'd resumed her efforts to try and shield all of them from any further violence. Although she wasn't happy about it, Ginny didn't have the heart to push her mother right now and had agreed to remain at Hogwarts.

Harry didn't know what concessions Umbridge had agreed to, but he knew she had to be stopped. He'd barely clamped down on the fury he felt over Wormtail's release after everything they'd gone through to capture him. Ron had nearly died! Wormtail's manipulations had landed Sirius in prison for twelve years. Harry's own parents had lost their lives because of the little rat's cowardice – and Umbridge had just let him walk away.

Harry slammed his fist into the wall just thinking about it, causing a nearby portrait of a lady in Renaissance finery to shriek in alarm. He surveyed the corridor quickly, ready to sprint if he saw signs of Filch approaching. He'd seen the old caretaker skulking around on several occasions. Harry had no idea if, since he technically wasn't a student, Filch still had any authority over him, but he didn't want to find out.

As Harry climbed the final stairs into the Owlery, he caught a flash of blue out of the corner of his eye. Drawing his wand, he inched inside the door.

"Who's there?" he called. "Show yourself."

Hedwig hooted from her perch and swooped down to land on his shoulder, nipping his ear affectionately. He could see Pig up in the rafters with several of the school owls, and Errol lay unconscious near the window. Errol always passed out after a journey.

"It's just me, Potter," Pansy said, emerging from behind a column near the window. She held her dark blue robes gathered in her hands so as not to let them drag in the owl droppings on the floor.

"What are you doing up here so late, Pansy?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"That's my business," Pansy snapped, raising her nose.

"It's my business if you're sending an owl to someone," Harry said, grabbing her by the arm.

She jerked her arm free, her face darkening into a scowl. "Sorry we all can't have things as easy as you," she said scathingly. "You and the Weaselette only have one mother to dodge when you need to find a place to snog, Draco and I have both of ours, and they can be like bloodhounds if they think we're up to something."

"Yeah, we're so lucky," Harry said dryly.

Pansy's face pinkened slightly, but her scowl never dipped. "It's all yours, Potter. It's too dirty in here for my tastes anyway," she said before striding imperiously from the room.

Harry shook his head as he peeked behind the column where Pansy had been hiding. There was nothing there. He gently picked Errol up off the open window and moved him to a perch. The old owl's eyes opened blearily, and he hooted his thanks. He took a sip of water before falling back on his side.

"What was she doing here, girl?" Harry asked Hedwig absently. "I don't see any new owls that might have brought her a letter, and all the school owls have been instructed not to leave the grounds."

Hedwig hooted and nipped Harry's ear again. He stroked her feathers as he pulled some owl treats from his pocket. "Sorry they're mushy. They've been in my pocket for awhile," Harry said, shrugging.

Hedwig reproachfully eyed the mashed treats.

"Hey! They'll still taste the same," Harry said, finding it ridiculous that he felt chastised by an owl.

Hedwig scooped the treats in her beak and flew up to her perch without a sound.

"Be that way, then," Harry said, chuckling.

He began his descent from the Owlery, peering out at the brightly lit sky. It was a full moon, and Harry's heart clenched with worry for Remus. He supposed that was the real reason he couldn't sleep. He wondered where his friend was, and how he was coping with the full moon.

He hoped that Remus would be able to live with whatever it was he had to do to make the other werewolves accept him. Harry's hatred for Umbridge was renewed over the way she'd forced Remus to live. The press conference couldn't come soon enough.

He pushed open the door to his dormitory and was nearly pushed back from the loud snoring roaring within. Harry had always known Ron snored loudly, but adding the combined volume of Fred, George and Charlie, and Harry was ready to move to his own room simply to catch some decent sleep.

He undressed and lay down, trying to block the sound by putting a pillow over his head. After several long and fruitless minutes, he finally gave up and cast a Silencing Charm around his bed. He didn't like to do that because he worried what would happen if there was a problem, and he couldn't hear it. He really wanted to sleep tonight, however. He'd been sleeping poorly since they'd arrived.

Smiling into his pillow, he remembered the scene two nights ago when the girls had told them about Umbridge. The other Weasley brothers had joined them all in the room shortly afterwards, and they were all fairly put out when they learned Ron and Harry had been drinking and didn't invite anyone else.

Ron had called Hermione a mood-killer, infuriating his girlfriend. Before stomping out of the room with Ginny in tow, Hermione had removed the Sobering Charms she'd placed on Ron and Harry. The twins had somehow produced more Firewhisky, and all the Weasley brothers had stayed up quite late into the night. Harry knew he'd passed out at some point, and he felt his body still hadn't quite recovered.

Pulling the covers up and finally beginning to drift off in the newfound silence, Harry's dreams about Snitches, freckles, and Firewhisky were plagued with the image of a rat stealing in and out of the shadows.

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The press conference at the Ministry drew a large segment of the Wizarding community. Witches and wizards had traveled across Britain to attend, some even bringing their families in the hopes of hearing encouraging news. The Atrium had been expanded to accommodate the

crowd, and the podium had been charmed to amplify voices throughout the building.

Aurors and Hit Wizards were assigned along the perimeter of the Atrium to maintain order. In fact, there were so many law enforcement officials in attendance, Harry wondered if there was anyone left actually guarding the rest of the Wizarding world.

The Aurors clutched their wands tightly, their faces pale and strained. They, at least, appeared to understand the gravity of the situation. That was more than could be said for the remainder of the crowd. The populace at large was in a jubilant mood, barely containing their glee. Harry suspected they were bursting to celebrate and only waiting for a nod of approval from the Ministry. Harry shook his head in disgust. He knew the war was taking a toll on everyone, but they were acting like fools – all of them.

After the last full moon, word had quickly spread about the destruction of a Muggle village near the border of Wales. A pack of werewolves had attacked a local gathering, killing and maiming a huge section of the townspeople. Many young villagers had been bitten and carried off by the pack. Cries had spread that all werewolves needed to be put down, and those victims that had survived the massacre had suddenly found themselves among the accused.

Harry's anxiety for Remus was palpable, and he hoped to get a chance to speak with Tonks tonight to ask if she'd had any word. None of the Weasleys or Professor McGonagall had had any contact with him, and Harry's concern had only grown.

He'd left an annoyed Ginny behind with her parents and Hagrid. Mrs. Weasley didn't feel up to a Ministry function, and Hagrid was simply too big to hide. Harry suspected that Mrs. Weasley merely wanted to keep an eye on Ginny, anyway. Professor Slughorn had supplied the Order with what little Polyjuice potion he had in stock – which wasn't much. Those that already had arrest warrants out in their name used the potion to disguise themselves while the others just tried to dress inconspicuously and blend in with the crowd.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had all removed the crest from their Hogwarts robes and kept their hats pulled low over their heads. They stuck to the back of the room and away from the Aurors. The lobby was so full that blending into the crowd wasn't difficult. Harry almost hoped Umbridge would try and make a move to arrest him at the event. Just let her try and get away with it quietly. He wasn't about to allow that to happen.

"Harry, isn't that Tonks over there by the door?" Hermione asked, rousing Harry from his dark thoughts. Hermione knew Harry wanted to speak with Tonks, and it was obvious that she, too, was worried about Remus. He was thankful that she'd been paying attention.

"Where?" Ron asked. "I don't see her."

"Her hair isn't pink," Hermione said, beginning to elbow her way through the crowd. "She doesn't look very good."

Harry glanced over at Tonks and realized Hermione was right. Her hair was a mousy brown color, and her shoulders drooped so heavily that she looked shorter than she was. She appeared listless and drawn, causing Harry's anxiety to increase.

"Blimey, she looks ruddy awful," Ron stated unnecessarily.

"Shh, Ron. She'll hear you," Hermione hissed, throwing a glare over her shoulder.

"So what if she hears me? She has to know," Ron replied, shrugging.

Harry elbowed him in the ribs, unwilling to deal with yet another Ron and Hermione row at the moment.

"Tonks," he said when they'd reached her.

She didn't look at him, and her face gave nothing away, but she spoke softly from the side of her mouth. "Pretend you're speaking with each other. I'm being watched."

The trio huddled in a circle, appearing to chat amongst themselves but standing close enough to the young Auror to hear her.

"Watched by whom?" Hermione asked, her eyes shifting nervously.

"By Umbridge's people. She's waiting for me to make a mistake, but so far she hasn't got anything. There are plenty in the Division who aren't as loyal to her as she thinks they are, and that number is growing daily. They think she did Kingsley wrong, and they know this whole treaty is a big mistake," Tonks said quietly, never looking in their direction.

"Then why is it happening?" Harry demanded, his voice rising.

"Shh," Hermione hissed, stomping on his foot. "Keep your voice down, Harry."

"Ow," Harry said, chagrined. "That hurt." Hermione was wearing pointy-heeled shoes.

"There's nothing they can do about it. If they even speak out of line, they'll be accused of treason and be in the same predicament as Kingsley. They're just waiting to see how it all plays out," Tonks said, appearing to shrink before their eyes.

"Are you all right, Tonks?" Hermione asked gently.

Tonks shook her head, tears filling her eyes before she could blink them all away. "No. I had a brief letter from Remus last night."

"You did?" Harry asked eagerly. "How is he? What did he say?"

"He didn't say much at all, that's the problem. He claimed that he didn't have much time, but something in the tone of the letter seemed very formal and distant. He said he was doing what was expected of him," Tonks said, sniffing.

Hermione wordlessly conjured a handkerchief and slipped it to the other woman.

"What does that mean?" Ron asked.

"I don't know, but I don't like the sound of it," Tonks said.

"D'you think it has anything to do with the attack the other night in Lyneham?" Harry asked quietly.

Tonks nodded tearfully. "I'm afraid it does. There's no way he could have stopped it alone, but if he was forced to take part..."

"The guilt will kill him," Harry said, his face impassive. Inside, his gut was wrenching, knowing how he would feel if faced with a similar situation.

Tonks sniffed again while Hermione leaned into Ron's shoulder.

"He also gave me a message for you, Harry, but I don't understand it," Tonks said.

"What is it?" Harry asked stonily.

"Only that 'creation hinges on the intensity of the hatred. The act does the splitting.' Does that mean anything to you?" Tonks asked, her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Harry nodded slowly. "Yeah, it does. Thanks." He saw Hermione's eyes widen, and he could almost see the wheels turning in her head. Hatred fueled the creation of a Horcrux, much like happiness fueled the creation of a Patronus. Why was that not surprising?

"I don't suppose you want to share?" she asked, her inquisitiveness finally breaking through her apathy.

Harry shrugged. "Sorry, Tonks. Know that it helps, though, all right?"

"Can't blame a girl for trying," she said, a flicker of her former exuberance shining through.

The lights in the lobby flickered on and off several times before the podium at the front began to fill with various Ministry officials. A young, fussily-dressed wizard took the podium, casting a Sonorus Charm.

Harry moved forward, but Hermione again gripped his arm. "First listen to what he has to say," she hissed.

"Wizards, witches and representatives of the press," the young wizard said stiffly, his voice cracking. Harry was suddenly jolted by his resemblance to Percy and assumed this was who had taken Percy's place. "I welcome you to this historic occasion. Our Interim Minister has some exciting news that we've all longed to hear."

He paused for a moment as cheers and whistles filled the Atrium; the volume was so loud that Harry was certain the roof shook. "She has

great plans to lead us from the darkness that has filled our lives for so long into a new, shining era of cooperation, where our bloodlines can flourish and prosper, bringing new opportunities to us all. Without further ado, I give you our Interim Minister – Dolores Umbridge."

Once again, the room erupted into thunderous applause. A group of rowdy wizards by the front desk, who had obviously been celebrating long before the introductions, began a string of catcalls and inappropriate innuendo and had to be silenced by some nearby Aurors.

Umbridge took the podium with a sweep of her new, frilly robes. The gray had been charmed from her hair, and she wore it pulled back with a pink bow. The mere sight of it made Harry want to rip it from her head. She wore that same, smug, toad-like expression she'd always used after being named High Inquisitor at Hogwarts.

"Hem, hem," she said, coughing her familiar, annoying little cough.

"Bloody hell," Ron mumbled under his breath, and Hermione appeared too stunned even to reprimand him.

"Welcome, one and all. I'd like to thank you for taking the time to attend our little announcement," she said, simpering. "The Ministry of Magic has always sought to ensure the growth and advantageous prosperity of the Wizarding community. In the past few years, some of our very best tried and true traditions have given way to modernization, and the slow, steady trickle of influence from the Muggle world. As Minister, I intend to see to it that the heritage and gifts our ancestors passed down to us are reborn, and once again become the centerpiece of Wizarding society."

Harry rolled his eyes. She was treating this as if it were her acceptance speech – without benefit of being appointed. Her breathy voice was like nails on a chalkboard, and he found his attention beginning to drift. The sharp stabs of dislike he always felt while Umbridge was speaking were pounding into his brain, and a nervous, restless energy had overtaken him.

"She's softening the crowd to accept restrictions on Muggleborns," Hermione whispered, her face horrorstruck.

"What?" Ron hissed, taken aback. "She hasn't said a word about Muggleborns, just lots of rubbish."

Hermione shook her head. "Listen, Ron."

"We need to prune out certain practices that have become commonplace, while reestablishing others that have fallen by the wayside," she said, the little-girl quality in her voice suddenly disappearing as it took on a hard, no-nonsense edge. "As you are all aware, the Dark Lord has been inflicting terror upon our community for quite some time.

"Despite that, I've managed to open a line of communication and taken steps to build a bridge of trust between two opposing factions. I've managed to do this through the help of one boy."

The room stilled at this statement, and Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. He peered curiously at the podium, wondering where this was going.

"There have been rumors for years that a 'Chosen One' is the person destined to lead us from the Darkness. Many of you have surmised that this 'Chosen One' is in fact the 'Boy Who Lived.' Recently, however, other knowledge has come to my attention. Facts that I'm going to share with you that indicate it might not be Harry Potter himself who can lead us from this Darkness, but instead, something in his blood."

Murmurs and questions broke out across the floor. Harry, Ron and Hermione all stared at one another, perplexed. Harry could see various other Order members casting glances his way.

"I've discovered the existence of an ancient prophecy," Umbridge continued, causing chills to run down Harry's spine.

How could she find the prophecy? The original had been destroyed years ago, and he was now in possession of Dumbledore's copy. Unless...Snape!

"This prophecy refers to a certain bloodline having the power to lead us from the darkness," Umbridge said, smiling sweetly and obviously enjoying the rapt attention.

Harry shook his head. What is she on about? The prophecy didn't say anything about his bloodline.

"Since the Potter line is extinct except for young Harry, and his mother was a Muggleborn, it appeared obvious that Harry Potter was the boy in question. I've since discovered an alternative possibility."

Slithering waves of dread coiled themselves around Harry's insides. Oh, no. She can't be serious.

"There is another member of Harry Potter's family who also has magical abilities. This person has been hidden from the Ministry for years now – and I find the circumstances of that omission highly suspect. I fear those who held the responsibility of protecting young Mr. Potter may have had their own goals – and not the best interests of Wizarding society – at heart," Umbridge said, licking her lips.

She was blaming this on Dumbledore, once again casting suspicion his way without coming right out and saying his name. Anger burned in Harry's chest.

"I've since been in contact with Mr. Potter's only cousin – a boy who's been denied the benefits of our teaching and instruction about his extraordinary gifts for his entire life. Yet, unlike Mr. Potter, he has willingly and enthusiastically agreed to help us. Witches and Wizards, allow me to introduce to you the new hope to bring light from these dark times, Mr. Dudley Dursley."

Dudley – massive, round Dudley – walked onto the podium with a rolling gait, his great girth covered in expensive, finely made green robes. He waved at the cheering crowd, his expression smug, as if they all had come to pay him homage. Harry's chin dropped when he noticed Uncle

Vernon and Aunt Petunia standing to the side, beaming and applauding their son. Uncle Vernon kept glancing warily at the various wizards around him, but his pride for Dudley clearly showed.

Harry felt as if his entire world had tilted sideways, and he was struggling to stay upright. This was not what he'd expected. His aunt and uncle had always doted on Dudley – to the point of being absurd – but to see such a turnabout on anything related to magic was more than he could grasp. Perhaps their acquaintances in the Muggle world had finally grown tired of Dudley's bullying ways, and the Dursleys were finding it harder and harder to find anyone they could still impress. Maybe they simply enjoyed the lavish attention he was certain Umbridge had showered on Dudley. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had always been overly impressed by their average son.

Umbridge nodded at Dudley, covertly pushing a small piece of paper toward him. Reading had never been one of Dudley's favorite pastimes, and his long pauses and struggle with words was painfully apparent.

"Greetings fellow w-w- wizards," Dudley, said, his voice wavering. "I was raised with one of you – but I was taught to fear you." Dudley paused, most likely because he was stuck on a word, but he appeared to enjoy the reaction and stretched the moment out longer. "I was told that you were all abnormal – freaks – and made to believe that everything magical was meant to harm me. I was wrong. My family was misled."

Dudley's frustration with the parchment and what was written finally overcame him, and he crumpled it. Dolores's face registered alarm when Dudley tossed it to the ground.

Harry shook his head, clearly seeing why Dolores would have gone after Dudley once she realized the magical register had been obscured. Her reasons for using him were twofold. First, she could strip Harry's strong public appeal by supplying a new "hero," and this time, she'd found one she could control. Manipulating Harry's blood connection to Dudley was a win-win for her.

"Look. I'm magic just like you. From what she tells me," Dudley said, jerking his thumb in Umbridge's direction, "I've got a lot of power. My folks were afraid of magic until they realized how special it made me. We've been threatened so many times, we thought-"

"Yes, and we all owe you an apology for that, Mr. Dursley," Umbridge said, swiftly moving Dudley behind her. "Your family never should have been made to fear your gift."

Harry could see Aunt Petunia dab her eyes, staring adoringly at her little popkin, who took up half the stage with his wide girth. Even Uncle Vernon had managed to maintain a stiff upper lip around all the magical folk. He proudly stuck his chest out and clapped Dudley on the back.

Harry carefully schooled his features, unwilling to allow any of his feelings to show. He knew Ron and Hermione had both seen something in his eyes, and he refused to look directly at them lest they see it again. He'd spent his entire life being made to feel abnormal for what

he was. The Dursleys had always hated magic and anything to do with it. Now that it was their precious Dudley being lauded for that same abnormality, suddenly it was a gift.

Harry wished he could say it didn't matter, that it didn't sting, but he knew Ron and Hermione had seen otherwise. He found it ironic that he was the one now being blamed for the Dursleys mistrust of magic. Could this night get any weirder?

Umbridge had once again taken over the podium. "When I discovered the wrongs done to this young wizard and his family and realized the misconceptions we've all accepted as true for many years, I began to wonder what other fallacies might be blindly accepted as fact. Perhaps, there was something You-Know-Who was trying to accomplish that had been misunderstood."

Rumblings of disquiet began to fill the room. Accepting Dudley as a possible savior was one thing, but being wrong about someone who'd been murdering for years was something else. Too many remembered the terror of the last war to accept Voldemort's cooperation this time. Harry was suddenly struck with the memory of Trelawney's second prediction.

The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever he was.

Voldemort had risen again, and if he'd finally managed to get a hold in the Ministry, his power certainly would be greater than it had been before...

Dolores ignored the whispering and ploughed forward, trying to keep her momentum moving. "It was through the enlightenment I received after speaking to Dudley that gave me the strength and courage to propose a truce. Perhaps, the sole role of this so-called 'Chosen One' was to bridge the gap, and not actually physically do anything to stop the violence. Perhaps, through our superior intellect and abilities, we could find a way to reunite the core foundation of the Wizarding world and once again live in harmony."

Murmurs and voices filled the hall again, louder and more hopeful this time. Apparently, the Wizarding world was desperate enough to accept just about anything to stop the mayhem.

"Through the Ministry's extensive covert operations, I managed to make contact with a delegate from You-Know-Who's inner circle. We discussed the Dark Lord's plans for the Wizarding community and discovered that there were many areas where his goals and the goals of the Ministry overlapped. With concessions on both sides, I believe I've arranged a compromise that will satisfy us all."

Voices continued to murmur, spreading both hope and mistrust across the room. Half of them appeared willing to begin a celebration, whilst the other half was wary and seemed ready to bolt through the doors.

"What kind of compromises?" a brave young witch asked, shrinking as all eyes turned her way.

"I'm glad you asked," Umbridge said, although the expression on her face indicated she wasn't pleased at all.

"Most of the stipulations we discussed were in regard to Muggleborns. The idea that they need a more formal introduction to our customs was brought up, and we thought it would be better if they were taught separately, outside of Hogwarts."

Hermione's mouth set in a grim line, and she cast an 'I told you so' look at Ron.

"We've also agreed that it would be best if the role of Minister and various positions on the Wizengamot were held by those longstanding members of the Wizarding community. After all, experience is what makes them understand how our society works," Umbridge said, smiling although her eyes held a hard, glinty edge.

"In that vein of open communication and cooperation between our two groups, I've invited several of You-Know-Who's inner circle to join us here today. Please lower your wands and allow them to enter peacefully," Umbridge said, the simpering tone stealing back into her voice.

The Aurors glanced uneasily back and forth at one another. Some instantly lowered their wands, while others refused to do so, staring at their commanders expectantly. Umbridge must have placed her own people in charge in the Magical Law Enforcement office, for they glared at the troops until their wands were lowered.

Harry watched in mute horror as a half dozen robed Death Eaters entered the premises. They walked toward the podium in a semi-circle, Severus Snape in the center, his black robes billowing behind him. They were about halfway across the room, Umbridge watching them with a very self-satisfied smirk, when suddenly the doors opened again and row after row of additional Death Eaters entered the building, fanning out along the perimeter of the room.

Harry could see the faces of the Aurors growing alarmed as they rapidly became outnumbered. Voldemort had certainly been recruiting. Dolores Umbridge stared at them uncomprehendingly for a moment before alarm spread across her face, rapidly giving way to panic.

"Mr. Snape," she said sweetly, her hand fluttering nervously to brush back her hair. "There are more of you here than I'd expected."

Snape nodded curtly. "You'll find that the bargain has been slightly altered," he said snidely, his lips curling.

"Altered how?" Umbridge asked, her hand clutching her throat. Those few Ministry officials who'd stood on the stage with her had all taken steps back, their eyes wide and panicked as they scanned the crowd.

Harry noticed that even Dudley had caught on to the fact there was a bigger bully in the playpark. He'd stepped down from the stage and stood with his parents, watching the proceedings warily. Uncle Vernon appeared put-out that Dudley's moment to shine had been interrupted, but Aunt Petunia seemed to understand the gravity of the situation. He

could see the taut veins in her neck straining against her skin as she clutched both Uncle Vernon's and Dudley's arms.

Snape's eyebrows rose as he tilted his head slightly, staring wordlessly at the spluttering Interim Minister.

"A treaty can't simply be altered after it's been signed by both parties. That just isn't how it's done," Umbridge said as if speaking to a very small child.

"Perhaps you think you're being treated unfairly?" Snape asked, letting his words hang in the air.

Umbridge's eyes widened. "No," she said in a breathy voice, taking two steps backward. "Of course not."

"Perhaps," Snape said silkily, "you'd like to speak with the Dark Lord himself?"

The temperature dropped ten degrees as Voldemort swooped into the room, his long robes trailing the ground behind him, giving the impression of a tail. He surveyed the crowd through narrow, snakelike eyes, causing stunned spectators to flinch and pull away, clearing a path for him directly to the podium. Behind him, Harry recognized Fenrir Greyback, his hair as matted as ever, leering at the crowd. A large group of Fenrir's pack followed them into the room, their clothes dirty and worn and covered in bloodstains. All of them had a deranged, slightly manic look in their eyes.

The entrance of the werewolves caused a stir of unease amongst the crowd, and some of them began to flee. Harry searched for Remus but couldn't distinguish him in the massive crowd. He noticed Tonks straining to see above the people, as well. She used her Metamorphmagus skills to grow taller, her eyes bright as she scanned the room.

Umbridge's whimper of fright sounded clearly in the stillness of the hall before a full panic erupted. Witches and wizards began pushing toward the exits, screaming in fright and trampling one another in their haste to escape. The Aurors tried unsuccessfully to calm them and organize their stampede to no avail. They kept casting anxious eyes in the Minister's direction, waiting for her to give the order allowing them to use their wands – but it never came. Interim Minister Umbridge stood frozen in panic – her brain apparently unwilling to accept this turn of events. Harry suspected a lot of them were tempted to use their wands, anyway, but they understood it was pointless. They'd be struck down before they had a chance to do any good.

The members of the Order of the Phoenix hidden amongst the crowd were the only ones not panicking. They watched the events warily, their bodies coiled and ready to spring into action.

Charlie Weasley positioned himself behind the trio, leaning over to whisper in Harry's ear. "There are anti-Apparation wards in place except in designated areas at the Ministry. If things erupt into violence and you can't reach one of those Apparation spots, I've got a Portkey to get you out of here."

Harry began to protest, but was stopped when Charlie tightened his grip on Harry's arm. "I know you wanted to confront Umbridge, but are you ready to face him today?" he asked.

Harry deflated, knowing it would do no good. He still had one more Horcrux to find, and he knew he wasn't prepared to face Voldemort yet. He wouldn't stand a chance. No matter how much he wanted to stay and help the Order fight to save the people here, he knew his best chance of saving them would come another day. The truth of the matter didn't stop the bitter anger from burning in his belly.

As if sensing Harry's acknowledgement, Charlie nodded and took a step back.

On the podium, Snape bowed low, his nose nearly touching the ground. "My Lord," he said.

"Rise, Severus. You have done well," Voldemort hissed, still surveying the crowd with his cold, emotionless eyes.

Snape stood, nodding. "Thank you, my Lord."

Voldemort finally turned to fully face Dolores Umbridge, who tried to regain some semblance of control, despite her trembling.

"W-welcome to the Ministry of Magic. As y-you c-can see, there has been a great turnout today of individuals who want to f-find ways of peacefully co-existing," she said in a sickly sweet voice.

"Peace is for the weak at heart," Voldemort said, waving his hand in the air. The doors to the Atrium suddenly sealed, blocking the remainder of the crowd inside. Very few had actually managed to escape.

Harry saw a short, brown-haired witch that he knew to be Mad-Eye Moody under Polyjuice, unsuccessfully attempt to unseal the nearest door.

"No one shall leave the premises until I dismiss them," Voldemort whispered menacingly. "Thank you, Minister, for making this so easy for me by gathering everyone here."

"Ea-easy for you? Wh-whatever do you mean?" Umbridge asked, fanning herself. "We've signed a treaty to stop the death and destruction. I returned your servant to you in good faith."

With a casual flick of his wand, Voldemort produced a thick stack of parchment. It ignited in flames before her eyes. "I've decided on an alternate plan," he whispered.

"B-but...sir...this is highly irregular. I released your man after the agreement was signed," she whined, apparently in shock. Harry knew she wasn't stupid, but she seemed fixed on that detail, as if the rest of her mind had simply shut down.

Once again, Voldemort lazily flicked his wand and a thick black box appeared on the podium in front of Umbridge, who started at it blankly. The lid began to shake and slowly rise in the air. Umbridge didn't move

toward it, and the air in the room seemed to still with a pregnant pause.

Harry's gaze returned to Voldemort, who reminded him of a cat toying with a helpless mouse before devouring it – or a snake playing with a toad. Since Voldemort's arrival, Harry had been struck by the fact that his scar didn't hurt – not so much as a flicker of pain. He realized that Tom was still using Occlumency to block him, hoping to shield what he was doing. By doing this, however, it meant that Tom didn't realize that Harry was already there.

His thoughts were dragged back to the proceedings when a frightened scream filled the air. Hermione grabbed his arm, her nails digging into his skin as Wormtail's head emerged from the box. Still dripping with fresh blood, it hovered above the box, vacant eyes staring at a speechless Umbridge.

"I've decided to return your gift. I have no use for weak fools who allow themselves to be captured by school children," Voldemort said, his snakelike nostrils flaring. "Unfortunately for you, this means that your participation is no longer necessary."

Umbridge turned her wide, panicked eyes toward the Dark Lord, gaping like a fish. Despite his hatred of her and everything she'd done, Harry couldn't help feeling a tiny bit sorry for her. He could see the Aurors grasping their wands, still seeking orders to surge and attack. Umbridge's loyal followers – those who were now in charge – suddenly appeared uncertain what to do.

Voldemort's face twisted into a hideous smile – a smile bereft of joy or happiness. It was a truly frightening sight, causing Harry to shudder.

"Fenrir," Voldemort said, caressing his wand with his fingers. "I believe your kind have some issues with the current Minister. Perhaps you'd like to discuss them with her...directly."

Greyback smiled wolfishly, running his long, yellowed fingernails through his whiskers. "Why, yes...that would be quite...delectable."

Umbridge screeched and backed away as Greyback began stalking her. She held her hands in front of her body as if it would somehow shield her. Greyback's pack of angry werewolves began to advance, joining Fenrir on the hunt. Umbridge's panicked face disappeared as she was surrounded by the pack, and Harry saw a smattering of blood hit the wall.

Umbridge's screams acted as the signal for violence to erupt. Several Ministry officials attempted to stop the werewolves' attack, but the Death Eaters struck them down without mercy.

Knowing they were now hopelessly outnumbered, the Aurors still attempted to regain control. They fought valiantly, but the delay had cost them dearly. Some of the witches and wizards in attendance joined in the fight, battling Death Eaters to try and clear a pathway to the blocked exits. The Death Eaters were pitiless, and screams of those suffering under the Cruciatus filled the hall, echoing in the large, open space. The green glow of the Killing Curse flew in all directions.

Voldemort took the podium and began speaking to the masses, oblivious to the chaos around him. Every so often, he'd lazily cast a Killing Curse at anyone who came to close, even those merely seeking shelter.

"As of this moment forward, control of the Ministry now rests with me. Vast, glorious changes are about to take place, elevating our status to where it rightfully belongs," he said. "All of you now answer directly to me."

Charlie once again grasped Harry's arm. "We've got to get out of here. The Portkey will only work outside the wards, so we need to find a way through them."

"What about the rest of the Order?" Hermione asked, panicked.

"We've all got our orders," Charlie said. "They know what to do."

Harry nodded, feeling helpless. Some people had moved to the sides of the room and sunk to their knees with their hands above their heads, but the majority were running pell-mell, desperately seeking a way out. For the most part, the Death Eaters focused their battle on the Aurors and those firing spells, but still, plenty of innocents had been struck.

Harry, Ron and Hermione moved in the opposite direction, towards the glass door that led to the Apparition Testing Facility, trying to slip by unnoticed. Despite knowing that drawing their wands would attract the attention of the Death Eaters, they eventually began firing curses, trying to help some of the panicked victims.

Harry told several people with small children to seek cover and just stay down until the fighting stopped. Most were stunned when they realized who was speaking to them, anyway.

"Always know whether to fight or flee," Ron panted under his breath, and Harry suspected he was battling the same demons that Harry was. Despite knowing the odds, it was difficult to leave and allow this to happen.

As they reached the doors, Ron tried to pull them open to no avail; they were tightly sealed.

Aiming his wand, Harry muttered, "Alohomora." The doors remained closed.

"You!" a nearby voice shrieked.

Harry's head shot up, and he stared into his Aunt Petunia's horrified eyes.

"I might have known you'd be here when all the trouble started," she hissed, shaking visibly. "How are we supposed to get out of here?"

"Hello, Aunt Petunia," Harry said, clenching his teeth.

"Don't tell me this whole mess has nothing to do with you," Uncle Vernon said, regaining some of his blustering bravado. "From what I've heard, this thing seems to follow you, boy. What are you going to do about it?"

"I haven't got time for this," Harry said, pushing past his uncle. "Voldemort will kill you without a moment's hesitation once he realizes who you are. If you want to live, follow me."

"I'm a wizard, too, Potter. I can do anything you can," Dudley said, poking Harry in the chest, apparently put-out that his parents were turning to Harry rather than him to get them out of trouble.

"Then go ahead and save yourself, Dudders," Harry said, turning his back.

Something shadowy crossed Aunt Petunia's face. She grabbed Dudley's arm and lowered it. "Not now, Popkin. Let's just get away from here and these people. I won't have you dying for this; you're too special."

At that moment, Harry's scar burst, and he dropped to his knees in pain. White-hot pokers pierced his skull, and he clenched his teeth to keep from screaming, biting his lip in the process. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth, but the pain was too unbearable even to spit.

"Harry," Hermione yelled, dropping to her knees beside him.

"Hurry," Harry said, groaning. "He knows I'm here."

"What's all this namby-pamby dramatics about?" Uncle Vernon demanded. "You're wasting time." The fear and rising panic in his voice became more apparent with every word.

Ron roughly shoved him to the side and helped Harry to his feet. Hermione and Charlie began firing a wide array of spells at the glass, but found it impenetrable. Around the room, no one had had any success in breaking Voldemort's spell sealing the exits.

"I'm all right," Harry mumbled, clamping his teeth against the pain. He and Ron joined the others, trying to penetrate the glass.

"Potter!" a cold voice hissed behind them.

Harry turned to see Voldemort slithering toward him, a hungry gleam in his slanted eyes. "I'm pleased to see you came to witness my takeover of the Ministry. You should have informed me of your presence; I would have arranged better seating."

He stopped before them, casting his cold, mechanical gaze over them all. The Dursleys pulled back, huddling together in fear, but Ron, Hermione, and Charlie stood defiantly beside Harry.

"Tell me," Voldemort asked, his voice as cold as ice. "Are you enjoying the show?"

"Not particularly, Tom. I never thought anyone who attacked innocents was all that powerful," Harry said indifferently.

Voldemort's eyes dilated, and his tongue shot out as if testing the air. "Silence! I am the most powerful wizard of all time, and I have single-handedly managed to wrest control of the Ministry from the incompetent fools who were running it. I have eliminated my opposition, and you now find yourself standing alone, young Harry."

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard how full of yourself you are before, and I'm still not impressed, Tom," Harry replied.

"You impudent brat!" Voldemort howled in rage. Before Harry could react, Voldemort hit him with the Cruciatus curse. He dropped to the floor, screaming in pain. It felt as if his insides were slowly being ripped out. It seemed to last an eternity before Voldemort finally lifted the curse. Despite his pain, Harry noticed that Voldemort appeared flustered, as if he was struggling to control his anger.

"Harry!" Hermione cried, moving toward him.

"No!" Harry shouted, a rush of adrenaline filling his veins.

Voldemort raised his wand again, and Harry knew he'd take his frustration over being unable to kill Harry out on Hermione.

"Get back," Harry said, casting the strongest shield he could imagine in front of Hermione, Ron and Charlie. The three of them stumbled back as if struck, but in the process, they were pushed out of the way of Voldemort's Killing Curse.

"This is between you and me," Harry said, breathing heavily, his anger pumping in his veins. "You leave them out of it."

"You've grown powerful, Harry, but you're no match for me," Voldemort said, frowning slightly. "I'm not going to kill you here today, but you are coming with me. Lower your wand, Harry."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Harry said, concentrating on keeping his shield in place. He could see his friends desperately trying to break it so they could reach him, but thus far, they had been unable to do so.

Unfortunately, Harry knew he couldn't keep the shield in place forever. His muscles were already shaking from the strain. He also needed help bringing down that glass door blocking their escape. Knowing that as soon as he dropped the shield, Voldemort would take out his wrath on his friends, Harry was trapped. He needed a distraction, and he needed it badly.

It came when he was least expecting it from a source he hadn't even known was there. As had happened in the past, someone who loved Harry always seemed to show up just when he needed help the most.

Remus pushed his way through the still-fighting crowd and stopped in the open space between Harry and Voldemort. Harry was so stunned to see him that he dropped his shield, releasing his friends. Remus was

filthy, and he appeared very tired and gray. His robes were tattered and covered with bloodstains, but a fierce determination glowed in his eyes.

"Remus," Tonks said, lunging through the fray. She was panting as if she'd struggled to keep up with him.

Remus winced, and Harry somehow knew that he'd tried to leave her behind. Like Ginny, Tonks had refused Remus's attempts. Remus and Tonks locked eyes, some sort of private communication passing between them. Tonks nodded heavily, her eyes filling.

Confused, Harry tried to move toward them, wanting to shield them from Voldemort, who was watching the scene with amusement. Ron and Charlie held him back.

"More of your protectors, Harry? And this one had convinced Fenrir he was one of them. Fenrir will be so disappointed," Voldemort said, his eyes briefly roaming to Greyback whose pack was still desecrating Umbridge's body.

Remus cast a significant, imploring glance towards Ron and Hermione, nodding briefly in Harry's direction. It was so fleeting, Harry wasn't even certain it happened until Remus squared his shoulders and began casting a barrage of spells directly at Voldemort.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, struggling to free himself from the Weasley brothers' grasp.

"I love you, Harry. I always have," Remus said, ducking and rolling away from one of Voldemort's Killing Curses. "Stay safe, end this thing, and most of all, be happy."

A wave of panic rose in Harry's chest. It sounded as if Remus was saying goodbye...

Tonks used a spell Harry had never seen that created a swirling mass of air that knocked him, Ron, Hermione and Charlie to the ground with its hurricane force. Tonks leapt to Remus's side, placing her wand tip next to his.

Their eyes locked, and they stared at one another for a brief moment that seemed to last an eternity.

Simultaneously, they cast a Bludgeoning Hex at the ceiling above Voldemort's head. Great chunks of metal dropped into the conjured windstorm, covering the floor and forcing Voldemort to retreat lest the debris hit him. The ceiling continued to erode while Voldemort regained his footing, turned and aimed his wand.

As if in slow motion, Harry watched the sickly green lights – two of them – erupt from Voldemort's wand. Despite having to shield his eyes against the winds, Harry could clearly see it happen. The first spell hit Remus squarely in the chest, knocking him off his feet. Before his body even hit the ground, the second spell struck Tonks on her shoulder. The two landed side-by-side, unmoving, their hands still

clasped together. The howling of the wind stopped instantaneously, releasing Harry with a jolt.

"Nooo," he screamed, scrambling to his feet and fighting against the combined restraint of Ron, Hermione, and Charlie. "Let go of me. Let me go!"

He clawed and scratched at their arms, attempting to force them to release him. He felt out of control, his heart hammering in his chest. He'd completely come undone.

"There's nothing you can do, Harry," Ron said, shaking his shoulders. "It's done. Are you going to let his sacrifice be for nothing? Are you going to let his death be worthless?"

The whine of panic and grief ringing in Harry's ears nearly drowned out Ron's words. He could see tears streaming down Hermione's cheeks, but his only thought was to reach Remus. He had to undo this. There had to be a way. It wasn't meant to happen like this.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Ron said, sniffing, and it was the crack of grief in Ron's voice that finally penetrated Harry's pain.

A great fury – a fury born of grief, despair and injustice – grew in his chest. Unthinkingly, he raised his wand. Using all the pain and rage within his heart, he shouted, "Reducto!"

The glass on the doors barring their escape imploded, shattering and raining shards in every direction. Like a shockwave, all the other exits in the building that had been sealed by Voldemort's spell were unlocked. The front doors blew open, various passages throughout the Ministry were revealed, and every window in the Atrium shattered.

The previously trapped mob wasted no time escaping, running to the street and trampling some hapless victims in their haste to flee. Unaware of the chaos as well as the various cuts littering his face and forearms, Harry turned to the Dursleys with deadened eyes. "Go, now."

For once, they didn't need further encouragement, and they scrambled from the room. Harry cast one more glance at Voldemort, whose red eyes blazed with rage watching Harry escape once again. Ron and Hermione each grasped Harry's arms and pulled him forward, Charlie on their heels.

"Here," Charlie said after they'd run several meters. He removed a Hogwarts quill from his back pocket and held it toward them. "The Portkey should work here. Take hold."

The Dursleys all stared at them blankly as Ron and Hermione each grasped the quill. Hermione gently lifted Harry's hand and placed a finger on it.

Uncle Vernon's face – already purple from exertion – darkened further. "What is this magic?" he asked, actually saying the M-word for the first time in Harry's memory.

"Touch the quill if you want to get out of here alive," Charlie snapped.

"Just do it, Vernon," Aunt Petunia cried, cringing as she placed one bony finger on the quill. Terrified, Vernon and Dudley followed her lead.

"Activius," Charlie hissed, and the Portkey spun them away – back to safety – back to Hogwarts – back with the chilling news.

*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Haven't I Been Here Before?

Ginny sat on the ledge in the Astronomy tower, sullenly kicking the stone wall and scowling down at the road to Hogsmeade. The road that Harry, Ron, Hermione and some of the Order had traveled only a few hours ago before Apparating into London for the Ministry's press conference. The chilly winter air nipped at her exposed skin; the breeze whipped her hair around her face, but she didn't care. She hated being left behind.

It didn't matter that her parents and the twins had also remained in the castle. She was still in a foul mood. Her mother hadn't been the same since Percy's death. Her anxiety for her children had reached alarming new heights, and Ginny, in particular, was feeling the strain. She was the only one her mother felt she still had any control over, and her obsessive need to know where Ginny was at every waking moment was smothering.

Sighing, Ginny again kicked the parapet, knowing her mum would probably faint dead away if she saw her sitting up here, but Ginny felt the need to do something rebellious. Sitting on the ledge of the Astronomy tower was the best she could do at the moment. Pathetic.

She knew her mum was devastated by Percy's loss, and Ginny felt bad for being so irritated with her, but she couldn't help it. She was aware that all her brothers had also had their fill of the way her mum kept counting everyone's heads to know where all her children were, but, somehow, they didn't allow her to make them feel as guilty as Ginny always did. Maybe it was a bloke thing.

Fred and George had been up here a bit ago – no doubt sent to check on her by their mum – and they'd tried to cheer her up. Although she appreciated their efforts, she'd just wanted to be left alone. She'd considered going to the spot by the lake that Harry had shown her, but since she was angry with him, as well, she'd rejected it.

The twins weren't pleased they'd been left behind, either, but Moody had thought they would stand out too much. Ginny snorted, imagining them trying to remain low-key. Her dad had planned to use Polyjuice like Bill and Moody in order to attend, but he'd conceded to her mum's pleading at the last minute and remained behind.

She glanced up at the setting sun, admiring the serene beauty as the glowing orb sank behind the Scottish hills. She wished she knew what

was happening. She didn't trust Umbridge for a moment, and she'd felt the unease of all the Order members as they'd quietly left the castle.

It was perfectly logical that not everyone needed to attend the press conference, but it was disappointing to Ginny that she'd been the one left behind...again. Although, she supposed it was a good thing that Ron and Hermione had gone along with Harry. Hopefully, they'd be able to calm him if his anger over Peter Pettigrew's release reached a boiling point. Harry had come a long way in learning to control his temper, but he could only be pushed so far.

Still, she wished one of them would have argued more forcefully on her behalf. She'd have done for them. Scowling again, she squinted into the dimming light, hoping to see a sign of someone returning before the darkness blocked her view entirely. It was probably time to return to the common room, anyway. She supposed she looked like the princess in the tower stuck up here, and that's exactly how she felt.

She tugged at necklace Harry had given her for Christmas. She never took it off, and the stone seemed to radiate pleasant warmth against her skin. Earlier this evening, however, the stone had done something very strange. It...flared, or burst, or...something. Ginny was certain she must have imagined it, but for a moment, it felt as if it had been burning her skin.

Finally deciding that she'd had enough, she swung her legs back over the ledge and jumped into the Astronomy tower. Glancing down one last time, she thought she saw a flicker of movement near the gates. She squinted, peering intently down the road. A moment later, she could recognize the telltale hint of red on the head of the tallest of the travelers. Certain it was Ron, she could then distinguish Hermione, Harry and Charlie, all trudging with him, along with several other people that Ginny didn't recognize. Two of them were rather large men, who struggled to keep up with the rest of the group.

Relief washed over her – they were safe. When she realized Bill and Fleur weren't with them, however, a tickle of fear ran down her spine. There was something about the way they were walking – almost rigidly – that told her something wasn't right. As they got closer to the castle, she could clearly see both Ron and Hermione leading Harry by his arms. He walked woodenly, staring straight ahead, his face impassive. It was how he usually held himself when he was trying to bury his emotions.

Something was very wrong.

Ginny wanted to turn and sprint to the common room. She could still beat them there if she left now, but she couldn't seem to tear her gaze away from Harry's stiff gait. Certainly, if Bill or Fleur had been hurt, Ron and Charlie would be more upset...right? So what could have happened? With a start, Ginny finally recognized the other three travelers as Harry's horrid Muggle relatives. What on earth were they doing here? If they had anything to do with whatever was wrong with Harry, Ginny would see to it they paid for it.

Her anger finally overriding her concern, she turned and bolted for the Gryffindor common room, running as fast as her short legs would carry

her. Panting, she skidded around the corner and barely stopped in front of the Fat Lady.

"Just because classes are no longer in session, doesn't mean there should be running in the corridors, young lady," the portrait scolded.

"Sanctuary," Ginny hissed, ignoring the reprimand.

The Fat Lady huffed indignantly, but the portrait hole swung open.

Several heads turned her way as she entered, her eyes sweeping the room for any sign of the returning party.

Iris and Mrs. Parkinson sat by the window, reading their books, although Iris kept glancing toward the corner where Fred and George were involved in a heated game of chess. Shannon peered over the board watching them. All of them looked up when Ginny entered the room.

"Ginny! There you are," her mother said fretfully, jumping up from her chair by the fire where she'd been knitting. "Are you all right? You'll probably catch a chill being outside in that cold air all this time."

Ignoring her mother's fussing, Ginny said, "They're back. I saw a group of them on the road from Hogsmeade."

"They're back already?" her dad asked, furrowing his brow. "That seems terribly soon."

Ginny nodded, unwilling to add to her father's obvious anxiety by voicing her concern. "I'm certain that I saw Ron, Harry and Hermione in the group."

"What about the others?" her mum asked, wringing her hands. "Bill and Charlie?"

Before Ginny could respond, the portrait hole swung open, and a grim-faced Professor McGonagall led the weary group inside.

Harry's face was a rigid mask, revealing nothing. Hermione took his arm, attempting to lead him to a chair, but he roughly jerked it away. Both Ron and Charlie's faces were taut, and Hermione looked as if she'd been crying. The Dursleys all looked like scared rabbits. They huddled together, barely stepping inside the room, their eyes warily taking in their surrounding.

Worried, Ginny moved closer to Harry, but he shied away, obviously not wanting to be touched.

Something was very wrong.

"Thank Merlin, you're back," her mum cried, throwing her arms around Charlie. "I've been so worried. Where are Bill and Fleur?"

Ron quickly moved away before she could smother him, wrapping his arm around Hermione's shoulders and leading her to a chair. She sank down into it, sniffing and leaning heavily on him. Neither of them took their eyes off Harry.

"Why don't you tell us what happened?" her dad asked, his eyes narrowed as he gazed at the Dursleys. "I'd also like to know how Harry's relatives came to join us." Although his voice sounded outwardly pleasant, Ginny could detect the hard edge. Muggles or not, her dad didn't like the Dursleys any better than the rest of them did.

Mrs. Dursley clutched her son's arm and pulled him against her, as if prepared to bodily keep any stray bits of magic from seeping into him.

"I'd like an answer to that question myself," Vernon Dursley said, regaining some of his bluster. "I don't know how we ended up at this ruddy school. I don't even know how all this can exist inside that pile of ruins we saw outside."

"Magic, dad," Dudley said, rolling his eyes. "It didn't look like ruins to me."

Mr. Dursley spluttered a moment, apparently unaccustomed to any kind of lip from Dudley.

Ginny continued to watch Harry. His face and forearms were covered with nicks and cuts, and he rigidly stood away from the others, wrapping his arms around himself as if chilled. The stony mask never slipped from his face, and his eyes were flat and lifeless. Ginny grew increasingly frightened, desperately wanting to comfort him but uncertain how. She tried to catch Ron and Hermione's eyes, but they purposefully avoided her gaze. They, too, were covered by small abrasions.

Ginny's stomach knotted.

"Sit down over there and be quiet until I fill them in," Charlie barked, directing the Dursleys to the table at the back of the common room. The harsh tone of his voice caused all three Dursleys to jump and quickly take the offered seats. Ginny suspected it was the same commanding voice he used with stubborn dragons.

Mr. Dursley's skin turned a rather alarming shade of purple, but he managed to hold his tongue.

"Charlie, where's your brother?" her mum asked, clenching her hands.

"I don't know," Charlie replied, flinching.

"What do you mean, you don't know? He was there with you, wasn't he? Why didn't he and Fleur leave with the rest of you? What happened?" she asked, her voice rising shrilly with each question.

"Molly, why don't you sit down and have a spot of tea," Professor McGonagall said, briskly handing her mum a cup and saucer. "I think we all want to hear what Charlie has to say. I'm certain Bill and the others will be returning from the Ministry, posthaste."

"The Ministry is under You-Know-Who's control," Charlie said softly, suddenly appearing very drained.

Startled gasps arose around the room as everyone turned their heads, looking back and forth at each other. Only Ron, Harry, and Hermione remained still, starting stoically ahead.

"I think you'd better start from the beginning, Charlie," her dad said, rubbing her mum's back.

"Umbridge started the evening by basically telling everyone that Harry isn't the Chosen One, Dudley Dursley is," Charlie said, gratefully taking the drink Fred offered him.

"She said what?" Professor McGonagall asked blankly, her entire posture perfectly still. Her eyes briefly flickered to the quivering lump that was Dudley.

"That Dudley's the Chosen One," Charlie said, taking another shot of Firewhisky.

From the corner of her eye, Ginny caught Dudley sitting straighter in his chair and sticking his chest out while Mrs. Dursley clutched his arm, appearing ready to snatch him and run away.

"She claimed that the prophecy never mentioned Harry specifically, only his bloodline, and that Dumbledore hid Dudley from the Ministry all this time," Charlie spat.

"How is it you came in contact with Dolores Umbridge, Mr. Dursley?" Professor McGonagall asked, her eyes boring in on Dudley.

"Erm," Dudley replied, his voice cracking. "She just showed up at the house one day. She said one of her detection machines told her I'd been performing magic."

"Machines, you say?" her dad asked, his demeanor brightening despite the tense atmosphere.

"Not now, Arthur," her mum snapped, rounding on Mrs. Dursley. "Did you invite her to your home? Did you contact her for any reason?"

Mrs. Dursley blinked owlishly. "Contact her? How would I go about contacting her?" she asked, aghast.

"How would I know why you do anything you do? You abused your own sister's only child – I can't ever imagine understanding how you think, and I hope I never will," her mum said, snarling. "How did Dolores Umbridge find you?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Dursley snapped. "After the summer holiday, Dudley was in a wonderful mood. All the nonsense stopped, and we were ready to send him back to school after the Christmas holiday. Then, all of a sudden, something snapped again, and he reverted to making odd things happen whenever he got upset."

"Harry sent me a spellbook for Christmas," Dudley said, glancing at Harry, who didn't respond. "I tried some of the spells, but I didn't have one of those stick things, and I couldn't make anything work. I got really frustrated, and then I don't know what happened. The

Playstation I was trying to float exploded, and a few minutes later, that Umbridge bird knocked on the door."

"She told us how special our Dudders is – something we always knew – and how great he was going to be. She saw things in him that Smeltings just didn't see. I don't know how they missed it. I never wanted my Dudley in this world, but she, at least, recognized how extraordinary he is," Mrs. Dursley cried plaintively.

"I gave it a chance, Petunia," Mr. Dursley said, the vein in his temple looking ready to explode. "I thought maybe if they could see all the potential in Dudders here, that they couldn't be all bad, but enough is enough. We're all going home and away from this craziness."

"Umbridge claimed that her realization over how wrong everyone had been about Harry and the wrongs done to Dudley made her think we might be wrong about You-Know-Who, as well," Charlie said, clenching his glass.

"The level of preposterousness from that woman is truly mind boggling," Professor McGonagall said, sniffing.

"She claimed to have signed a treaty to end the violence and bring cooperation with the Death Eaters," Charlie said.

Harry, his arms folded across his chest, clutched at his biceps, digging his nails into his skin. Unthinkingly, Ginny grabbed his hand, wanting to keep him from hurting himself further. Harry again flinched away, but this time, she caught a fleeting shadow cross his eyes. He looked so lost and vulnerable that she wanted to cry, to scoop him into her arms and soothe away whatever hurt was tormenting him.

Obviously, he was determined to handle whatever it was alone, but his eyes told a different story. His beautiful, sad eyes were crying out for help. Wrapping her arm around his waist, she gently squeezed. He stiffened, but she was encouraged that he didn't pull away.

"How did the people react to that idea?" her dad asked.

Charlie ran a hand through his hair. "I really can't say. It was obvious they wanted to believe it, but I still saw a lot of mistrust in that room. They were willing to ignore any difficulty in believing Dudley was the Chosen One, but when it came to the treaty – the hope in the room was palpable. I could see it in the eyes of everyone around me. Just as Moody predicted, they were willing to ignore reason because she was telling them what they wanted to hear."

"They're frightened," her dad said, squeezing the bridge of his nose. "It happens all the time."

"They should've been more frightened," Charlie said grimly. "She began to list some restrictions placed on Muggleborns, including educating them separately from Hogwarts students and barring them from holding positions of authority."

"That's probably the best idea I've heard in a long time," Draco Malfoy said, slinking into the room from the stairs to the boys' dormitories.

"The position of Minister, in particular, should be held by someone brought up according to the traditions of the Wizarding world."

Narcissa nodded approvingly at her son.

"Yeah, that sounds just about what she said before she opened the door and allowed the Death Eaters to march inside," Ron said, snarling.

"She what?" her mum shrieked, sitting bolt upright.

"The Death Eaters stormed the place, and Umbridge ordered all the Aurors to stand down," Charlie said, shaking his head. "Snape led them inside the building."

"Severus?" Professor McGonagall asked, clutching her throat.

"He basically cleared a path so Voldemort could sweep in and declare himself the new Minister," Ron said, patting Hermione on the back as she sniffled. "Voldemort sealed all the exits, blocking everyone inside. He returned Pettigrew's head to Umbridge on a platter before he turned her over to Greyback and the other werewolves. They weren't too happy with her."

As the others discussed the events at the Ministry, Ginny let the words drone emptily around. Her focus was solely on Harry. What had happened to put that hollow emptiness in his eyes yet again? She'd seen it there before, on several occasions in the past. The first time was after the Third Task and the events in that graveyard that had started it all. She'd been pretending not to pay attention to him then. She'd been with Michael, and had, in fact, been quite happy at the time. But it still didn't stop her from noticing Harry, nor her heart aching over the sad, lost, rather dazed expression in his eyes.

The next time she'd seen that look on his face had been after Sirius's death. After the tragic events that night, any fool could see the raw, desperate pain radiating in Harry's eyes. He'd placed an invisible shield around himself, and no one had dared approach in those first few days.

The last time his face had taken on that look was after Professor Dumbledore's death. Harry had again been forced to witness it. He'd handled it better this time – perhaps it was his newfound maturity, perhaps simply because he'd been through it already. Ginny liked to think it was because he hadn't been so alone.

Now...what could have happened at the Ministry to put that haunted look back in his beautiful green eyes? She thought his eyes were his best feature – so expressive and full of life, always revealing far more about what he was feeling than he realized.

"It was awful," Hermione cried, dragging Ginny back to the present. "There were people being struck in the back as they tried to escape, and others who were trampled after they fell. There were bodies everywhere," Hermione said, shuddering.

Ginny felt Harry's body tremble, as he finally began to lose his rigid stance and relax against her, leaning on her for support.

"We tried to find a way out, but the place was sealed tighter than a drum. I've never seen anything like it," Charlie said, impressed despite the situation. "Nothing worked."

"That's when Voldemort realized Harry was there," Hermione said, glancing at Harry. "They exchanged words, and then Voldemort used the Cruciatus on him."

"Merlin's Beard!" her mum gasped, her eyes darting towards Harry, who shrank away.

Ginny felt his trembling increase, and she was grateful to her dad for holding her mum back. She didn't think Harry could handle her right now.

"Harry and Voldemort dueled, and it looked like Harry might be in trouble," Ron said, swallowing heavily and glancing tentatively at Harry.

Ginny noticed that both Ron and Hermione were speaking very slowly, as if dragging out the story. Whatever happened next, they obviously didn't want to say it, and Ginny felt a wave of dread wash over her.

Heavy shadows fell across Harry's eyes, making the green appear almost black. Ginny kept her hand firmly around his waist, and he suddenly reached for it, clasping it almost desperately.

"Remus and Tonks arrived, and they sacrificed themselves so we could escape," Charlie said, speaking very fast, as if to just get it out. "They were amazing."

The entire room erupted into shouts of dismay. Even Malfoy's eyebrows rose to his hairline.

"The werewolf is dead?" he asked blankly, his eyes darting to Harry.

Harry stared firmly ahead, not meeting anyone's gaze. Ginny's vision blurred as her own eyes filled with tears.

How can this be happening?

Remus – sweet, gentle Remus. He'd been so kind to her during her second year. She'd had so much work to catch up on after her disastrous first year, and he'd been so patient and understanding. And Tonks! Clumsy, fun-loving Tonks. She'd been more like a friend than another adult. Her mother would be horrified if she realized half the things Tonks had taught Ginny. Ginny remembered a giggling Tonks saying something about her mum maybe not being the world's best expert on contraceptive charms...

She and Remus had finally declared their love for each other. They were supposed to get married and live happily ever after. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

Tears streaked Ginny's cheeks, and she quietly brushed them away. She felt empty inside, as if it couldn't be real. She couldn't even summon the energy to have a proper cry.

"Shut it, Malfoy," Ron snarled, his own eyes suspiciously bright. "If it wasn't for Remus, we wouldn't have got out of there."

Ginny saw Harry's lower lip quiver for an instant before he slipped the emotionless mask back over his face. He was squeezing her hand so tightly, Ginny was certain she'd lost circulation.

"How did you get away?" her dad asked, his voice cracking. Ginny watched dispassionately as her mother wept against his chest. "What happened to the charm blocking the doors?"

Ron's eyes shifted to Harry again. "I don't really know," he said softly.

"Harry did it," Hermione said, sniffing. "It was shocking, actually. Obviously he was upset, but he did something to the glass doors where we were standing, and the whole room shook. All the doors unlocked just as suddenly, and there was a mad rush to escape."

Every eye in the room turned toward Harry, and Ginny felt his body tense. She was certain he would've bolted if it weren't for her arms wrapped securely around him. Before he had time to speak, the portrait hole again swung open, and a battle-weary Bill, Fleur and Moody stumbled inside. All three had used Polyjuice Potion to attend the meeting, but their normal appearance had since returned. Bill's face was bleeding, and Fleur limped alongside him.

"Bill!" her mum said, again jumping from her chair and flinging her arms around him. She then turned and treated Fleur to the same bone-crushing embrace. "Oh, Fleur. Thank Merlin, you're all right."

Bill and Charlie shook hands before pulling each other into a rough embrace. "Glad to see you, mate," Charlie said, his voice thick.

"Yeah. We saw you lot get out after the doors burst. We stayed to help get people to St. Mungo's, but when the Death Eaters really started to regroup, we had to flee," Bill replied.

"What 'appened to ze doors?" Fleur asked. "I have never zeen anyzing like it."

"That was Harry," Charlie replied, casting a tentative glance in Harry's direction.

"Damn fine bit of magic," Moody said gruffly, easing himself into a chair. "We would've had even more casualties than we already do without it. Most of the Aurors have been decimated, but I've brought those that survived back here with us."

"They're here?" Professor McGonagall asked, raising her eyebrows.

Moody nodded. "They're in the Great Hall. The Ministry's gone – completely under Voldemort's control."

Ginny looked up sharply; it was the first time she'd ever heard the old Auror use the name. She could see a steely glint of determination in his eye – he wouldn't be pushed any further.

"They want to join the Order," Moody said. "We're the last line of defense now. We're going to get Kingsley out of Azkaban. He doesn't belong there, and he can help lead them. They trust him."

Professor McGonagall nodded, appearing very pale.

"I want to train with them," Harry said, speaking for the first time. His voice was hard – unforgiving.

"Harry-" her mum said, but he didn't give her time to finish.

"If I'm the one who has to stop him, I need someone to show me how to do it. I need to learn how to kill him," Harry said, his eyes blazing. "Can you teach me?"

Moody nodded solemnly.

"Potter..." Professor McGonagall said, apparently at a loss for words.

"What?" Harry shouted, rounding on her. "Am I supposed to continue to sit back and let him take you all one by one? Nothing changes in the end – it's still up to me. I choose to do it while there are still some of you I care about left."

Turning on his heel, Harry stormed from the room, roughly bumping his shoulder on the side of the portrait hole as he did. Both Hermione and Ginny moved to follow, but her father's soft voice stopped them.

"Let him go. He needs to burn off some steam."

They all stared at the empty hole for a moment, even Draco – looking pale and strained – was oddly silent,. Professor McGonagall broke the stillness.

"Alastor, we'll put the Aurors in the Ravenclaw dormitories. You can get Filius to help you with that. Molly, can you please put the Dursleys in one of the empty dormitories here? Dobby can prepare the room. Dudley can join Mr. Malfoy, I believe he's currently alone on his floor."

"I'm not going to share a room with a Mud...er...a Muggleborn," Malfoy said, catching himself under Professor McGonagall's stern gaze. He shook his head as if to clear it.

"You'll stay wherever we have room, Mr. Malfoy," Professor McGonagall replied briskly.

"Malfoy?" Dudley asked, staring at the blonde for the first time. "I've heard Potter talk about you."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Charming."

After all the sleeping arrangements were settled, and Madam Pomfrey called to tend the injuries, Ginny quietly slipped out of Gryffindor tower in search of Harry. She knew his heart was breaking, but she wasn't certain what she could do about it, other than to grieve with him. At least she could ensure that he didn't have to go through it alone.

She knew instinctively where to find him. Pushing open the heavy front doors, she hurried outside into the cold night air. None of them was supposed to be outside the castle after nightfall, but if Harry were hurting, he would have gone to the Quidditch pitch.

As she approached it, the lights were blazing, and she could see a lone figure swooping around the rings. Rather than searching for the Snitch, he held a Beater's bat in his hand. She watched as he swung it at an approaching Bludger, admiring the way his taut muscles rippled when he moved. She could understand how he felt – the idea of beating the crap out of something was immensely appealing right now.

Turning suddenly, as if he knew he was being watched, Harry's body relaxed when he saw her. He flew down and landed on the grass near where she stood. A fine sheen of sweat covered his skin, despite the chill in the air. His eyes still held that same, haunted, deadened expression.

"Hey," he said, scuffing his toe on the ground.

"I was worried," she whispered, slipping her hand inside his gloved one.

"I'm all right – been here before," he said, shrugging.

"I know," she replied, wiping the damp hair from his forehead. "I'm sorry, Harry."

He nodded without speaking, and she watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed heavily. Pulling her into his arms and resting his chin atop her head, he whispered. "Why him? Why does this keep happening to me? Just when I think it can't possibly hurt anymore, he- Why did he do it?"

Harry broke off with a strangled catch in his voice, and Ginny's throat ached. It was all she could do not to break down and sob, but she fought it. It was her turn to be strong for him. Despite her resolve, she couldn't stop the tears that trickled down her face. She had to offer him some kind of comfort, but she also knew that he'd bolt at the slightest hint of pity in her voice.

"Because he loved you," she said. "And he loved your parents, and that's what people who love each other do."

"Tonks knew his power alone wouldn't do it. She sacrificed herself to give him that extra power so we could all escape," he said, his voice scratchy.

"Because she loved him," Ginny replied, her voice growing stronger as his weakened.

"Love is scary if it makes people do things like that," Harry said quietly.

"It's powerful, and it's what you are so full of inside," Ginny said, resting her hands on his chest above his heart. How could she explain love to someone who couldn't remember ever having it? She suddenly felt guilty for always having such an abundance of the one thing he'd always been lacking. She had to try and make him understand. "Something both more wonderful and more terrible than death because of the lengths people will go for it."

Harry pulled back, staring at her. "Dumbledore said something like that to me once. He was talking about the locked room at the Department of Mysteries."

"Come inside, Harry," Ginny said gently, taking his hand. "You're freezing out here. The fire's warm, and you look frightfully tired."

"I am," Harry whispered, leaning heavily against her as if she'd just released the wind from his sails.

"I'll get Dobby to bring us some hot chocolate, and we'll curl up by the fire," Ginny said.

"I want to talk to Dumbledore's portrait. Maybe he can help give me some ideas on where to look for the missing Horcrux," Harry said as they began walking back toward the castle.

Ginny knew that Harry had been avoiding talking to the portrait, making any excuse not to go up into McGonagall's office. She knew because Hermione had been up there several times trying to work out a way to get the Horcrux out of Harry. Perhaps talking to Dumbledore's portrait could help him deal with Remus's loss. She hoped so, anyway.

When they reached the common room, they found it surprisingly empty. She supposed it had been a long night for all of them. Whatever the reason, she was glad to find it deserted. She gave Harry a gentle shove, and he tiredly sunk onto the couch by the fire.

"Why don't I run down to the kitchen and get us some hot chocolate and some biscuits?" Ginny said. Harry's eyes were drooping so heavily, she was certain he'd be asleep by the time she got back.

He shook his head. "I'm not hungry, thanks. Just come sit for awhile."

"You look knackered, Harry. Why don't you just go on up to bed?" Ginny said gently.

Harry shook his head again. "Can't sleep up there. Your brothers snore too loud," he said, attempting to smile.

Ginny could understand that. All of her brothers snored quite loudly on their own, but when they were all together at the Burrow, it was deafening. Her mum had created a special soundproofing charm that she'd applied to all the walls. She couldn't imagine poor Harry being stuck in the room with four of the Weasley boys. Ron, alone, was bad enough.

"You could always use a Silencing Charm," she said, the corner of her mouth twitching.

"I have," Harry said, sighing, "but I'm afraid of missing something important."

Ginny nodded gravely. "Okay. We'll have to see if we can do something about that, then."

She sat on the couch beside him, and he immediately turned to press his back against her chest, leaning back between her legs and using her like a pillow. He wanted comfort.

That, at least, was something she could do. Wrapping her arms around him, she reclined against the arm of the couch, snuggling down and enjoying the heat from the fire on her face.

"He taught me how to cast a Patronus, did you know that?" he asked softly.

She did know, but she suspected he wasn't really looking to have a conversation – he just needed to talk.

"He came to a couple of the Quidditch matches in my third year. He was there when we won the Cup," he whispered.

She kissed his head, pulling him tighter to her. He made several soft, barely audible sniffing sounds, and she suspected he was crying. She supposed it was easier for him to keep his face turned away from her. She didn't speak, but gently caressed his arm and back, offering what comfort she could. Harry so rarely allowed himself to release his emotions; she thought a good cry was exactly what he needed.

She felt his breath hitch before the dam finally broke, and he began to sob in earnest. She held him tightly, whispering soothing, nonsensical words in his ear and keeping her face pressed close to his head. Several splashes of warm liquid hit her hand as he finally released his grief, clinging to her. He seemed to want the physical comfort.

She'd been surprised to learn how affectionate Harry could be. It was something she'd never suspected of him before they started dating. While they'd been in Albania, she'd particularly noticed how much he enjoyed holding hands, touching her face, or any simple caress she'd give him. She supposed it was all new to him. She didn't imagine that his horrible family had ever bothered showing him much affection.

That thought, combined with Harry's obvious delight from her touch, had made Ginny want to touch him all the more. Of course, the supreme satisfaction of knowing she was the one having that effect on him didn't hurt, either. She'd purposely brush her fingers to his when she

handed him something, or swipe her hand along his shoulders when she left or entered a room, and he always responded to it.

Thinking of that now, Ginny gently ran her fingers through his untidy hair, wrapping the ends around her fingers. Harry leaned his head into her touch, his breathing finally becoming deep and regular. He'd fallen asleep quicker than she'd thought he would. Wondering if she should leave him on the couch or attempt to levitate him up to his bed, she heard the portrait hole open.

Peering over the back of the couch, she saw Draco and Pansy tiptoeing inside.

"It's clear," Draco hissed through his teeth. "They must have all gone to bed already."

"Thank Merlin for small favors," Pansy whispered.

Ginny ducked so they couldn't see her, dragging her hand across her eyes and cocking her head to listen.

"So," Pansy purred, "what would you like to do since we have this big room all to ourselves?"

It was all Ginny could do to suppress a gag.

"Knock it off, Pansy," Draco said, his voice surprisingly harsh. "That's not going to work this time. I want to know where you were."

"I told you," Pansy said, sighing dramatically. "I needed some air. Being around all these Gryffindors all the time is stifling."

"You were gone a long time, and I couldn't find you anywhere," Draco said, sounding petulant.

"Honestly, Draco. Do you really think I'm out shagging Potter or a Weasley behind your back? How about Filch? He always seems available," Pansy shrieked.

"Keep your voice down," Draco hissed. "I didn't accuse you of anything, Pansy. I just want to know what you were doing all this time. Potter and Weasley were here, anyway. They brought back the news about the Dark Lord seizing the Ministry."

"Heh, I would've loved to see the expression on their faces when they got that news," Pansy said, causing Ginny to scowl.

"While I might enjoy it, too, if the circumstances were different, this isn't good news, Pansy. The more power the Dark Lord seizes, the less likely it is that I'm going to survive this mess," Draco said, suddenly sounding very young and frightened.

"Don't say that, Draco," Pansy said, drawing a sharp breath.

"It's true. I don't want to help Potter, but I like the idea of dying even less. He's going to kill me if Potter doesn't stop him soon. He's getting closer," Draco said.

"You're scaring me, Draco," Pansy replied, sniffing.

"I'm scared, Pansy. I don't want to die," Draco said, his voice cracking.

Ginny shifted uncomfortably.

"You won't. I won't let you," Pansy said vehemently.

Ginny tried to ignore the sudden passionate sounds coming from behind the couch as she snuggled deeper into the cushions, pulling a sleeping Harry closer to her. She might not like Draco or Pansy, but she was suddenly struck by the similarity of their situation to hers and Harry's. This newfound feeling of solidarity with the Slytherins was unnerving, and Ginny wasn't certain what to make of it. Her rational side kept screaming not to trust them; they were Slytherins, after all. Her heart, however, ached from their words.

She knew how Pansy felt. She'd do anything to ensure Harry's survival, as well. She also knew that even if – Merlin forbid, she lost Harry – she'd never move on again. She'd live her life, because that's what he'd want her to do, but she'd never fall in love again. He was the only man for her. If there was such a thing as soul mates, she knew she'd found hers. She wondered if Pansy felt the same way about Draco.

Fortunately for Ginny, Draco and Pansy broke apart and bid each other goodnight before she had to listen to anything she really didn't want to hear. They hurried up the stairs without ever glancing back in Ginny's direction. She lay on the couch for quite some time, contemplating their conversation.

Finally, she decided she needed some sleep. On the morrow, they'd all have to get serious. There was no time left for youthful pursuits. For tonight though, both she and Harry could pretend. Kissing the top of his head, Ginny rested her head back on the arm of the couch and drifted off to sleep.

Several days after the attack on the Ministry, life inside Hogwarts had settled into something of a routine. Moody had taken the surviving Aurors under his command, and they did their best to maintain order and deal with the panicked public. Harry suspected Voldemort knew exactly where they were hiding, but he appeared to be too focused on dismantling the Ministry and creating a kingdom under him to be bothered with them at the moment.

Harry didn't think it would last for long, and he also knew Voldemort didn't really see him as much of a threat. Harry intended to change that – but he had to find that remaining Horcrux first. The research was getting him nowhere, and he had the nagging feeling he was missing something in those Pensieve memories.

The strangest thing that had happened during the time they'd all been together was the odd – camaraderie – that had developed between Draco and Dudley. They certainly weren't friends, but Dudley had become the

new "Crabbe" or "Goyle" for Draco. They had their dislike of Harry in common and appeared to be bonding over it.

Dudley had a huge row with his parents a few nights after they'd arrived. Draco had obviously been telling him how much better the magical world was, for Harry was certain he recognized a sneering quality to Dudley's words that hadn't been there before his cousin had met the Slytherin. Dudley was angry with his parents for keeping him away from all this for so long.

Harry was disturbed by Dudley's fascination with Voldemort and everything that happened at the Ministry – his curiosity over how the Death Eaters had done what they did. Still, Dudley had always gravitated toward a gang of bullies; he wasn't certain why he expected it would be any different in the Wizarding world.

His aunt and uncle were torn. Their intense hatred for anything magical was warring with their lifelong habit of giving Dudley anything he desired. They wanted Dudley to have the fame and greatness that the Wizarding world had promised him – they just wanted him to have it without the magic part, and they didn't know which way to turn.

Aunt Petunia constantly burst into tears, nearly begging Dudley to simply look at her. His staunch refusal was tearing her apart. Naturally, both Dursleys blamed Harry for their situation. They appeared completely out of their element now that they were forced to depend on him for their well-being.

Harry found the whole situation rather ironic.

He knew Mrs. Weasley was taking great pleasure in making Aunt Petunia uncomfortable. Aunt Petunia was terrified of the house-elves, and he'd noticed Mrs. Weasley directing them to enter his aunt's room for any number of reasons. His heart had surged with affection for Mrs. Weasley each time.

He'd also heard the twins were running a betting pool on which one of the Weasley brothers could actually cause that vein in Uncle Vernon's temple to finally burst. Harry appreciated that, too and placed his money on Fred being the one to do it.

He'd woken up the morning after Remus's death on the couch in the common room. Ginny had slipped back up to her own room during the night, and he'd been able to catch a decent night's sleep. In fact, he'd since spent several more nights on that couch when the snoring in his dormitory became too much to bear.

Oddly enough, he'd heard Draco complaining rather vocally about Dudley's snoring on several occasions, but he wasn't about to offer to switch rooms with Dudley. Harry shuddered at the thought of sharing a room with Draco Malfoy. He'd rather suffer exhaustion than that.

This afternoon, Harry quickly ran down the steps towards the Great Hall. He'd planned to meet Moody there after lunch, and he hoped to do it without his friends noticing. He needed to ask Moody a question, and he didn't want to see the expressions on the other's faces when he asked it.

Moody promptly joined him, his wooden leg clunking on the floor as he walked. Harry had to admit, he liked having the Aurors at Hogwarts. The school has seemed empty and dead before their arrival, as if the whole place was still in mourning over Dumbledore's loss.

"Good afternoon," Moody said, sinking into the seat across from Harry. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to know all the curses that can kill," Harry said bluntly.

"You know the main one," Moody replied without batting an eye. "The Killing Curse is your best bet against the Dark Lord, and I think you have the power to use it."

Harry shuddered. That curse had taken so much from him already. He really didn't think he had it in him to use it. "What if I can't use that curse? I don't even know how to do it. Isn't there anything else?"

Moody shrugged, his eyes grave. "Other curses can kill. Diffindo can slice open an artery, Inflammare can burn someone alive. There are more chances of survival with those curses, however. Avada Kedavra is used when the sole purpose is to kill. Completely."

"I can't do the Cruciatus," Harry said warily, licking his lips. He eyed the old Auror carefully, uncertain how he'd take this. "I've tried – it's never worked."

Again, Moody didn't flinch. "While the Killing Curse is similar, it's not exact. With the Cruciatus, you have to enjoy causing pain. You have to want to cause suffering. When using the Killing Curse, you simply have to want to kill, for whatever reason. The reason it's an Unforgivable is that it can't be undone, or blocked, and there isn't a shield that can withstand it. It's your best hope," Moody said quietly.

Harry leaned back, feeling sick. He'd suspected it already, but hearing the words was difficult. He'd have to use the same curse that took his parents – took Dumbledore – took Remus – from him. If it was an Unforgivable, how would he ever be forgiven?

Not that it mattered, anyway. There was no way for him to survive the end. He'd resigned himself to it. He'd somehow have to go to the Department of Mysteries, and draw Voldemort's attention to the fact he was there. Perhaps he could send images of that bloody locked door back through their connection the other way. That would be poetic justice.

At first, Harry had been stuck on the idea that he'd have to destroy the Horcrux inside himself at Godric's Hollow since that was where it had been created. He didn't really want to return there, and certainly not to kill. He didn't think he'd be able to concentrate. It was something Hermione had said that changed his mind. He was different from the other Horcruxes because he was a living thing. A living thing with a mind of his own and free will to move about. The Horcrux couldn't have remained stationary, and besides, Voldemort had never had the time to create any kind of enchantments to guard the Horcrux within Harry. Voldemort hadn't even known it was there.

After Harry got him to the Department of Mysteries, he'd try to drag him through the Veil. It might be easier to go through if he had to concentrate on getting a struggling Voldemort through with him. If not, he'd try the Killing Curse, and simply jump through himself immediately afterward. Either way, it should solve everyone's problems.

But he'd have to find that last Horcrux, first.

That meant having a talk with his former headmaster.

Nodding to Moody, Harry sighed, pushed away from the table and slowly climbed the stairs back to Gryffindor tower. Stepping through the portrait hole, he found most of the inhabitants involved in a heated discussion.

"What's happened?" he asked, his heart rate quickening.

He could see Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon sitting in a corner, their eyes wide. It was rare to find them out of their rooms, never mind with the company of anyone magical. Harry had no idea what they did all day. Uncle Vernon, in particular, seemed lost without a telly, and Aunt Petunia was on hands and knees scrubbing and muttering that she'd see to it there was no need for those foul creatures to enter her room.

If his heart hadn't been so heavy, he might have even been amused by it.

"Voldemort's shut down St. Mungo's," Ron said grimly. "Anyone needing medical attention has to be approved by the Ministry – namely him."

"That's barbaric," Harry replied, knowing he should no longer be surprised by anything.

"He won't allow them to heal Muggleborns," Hermione said, her mouth set in a grim line.

"What are you going to do, Harry?" Bill asked.

Harry raised his eyes slowly, realizing all the inhabitants of the room were staring at him. Harry could almost feel a gauntlet being passed, as if they'd finally accepted that he was the only one who could end the madness.

Aunt Petunia's eyes widened, as if she was only just realizing it was Harry whom they were turning.

"I'm going to stop him," Harry said. It felt good to say it out loud, and doing so bolstered his confidence. "I've already asked Moody for some assistance, but I have one other thing I have to do first before I can confront him."

"Why? What is it you're doing that is so important? It seems to me stopping him should be the most important thing," Bill said, wincing.

"Bill!" Mrs. Weasley said, tears filling her eyes.

"It's not what I want to happen. I wish it didn't have to be Harry, but we all realize it does, even if we don't want to have to admit it. Harry has said it has to be him, so I'd like to know what else is so much more important," Bill said.

"It's okay," Harry said quietly. "It's a reasonable question. I still can't give you the answer, but I promise you that what I'm doing is helping to ensure I can kill him when the battle begins."

Harry absently watched the expressions on his aunt's face, uncertain what was going on behind her eyes.

"How do you even know where to find him?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Are you kidding?" Fred asked incredulously. "Harry doesn't have to find him – all he has to do is go outside and stand still for a bit. V-V-Voldemort always seems to find him."

"Fred!" Mrs. Weasley shouted. She was working herself into quite a state.

Mr. Weasley patted her back. "It's all right, Molly."

"It's not all right. Nothing is all right, and I can't bear the thought of letting Harry walk right into this," she cried, taking a sharp breath.

Harry knelt in front of her, taking her hands in his own. "Mrs. Weasley," he said, uncertain what he could possibly say that might make her feel better.

"Don't, Harry," she said, squeezing his fingers as tears leaked from her eyes. "I know what you're going to say, but understanding it and accepting it are two different things. You're like one of my own children, and I can't bear the thought of having to watch you do this. I should be the one protecting you."

"I don't want you to protect me, Mrs. Weasley," Harry replied, his throat tight. "The people who've already tried haven't done so well."

"Oh, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, throwing herself in his arms

Harry felt panicked, and he raised his eyes towards Ginny, seeking help. He was dismayed to see tears glistening in her eyes, as well.

Mr. Weasley was the one who came to his rescue, pulling his wife back and letting her cry on his shoulder.

"Fred has a point," George said, kicking his foot against the table. "I mean...Voldemort does tend to come after Harry. Look at the lengths he went to get him into that graveyard."

Aunt Petunia flinched, cocking her head to the side. Harry could see she was curious, despite the fact that Harry was the subject. He again wondered how much she really knew about the Wizarding world.

"Yeah, and that place wasn't far from where he'd been hiding at the time," Ron said. "Most people don't know that."

Harry suddenly sat up straighter, the conversation droning in his ears, and Aunt Petunia forgotten. Ron was right. Why hadn't he thought of it before? Voldemort had been hiding in the Riddle House. That vision Harry had of him murdering an old man took place in the Riddle House. The home of Voldemort's father and grandparents who he had killed right inside.

Harry knew Tom had hidden Marvolo's ring in the Gaunt house after killing them, but there was no reason he couldn't have made two Horcruxes at the time. He'd committed three murders that day. Why couldn't he have left something behind in the Riddle House, as well?

He shakily got to his feet. "Ron, Ginny, Hermione," he said. "We need to go talk to Professor Dumbledore's portrait."

"Now?" Ron asked, blinking rapidly.

"Now," Harry replied. "I think I might have an idea where we have to go next."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Echoes in Time

Harry led the way as the four teens grimly walked down the corridor toward Professor McGonagall's office. He watched dust motes dance in the sunlight that streamed in from the windows, wondering how his thoughts could feel so dark on such a bright day. When they were far enough away from the common room, Hermione grabbed his arm and stopped their progress. He'd been aware that she'd barely been containing her curiosity since he'd dragged her from the common room.

"Harry, what's going on? What did you remember?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I want to talk to Professor Dumbledore – I think it's time," he said, taking a deep breath.

Ginny snaked her fingers through his own, and he gave them a quick, reassuring squeeze.

Hermione smiled, obviously pleased. "Well, I've been saying you should do that since we arrived here. I'm glad you're finally listening, Harry."

Ignoring her reproach, Harry said, "Ron reminded me about the Riddle House. I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner. I want to go to Little Hangleton with the Spell Detector after we see the portrait."

"But I thought Voldemort hid a Horcrux at the Gaunt's old house after he killed the Riddles," Hermione said, frowning her brow.

Harry nodded. "He did. Professor Dumbledore found the ring there, but there were three murders committed that day, and Voldemort was drawn to

the place enough to return while he waited to capture me during the Triwizard Tournament. I think it's worth a look."

"He's right, and it'll feel good to go out and accomplish something instead of reading old books all day," Ron said, unaware of Hermione's scowl.

Hoping to avoid a row, Harry began walking again, keeping Ginny's hand tucked firmly within his own. "We have to try and speed up the search before Voldemort is able to sink his claws too deeply into the Ministry. At the rate he's killing people and others are fleeing, there'll be no one left to save."

"And we still have to talk about what we're going to do about the Seventh Horcrux," Hermione said, glancing uneasily at Harry.

"Let's just find this last one first," Harry said, brushing her off. He'd made up his mind. It wouldn't do any of them any good to continue rehashing the alternatives. He knew what he had to do, and they'd come to realize it after the fact. They'd have to – it wasn't as if he'd have allowed Remus to do what he did beforehand. Still, he had to admit that Remus's sacrifice had allowed them all to escape.

Remus finally had had the chance to do what he'd always wanted – make a difference. Harry forced himself to slow his pace when he realized that Ginny – on her shorter legs – was nearly running to keep up with him.

When they reached the stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Professor McGonagall's office, Harry's heart lurched. He hadn't been back here since the night Dumbledore had died. He swallowed heavily and gripped Ginny's hand more tightly.

She gently caressed his hand with her thumb, soothing him.

"Three hundred and ten spread," Hermione said, and the gargoyle sprang aside, revealing the moving circular stairway.

Harry and his friends rode up in silence, none of them feeling any desire to rush into the office. Hermione pushed open the door, and Harry took a good look around.

The office was familiar, although all of Professor Dumbledore's odd little trinkets and instruments were missing. Godric Gryffindor's sword still hung in the display case, and Harry supposed that it was appropriate that it remain at the school. A tartan tin of biscuits had replaced the candy jar on the desk, and the Quidditch Cup was displayed prominently where Fawkes' perch once stood. The game-winning Snitch sat beside it, gleaming in the sunlight. Harry supposed that a new head of Gryffindor House had never been named, so Professor McGonagall had been able to hold onto the trophy.

Harry studied the office carefully and only when he had nowhere else to look did he raise his eyes to the golden-framed portrait that hung above the desk. He inhaled sharply when he realized that Professor Dumbledore's piercing blue eyes were open, twinkling with that familiar sparkle, as he watched the four friends approach.

"Good afternoon," Dumbledore said, clearing his throat. "It is lovely to see young people about the castle again. I am glad you convinced your friends to drop by, Miss Granger. I have been eagerly anticipating it."

"Hello, Professor," both Ginny and Hermione murmured.

Ron smiled halfheartedly, but Harry stood frozen, rooted to the spot, his heart hammering.

"Care for a lemon drop?" Professor Dumbledore asked pleasantly, raising a painted jar full of the sugary sweet and leaning it toward Hermione.

"No, thank you, sir," she replied, smiling fondly.

Professor Dumbledore peered at Ron, and then Ginny, each of whom shook their heads mutely. Hermione wrung her hands while Ron nervously shifted from foot to foot. Ginny tried to melt back between the two. All of them kept casting anxious glances in Harry's direction, but he maintained his silence. He knew it was making everyone else nervous, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't seem to find the words.

Dumbledore's twinkling gaze finally reached Harry, and it took all the willpower he possessed not to shrink away. The Bludger-sized lump lodged in his throat prevented him from speaking, and he had to rapidly blink the mist from his eyes, hoping no one else would notice.

"Harry, dear boy, I had wondered when you would finally come around to call. I have been asking Miss Granger after you. I am delighted to see you are well. Unfortunately, you are the one person to whom I cannot offer a lemon drop," Dumbledore said, a sad smile crossing his face.

"Sir?" Harry choked, confused.

He felt Ginny's hand on his back, reassuring him, and he leaned into her touch.

"For years I kept a jar on my desk, and I always offered sweets to my visitors, but no one ever accepted," Professor Dumbledore said wistfully. "I find it amusing to continue offering them, since now there is obviously no way I can really oblige. However, people still merely shake their heads at the offer, and I am certain they never really consider it. But you, Harry, you were the only one who always accepted my offer. I always enjoyed that about you."

Harry nodded, unable to speak.

"So, tell me, how far have you come in your quest to locate all of Tom's Horcruxes?" Professor Dumbledore asked, folding his long fingers beneath his chin in a gesture that was so familiar it made Harry's heart constrict.

"You know about them, then?" Ginny asked, unable to restrain herself. Realizing she'd interrupted, she blushed and tugged at a strand of hair. "I mean...we weren't certain how much you'd be aware of since..."

"Not to worry, Miss Weasley. I regularly updated the enchantment to ensure my portrait would have full awareness of my activities up to the point of my demise. I was always rather clever with foresight, if I do say so myself," Professor Dumbledore said, smiling kindly.

"Do you know how you... How it happened?" Harry asked, unable to stop the hard edge that had crept into his voice once he finally found it.

The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes flickered and waned as he nodded solemnly. "I do. Professor McGonagall has been good enough to keep me apprised of current events. She told me about Severus."

"You...you didn't have some sort of plan with him then, sir?" Hermione asked, wincing slightly under Harry's fierce glare.

"Alas...no, Miss Granger, I did not. I believed Severus truly regretted his past misdeeds and was seeking redemption through his service to me. I was mistaken. I think I told you once before, Harry, did I not, that my mistakes in judgment tended to be larger than most?"

"But why? Why did you trust him so?" Harry asked, his throat tight.

Dumbledore smiled, his sad eyes drifting over each of them before answering. "Perhaps it was my own hope for his redemption. I wanted to believe he had changed – that I had managed to reach him. I wanted him to have a second chance to realize that his choices could be different – that walking a different path could change everything.

"I had always felt guilty for the life Severus led. I wished I could have done more for him. I wish I had realized sooner how close to the edge he was walking when he was a student here. Severus always felt persecuted – as if his teachers and all authority figures had it in for him. After so many years of the same complaints, it became so that the faculty – myself included – only listened to him with half an ear. When he turned to the Dark, I felt I had failed him."

Professor Dumbledore's eyes dulled, taking on a faraway expression.

Harry compressed his lips, barely able to contain his fury that this echo, or imprint, or portrait – whatever it was – of Professor Dumbledore would feel guilty for failing Snape when Snape was the one who had forced Harry to have to talk to him in this way in the first place.

He glanced up to find Dumbledore's intense blue eyes boring him into him. He held his hand in the air as if trying to reach out and touch Harry, but it was impossible.

"After Severus learned about Voldemort's plans for your family, Harry, he came to me. Although the bitterness between he and your father ran deep, your mother had always been kind to him, and I don't think he'd ever forgotten that. I believe hearing the plans for the brutal murder of people he knew – his classmates – stirred something in Severus. He tried to save them, but his warning came too late for me to affect a change," Dumbledore said, his eyes full of sorrow.

"How do you know he tried to save them? How do you know he wasn't aiming to get in your good graces even then, giving you the information after it was already too late?" Harry snarled, breathing through his nose in an attempt not to lose control.

Dumbledore sighed, pinching the bridge of his long, crooked nose. "I do not know that for certain. If you had asked me that same question when I was still amongst the living, I would have adamantly denied the possibility. I would not have listened to a word against Severus. I wanted to believe him; I'd grown to care about him enough that I tended to overlook some of his more...unorthodox...teaching methods. You never trusted him, Harry. Perhaps that is the way it should be – that you were right, and I was wrong in the end, as the torch was passed to you."

Harry shut his eyes tightly, unwilling to hear anymore.

"I still wish I could have done more to save Severus, but it was not meant to be. Now, our challenge is to save everyone else," Professor Dumbledore said, his eyes finally clearing.

"And to save Harry," Ginny said, wiggling her hand in his. He'd been gripping her fingers so tightly that he'd probably cut off her circulation.

"Did you know?" Harry asked suddenly, his eyes piercing into Dumbledore's, certain his old Headmaster would know exactly what he meant.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, looking down at his folded hands. "I suspected," he said, appearing to age before their very eyes.

Harry steeled himself against the stab of sympathy that struggled to arise. "Then why didn't you tell me?" he bit out.

"I could not – not until I was certain," Dumbledore said wearily. "I could not bring myself to share my suspicions with you, particularly when I was fighting with my own desire to discount the mounting evidence. I kept seeking an alternative – any other possibility to satisfy my unease. I told you I thought Nagini was that Horcrux to alert you to the idea that although inadvisable, a living thing could become a Horcrux. I wanted you to be aware of that fact while I continued to seek another answer. Again – I made the mistake of allowing myself to care too much. I am sorry, Harry."

Harry clenched teeth, furious, and looked away.

"What does that silver instrument you left Harry do?" Hermione asked, her eyes darting nervously between Harry and the portrait.

"It is called a Soul Balance," Professor Dumbledore said, his eyes grave. "It is meant to aid in the decision-making process – to show which way your soul is leaning when a particularly hard choice needs to be made. However, instead, I have modified its use to indicate if the two souls that reside within Harry are separate or connected. The piece of Tom's soul that resides within you, Harry is still separate from your own. It has never been absorbed into your own personality. It is

very tricky to place a Horcrux inside a living thing, as there is always the chance that the soul of the living host becoming the dominant force and consuming it."

"What does it do to the host if that happens?" Hermione asked apprehensively.

"I cannot answer that succinctly since I could find no record of it ever being done. It is suspected, however, that although the fragment soul would essentially be destroyed, the host itself would be contaminated by it," Dumbledore said heavily.

Harry suddenly felt very sick as the color drained from his face.

"That has not, however, happened to you. Your soul remains quite separate and intact from the piece of Voldemort residing within your body, Harry," Dumbledore said, his own face very pale. "The fact speaks volumes about your strength of character."

Harry wanted to steer the conversation away from this topic. Professor Dumbledore had an uncanny knack for seeing through him and knowing his intentions. He couldn't afford that discussion with the others still in the room. Besides, his stomach was churning so unpleasantly, he wanted to get away before he embarrassed himself by heaving on the floor.

"We've found all the Horcruxes but one. The cup was in Hepzibah Smith's old home," he said, rubbing his belly. He didn't mention the locket, unwilling to admit to Dumbledore that the ordeal he'd suffered on the night he died was all for naught.

"We're planning on searching the Riddle House next," Ron said, nervously. Harry suddenly realized how quiet he'd been during the entire conversation. Glancing at his friend, Harry noticed that he didn't appear well, either.

"The Riddle House?" Dumbledore asked, perplexed. "I suppose it is possible, but it seems unlikely Tom would have hidden two so close together."

"I thought about that, but I'm running out of ideas, and I thought it was worth a check," Harry replied, shrugging.

"Yes, it is certainly a possibility. Let me know how it goes, and I will ponder what artifact from Gryffindor or Ravenclaw might have fallen into Tom's unclean hands," Dumbledore said.

"Thanks you, sir," Hermione said

"Do not mention it. It is not as if I am overwhelmed with things to do these days. Minerva is a good woman, but it is not as though she has a wild underside that would create a wonderful source of gossip and entertainment," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling once again.

"Yes, sir," Hermione said, blushing. Harry, Ron and Ginny all hid their sniggers.

"Come back to see me when you are not so pressed for time, Miss Granger, and I will inform you how the Soul Balance works," he said, peering intently at Hermione.

She nodded but remained silent. They bid their farewells and left the room in darkness.

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The following day, the four teens arose early and began the trek to Little Hangleton. They'd managed to avoid Mrs. Weasley and instead informed Mr. Weasley and Professor McGonagall that they'd be outside the gates for a while. Neither of the adults appeared pleased with the news, but they didn't attempt to stop them, either.

Harry noticed Draco and Pansy watching them closely from atop the Astronomy tower as they traveled the road toward Hogsmeade. He would have preferred to have slipped away unseen, but he supposed it didn't really matter. It wasn't as if the Slytherins knew where the four were headed, anyway.

"So, here we go again," Ron said, kicking a stray stone as they walked.

It crossed into Harry's path, and he absently kicked it back. "Yeah. Here's hoping we find something, so we can get this done and over," he said, sighing.

Hermione and Ginny exchanged pointed looks.

"Still, this hasn't been so bad," Ron said, continuing to kick the stone forward. "I mean, a lot more research time than I would have imagined, but we've done okay. When we first talked about starting this quest - I thought we'd, you know, have to live in caves and stuff."

"Why would we have to do that?" Harry asked curiously. "Dumbledore searched the whole time right from Hogwarts."

"I know," Ron replied, shrugging. "I suppose I just didn't think of that. Figuring out what and where has just taken a lot more time than the actual destruction, is all."

"Destruction is generally done very quickly, Ron," Hermione said, pursing her lips. "It's the building - the creation - the planning it all out that takes the time."

Ron scowled as his face began to turn an alarming shade of red. Ginny caught Harry's eye and grinned.

"Race you to the gate," she said, beginning to sprint before Harry even had a chance to reply.

Grinning, he took off after her, leaving Ron and Hermione behind to either continue bickering or hurry to catch up. Harry's long strides allowed him to overtake Ginny just as they reached the Hogwarts' gates. They both put their hands out to stop their progress, slamming against the heavy iron bars and panting heavily.

"I won," Ginny said, gasping.

"How do you figure?" Harry asked, hunched over with his hands on his knees. "I touched the gate first."

"You did not," Ginny said indignantly.

"Did so," Harry said, laughing. He turned and rested his head on the gate.

Ginny narrowed her eyes and he could see her plotting behind the cinnamon color of her irises. Pasting what he hoped was a conciliatory expression on his face, he tried to control his smirk.

"Tie?" he suggested.

Ginny pursed her lips, considering. She nodded and punched him in the stomach lightly. "Tie works this time, but I'm not letting you off that easy again," she said primly.

"I'll tread carefully," Harry said, cocking his eyebrow.

Ginny giggled, resting her head on his shoulder. "Think Ron and Hermione are done rowing yet?"

"I doubt it. Complaining about library time and research is never going to end well," Harry said, squinting his eyes to distinguish Ron and Hermione walking over a hill in the distance.

He and Ginny watched their friends' progress until they all stood in front of the gates. Ron and Hermione weren't speaking, and Hermione pointedly looked in the other direction. Harry sighed. Some things never changed.

"Let's get going so we can still be back in time for dinner," Ron said. "I'm starving."

"You are?" Ginny asked in mock astonishment, blinking her wide eyes. "That's so unlike you, Ron. Are you feeling all right?"

Harry grinned. "All right, once we're outside the gates, I'll Side-Along-Apparate Ginny with me. Ron and Hermione, you two can just lightly hold my arm so I'll guide you. We'll appear several meters away from the house, just in case it's being watched," he said, taking Ginny's hand.

He held out his arm for Ron and Hermione, but Hermione hesitated, a perplexed frown crossing her features.

"You're certain you have a spot in mind, Harry? Somewhere specific?" she asked, appearing rather nervous.

Harry rolled his eyes impatiently. "I've been there before, Hermione," he snapped.

She didn't look pleased, but she took hold of his arm. Harry envisioned the dirt road leading towards the Riddle House. He remembered how it curved and rolled past the graveyard...

Harry's vision briefly swam before he felt the uncomfortable squeezing sensation of Apparation. His mind's eye flashed on the image of that graveyard on a starry night, remembering how long shadows appeared as if rising from the graves themselves...

With a start, he realized he was standing in the middle of that very graveyard rather than on the road that curved alongside it. Piles of melting snow had left the ground slick and muddy beneath his feet. The bright, early afternoon sun on this chilly day was in stark contrast to the warm June night he often relived in his nightmares. His palms began to sweat, and his heart hammered in his chest as terrifying memories assaulted all his senses.

Phantom images of Death Eaters appearing from nowhere, the sound of cold, cruel laughter, the acrid smell of smoke as it rose into the night, the feeling of his body being ripped apart...

"Ow!" Ron yelped, hopping around on one foot and holding his knee with the other. "Bloody hell, Harry. I didn't think you'd set us down right in the graveyard. I slammed right into that tombstone."

"I didn't mean it," Harry said quietly, his eyes glued to the tall marble headstone directly in front of him. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to pull his gaze away from the name engraved on the stone.

Tom Riddle

"I was afraid this might happen. I told you to envision the spot carefully, Harry," Hermione said, her lips puckering. "It's a wonder we all didn't get Splinched." She looked torn between concern, annoyance and frustration – the expression on her face rapidly alternating between the three.

"Harry?" Ginny said tentatively, resting her hand on his bicep.

"Yeah," Harry said, shaking his head to clear it. Sheepishly, he admitted, "At the last minute, my mind drifted. Sorry about that. We're only a few meters from where we should have been. That's the Riddle House there, on the hill." He pointed towards it, but once again his eyes traveled to the marble gravestone and moved along the length of the grave. The large stone cauldron had since been removed, but he could picture it there, churning and bubbling, remembering the stark terror of watching the smoke rise into the night...

Ron clapped him on the back, his eyes shifting between Harry and Hermione. "We can't afford to get Splinched, mate," he said, looking around the graveyard uncomfortably. "It's a right mess, and I don't know how to undo it."

"And we can't get the Ministry Reversal Squad involved, Harry. We don't even know if they still exist," Hermione said, her eyes wide and apologetic. She wrung her hands nervously. "You need to slow down and think a bit first."

"All right," Harry said, feeling nettled. The memories were assaulting him fast and furious, and he felt his breath coming quicker as he recalled what easily had to be the scariest night of his life. "What's done is done, and we're okay."

"That's not the point," Hermione said indignantly. "I know this must be hard for you, Harry, but we can't be impulsive. We can't afford any mistakes." Her eyes softened, and she rested her hand on his arm. "I do want to help, Harry, and I know this must be traumatic, but I can't assist you if you won't let me. You have to trust that we can handle something if you can't once in a while."

"Is this where it happened, Harry?" Ginny asked quietly. She'd wrapped her arms around herself and was staring at the stones apprehensively. Harry thought she looked ready to sprint for the road at any moment.

"Yeah," he said, turning his attention away from Ron and Hermione and focusing solely on her. "That's the grave where I was tied. Wormtail did it before I even knew what was happening." He silently traced his hand along his cheekbone, remembering the blow Wormtail had used to still him.

He didn't know why, but he suddenly felt the desperate need to talk about it – a need like he'd never felt in the past. "The cauldron was there, and Wormtail stood between us, carrying the thing Voldemort was. He looked like some kind of grotesque baby. When Wormtail dropped him into the cauldron, I kept hoping he would drown," Harry whispered, swallowing thickly.

Again, Ron clamped his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let's get out of here, mate. We've got a house to search."

Ron was obviously nervous. Harry knew that Ron wanted to move away from the emotional events that happened here, both for Harry's sake and his own.

"Where did the Priori Incantatum take place?" Hermione asked, her anger over their near-Apparation accident dissolving beneath her curiosity.

"There," Harry said, pointing, his eyes faraway. He stared at the small clearing where he and Voldemort had dueled – where he'd seen the shades of his parents for the first time. Some of the gravestones were chipped and broken, and he could detect spell burns on the edges of several of them. He shuddered, remembering.

"But you did get away," Ginny whispered, slipping her small hand into his. "Thank Merlin."

"It was terrifying to sit in the stands that night, not knowing what had happened," Hermione said, her eyes taking on that same, distant expression he knew was in his own. "The rumors spread like wildfire that one of the champions was dead."

"We were so afraid it was you," Ron said, briefly glancing at Harry. His voice was low and gruff with suppressed emotion.

Harry shook his head solemnly.

"Cedric died right there," he said, pointing a shaky finger towards the spot. The image was still burned into his memory.

They stood in silence for a moment, remembering their fallen schoolmate before Ginny tugged on Harry's hand. "Come on. We can't change anything that happened in the past by standing here."

"Ginny's right," Hermione said, taking a deep breath. "It's the future we have some control over. Let's go search the Riddle House."

Harry allowed the girls to lead him away, feeling bolstered by their confidence. They were right. He did have some control over the future for the rest of them. For once, he wasn't completely dependant on anyone else.

As they approached the house, Harry kept a wary eye out for Goyle or any of Voldemort's followers who might be watching the place. There was nothing. Traces of unblemished snow still surrounded the walkway up to the house. No one had entered this way, at least not since the last snowfall.

"It doesn't look as if anyone's been here in ages, Harry," Hermione said, sounding both relieved and disappointed.

"I know. We'll check inside, anyway, but I don't think it's here," he replied.

Hermione raised her eyebrow but refrained from commenting.

Bracing his shoulder against the door, Harry shoved, and it easily opened as if it had been forced open many times in the past. Examining the doorjamb, he could see where it was splintered and frayed. It had obviously been repaired several times already. He could vaguely sense some kind of wards surrounding the house and instinctively knew they'd be unable to Disapparate from inside.

They entered to find the inside of the house nearly void of light. Dark wallpaper and heavy drapes completely dampened the afternoon sun and added to the creepy...haunted...feel of the place. Had they been innocent children, it was exactly the kind of house they would have hastily crossed the street to avoid walking past.

"Lumos," Hermione said, and the glow from the tip of her wand cast a shadow across the room. She crossed toward the light switch on the wall and flicked it upward, but nothing happened. "The power must have been turned off."

"Perfect," Ron said, his eyes quickly darting from side to side, seeking out any threat.

The others all lit their wands and fanned out across the room. A thick layer of dust covered the floor and furniture, and Harry absently wondered why the place hadn't been sold. There was obviously no one still caring for it. He moved assuredly towards the stairs.

"Voldemort used a room upstairs," he whispered, uncertain why he felt the need to keep his voice so low.

"How do you know?" Ginny asked, also whispering.

"I saw it in a dream," he replied curtly. He found it rather unsettling to feel as if he was somehow returning to this house, even though he knew he'd never actually physically been there before.

Upstairs, the dust also thickly covered the floor, but Harry could distinguish vague, slithering strips where it wasn't as thick – traces of Nagini's presence. Memories of Voldemort murdering the Muggle who'd discovered him here filled Harry's mind, and he suddenly didn't want Ron to follow him into that room.

"Take the Spell Detector and look around downstairs. I'll check the room up here," he said, placing his hand on Ron's chest and handing him the glasses.

Ron shrugged, but took the Spell Detector and turned around. Hermione glanced at him suspiciously before following Ron down the stairs. Ginny, however, stayed with him.

"Why don't you start at that end of the hall, and I'll go this way?" he suggested, already knowing her answer.

"What good is that going to do? I can't sense anything the way you can, and we've only got the one Spell Detector. It's better to stay in pairs," Ginny said, frowning slightly.

Sighing, he began moving forward again, trying to shield her with his body. He didn't know if she was aware of what he was trying to do, but suspected she was because she kept moving in different directions to examine various paintings on the wall, or peek inside an open room. He was practically bouncing off the walls, trying to stay in front of her. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

When they finally reached the room at the end of the hall, Harry was struck with a massive sense of *déjà vu*. It looked exactly how it had appeared in his dreams, right down to the large wing-backed chair in the center of the room.

Harry glanced around, peering into cracks, crevices and each corner and, although he found nothing, his nerves refused to settle. He suspected his apprehension had more to do with what had happened here in the past than any threat now, but he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling. It made him very edgy, and he suspected his tenseness only increased Ginny's anxiety. She stayed with him as he searched each room, although she walked around, peering behind portraits and moving trinkets on the shelves.

Neither of them spoke as they moved from room to room, and the hair on the back of Harry's neck stood on end. There was something wrong about this house.

Finally, in the last room they searched, Harry tried to lighten the mood and ease Ginny's tension by repeatedly poking her in the ribs each

time he walked by. He could tell she was growing annoyed, but he could also see the laughter in her eyes.

"Harry, you're being a prat," she said at last.

Harry grinned, blowing on a tabletop so a cloud of dust arose in their faces. "Am not," he replied childishly.

Shaking her head, Ginny returned to what she was doing, smiling lightly. They continued their search in silence once again.

"Find anything up there?" Ron's voice shouted from the floor below, causing both Harry and Ginny to jump.

They grinned at each other self-consciously, silently promising never to let Ron know he'd startled them.

"Nah. There's nothing," Harry called.

"This place gives me the creeps," Ron said,

Although Ron couldn't see him, Harry nodded in agreement. He watched Ginny peering at several items atop an antique desk. Quietly slipping back into the room, he ducked behind the other side of the desk and poked his head up suddenly.

"Good evening," he said in his best imitation of a vampire voice that he'd heard on the Dursleys' telly.

Ginny shrieked, jumping back and aiming her wand. "Sternumentum," she shouted, and Harry barely had time to raise a shield before a mass of fluttering winged creatures covered in slime slammed into the wall.

"Reducto," Ginny hissed, scrambling away as the desk blasted into pits, sending shards into the air.

Harry had to roll across the floor to escape injury.

"Ginny!" he shouted when she raised her wand again.

Wild-eyed and panting heavily, Ginny turned toward his voice, blinking in confusion. "Harry," she said weakly, slumping against the wall.

Harry stood up gingerly, brushing the dirt and debris off his clothing. "You tried to hex me," he said, dumbfounded.

He could hear Ron and Hermione's pounding footsteps on the stairs. They entered the room, panicked, just as Ginny's shock gave way to fury.

"What in Merlin's name did you think you were doing? You scared me to death, Harry!" she shouted, once again brandishing her wand at him.

"You tried to hex me," he repeated, blinking.

"Do that again, and I'll do more than try," Ginny snapped, finally putting her wand back in her pocket.

"What did you do?" Ron asked, uncertain whether he should be angry on Ginny's behalf or outright laugh at Harry.

"He sneaked up on me and spoke in a different voice," Ginny said, scowling. "Nearly frightened me to death."

"Harry!" Hermione said reproachfully, wrapping her arm around Ginny's shoulder.

"It was supposed to be a vampire voice," Harry whined.

Apparently unable to contain himself any longer, Ron threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"It isn't funny, Ron," Ginny said, slapping him on the arm.

"Is so," Ron said when he was finally able to catch his breath, tears streaming from his eyes. "Ginny Weasley admits she was scared, and Harry Potter nearly gets done in by his own girlfriend on the same day. What's not funny about that?" Ron asked, doubling over with laughter again.

Although she tried to hide it, Harry saw Hermione's lips twitch.

"I wasn't scared," Ginny said, color finally returning to her face. She raised her chin defiantly in the air. "He startled me, that's all."

"That's all," Harry said, biting the inside of his cheeks.

Hermione finally lost the battle, and she leaned against Ron as she giggled. "Merlin, Ginny. If you could have seen your face."

"Are we done here?" Ginny asked, scowling, two high points of color staining her cheeks.

"Yeah, there's nothing here," Harry replied, schooling his features. "We're back to square one."

"We'd better get back, then," Ginny said coldly. Turning on her heel, she left the room with her head high in the air.

"Damn. You're in trouble now, mate," Ron said, still sniggering.

"Don't I know it?" Harry mumbled, following behind Ginny.

Still giggling, Hermione said, "It really was a nasty trick, Harry."

As he descended the stairs, Harry was brought to his knees as a blinding pain suddenly shot through his head. His vision swam, and he doubled over, falling down the last half dozen stairs and crashing into Ginny at the bottom. He gripped the sides of his head in agony, unable to suppress his screams.

The pain in his head was intense; it felt as if the roots of his hair were on fire, burning from his scalp outward. He clawed at it, tugging out tufts of hair in an effort to stop the scorching intensity.

He could hear his friends shouting his name in the distance, but couldn't get past the intense pressure in his skull. He felt a Dark presence within his mind, coiling around his thoughts and seeing through his own eyes. He tried to fight, to push the presence back, but it was too strong. Icy drops swirled in his head, clouding his thoughts and confusing him. He was so cold.

The snake in his mind flicked his eyes methodically on his location, intently studying the door and the surrounding room. Harry felt cold, calculating recognition dawn as a sickening sense of accomplishment filled his senses. With cold dispassion, he turned his slit-like eyes onto Ron, Hermione and Ginny's panicked faces. It was the terror in his friends' expressions, added to the feeling of the evil in his soul thrilling at their presence, that finally enabled Harry to push the Darkness from his mind. He felt it swirl in a whirlpool, receding slowly as if sliding down a drain.

The pain diminished slowly until only a dull headache remained, leaving Harry gasping on the floor. The palms of his hands were scraped and bleeding from trying to stop his fall, and his ankle felt strained beneath him.

"Harry," Ron said, shaking him slightly. "Wake up, Harry. Can you hear me?"

Harry groaned, his body aching. He wanted to drift into the sleep that beckoned, but Ron just wouldn't let him. Dark shadows encroached upon the edge of his vision, threatening to overtake him completely.

"Harry, wake up," Hermione said slapping his face.

Groaning again, he pulled his face away and tried to open his eyes. They didn't want to cooperate, and it took him several moments.

Blinking, he realized he was lying on the floor propped against Ron's chest as his friend cradled him tightly. As if realizing Harry's new awareness, Ron released his grip, although he continued to support Harry's weight.

"You were thrashing like mad. I thought you were having a seizure," Ron said, sounding panicked.

"What happened, Harry?" Ginny asked, her face pale and tear-stained.

Harry furrowed his brow, confused. Suddenly, memory crashed over him like a tidal wave. "We have to get out of here," he cried, attempting to rise. He would have fallen again if Ron hadn't caught him.

"Easy, mate. We're going. Just catch your breath," Ron said.

"No! You don't understand. He knows we're here. Voldemort!" Harry gasped, scrambling for the door again. He had to get them out of here. He couldn't lose anyone else.

Finally catching on to his urgency, Hermione jumped to her feet, pulling Ginny up beside her.

"Let's go," she said, yanking open the door.

Ron pulled Harry to his feet and wrapped his arm around him.

"Hurry," Harry moaned.

When they were out on the porch, and Harry could see the graveyard at the bottom of the hill, the popping sounds of Apparation began to fill the air.

Both girls stood on the porch, their wands at the ready.

"Go! What are you waiting for?" he shouted.

He tried to clear his mind, to concentrate on the hills surrounding the gates at Hogwarts just outside of Hogsmeade, but he couldn't get his mind to focus. A swirling mass of gray clouded his vision, darkening the sky.

He felt his knees give out, and his last thought before losing consciousness was the fact he really would die in that God-forsaken graveyard after all.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Scars

The late afternoon sun shone weakly on the Scottish hills surrounding Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. February's chill permeated the village of Hogsmeade, and icicles dripped slowly onto the cobblestone below. As usual during these days of political unrest, the village was nearly deserted. No one wanted to risk being seen in public lest Voldemort's supporters should strike. The Wizarding world at large was in hiding, holding its breath, awaiting the next calamity.

The ground around the gates of Hogwarts was muddy and puddle-filled. The iron gates blended seamlessly with the cold gray sky. A loud popping sound disturbed the stillness, causing a few stray birds to caw and flutter from their branches. Hermione and Ginny appeared a short distance from the gates. A moment later, Ron arrived, clutching an unconscious Harry.

Harry slumped to the ground upon impact, and both girls rushed toward him. He groaned as his eyes fluttered open, struggling to fight off the confusion and disorientation. His head throbbed painfully, and he raised his aching arm to shield his eyes from the sun.

"What happened?" he slurred.

"Harry, are you all right?" Hermione cried, sounding panicked. "Was it Voldemort? That hasn't happened in a really long time. This isn't good."

Ginny placed her hand on his head and gently smoothed back his hair. "Can you stand?" she asked gently.

Grunting, Harry lifted himself onto his elbows. "I'm fine - just a headache. We should get inside the gates."

Ron reached down to help him stand, but before Harry managed to steady himself on his feet, several more popping sounds rent the air. A handful of Death Eaters, fully robed and masked, stood between the four teens and the gates of Hogwarts.

"There," one of the men cried, pointing.

All four teens dove for the cover of the trees that aligned the road. Harry's head throbbed painfully, but he ignored it as he drew his wand. He counted five of them before a series of Blasting Curses began hitting the trees where he crouched, splintering the wood. Staying tucked down, he quickly moved back to where Hermione was hidden.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

She nodded. "Ron and Ginny are on the other side of the road, but I can see two Death Eaters checking over there, as well."

Harry cursed when the tree where he was hidden was struck with a red beam of light, missing his head by inches. He aimed his wand and successfully struck the first Death Eater with a powerful Stunning Spell. The man fell to the ground in a heap. The second one managed to raise a shield before also taking cover behind the trees.

A volley of sparks ignited on the other side of the road as either Ron or Ginny traded Spellfire with one of the masked Death Eaters. Harry saw another robed figure entering the woods in search of them.

"There's still one guarding the gate," Hermione whispered.

"We'll Apparate into Hogsmeade and take the tunnel beneath Honeydukes to get back," Harry said. "We've just got to let Ron and Ginny know where we're going."

"Didn't they block the tunnels last year?" Hermione asked, keeping her wand pointed at the trees behind Harry's back.

"We'll worry about that when we get there. We'll still be safer away from those Death Eaters," Harry said.

Sparks ignited in the trees across the road once again, and he heard Ginny shout, "Stupefy."

Uncertain where the other three Death Eaters were hidden, Harry didn't want to risk sprinting across the road. He'd either have to leave Hermione behind, or drag her into the open to become a moving target. He couldn't risk either option. An idea suddenly occurred to him.

He waved his wand in the air in the same pattern he'd seen Tonks use once before, concentrating intently on the message he wanted to send. Prongs leaped from his wand and sauntered across the road, disappearing into the trees.

Harry's head throbbed, and he had to grab the tree to stay steady. The Death Eater chose that moment to swing out from behind a tree.

"Diffindo," he snarled.

Harry ducked, but he heard Hermione gasp in pain.

"Stupefy. Reducto. Tarentallegra," Harry cried in short order.

The Death Eater managed to block the first two, but had to roll away from the third. While he was dodging, Harry turned and grasped Hermione's bleeding arm. He Apparated them both into Hogsmeade, directly outside Honeydukes. Ron and Ginny were already waiting there.

"Hermione!" Ron said, reaching for Hermione's wounded arm.

"It's all right," she said, wincing. "Let's get out of here."

"How did they follow us?" Ginny asked, tugging at her necklace. "There isn't a way to instantly trace Apparation coordinates like that."

"Unless they knew where we were going," Ron said grimly.

Harry's eyes met Ron's serious blue ones, a silent communication passing between the two.

"Watch it," he said, pulling the others deeper into the shadow of the store's entrance as two wizards ran past them on the street.

"I got word that they were just seen at the gates, but they Disapparated. They have to be around here somewhere if they want to get back inside the school. Martin is guarding the gate. We need to start searching the shops," one said to the other.

"That'll take forever," the other complained. "What are you doing here anyway, Busby?"

"I've been assigned here by the Dark Lord himself," the other said, straightening importantly. "Now, go. You, take that side of the street; I'll start on this one."

Once they were out of sight, Ginny grasped Harry's hand and tugged him into the sweet shop. "We'd better hurry. It won't take them long until they search Honeydukes," she said.

"Harry, that was Busby Goyle," Hermione said, her eyes shining brightly.

"I know," he replied, trying to tamp down on his excitement.

"We'll work out what that means later. For now, let's just get back inside Hogwarts," Ron said, still trying to stop the bleeding on Hermione's arm.

Despite his throbbing head, Harry could see pain reflected in Hermione's eyes. Ron was right. Getting everyone safely back inside the protection of Hogwarts had to take first priority.

"Episky," he said, pointing his wand at Hermione's arm. "My healing spells aren't very good, but it should hold for a little while."

"You need to slow down and calm your own heart rate before using the Spell," Hermione said. "I read it in one of those medical journals after I lost my hair."

Harry smirked. "I don't think I have the temperament to be a Healer," he said wryly.

He led the way into Honeydukes, glancing warily around the interior before allowing Ron and Hermione to shut the door behind them. The store had always been crowded during Harry's previous visits. The lack of customers made it impossible for the four to sneak into the storeroom unnoticed.

"Children! Blimey, Hal. There are children in the store," an elderly woman cried, hurrying towards them. "Oh, it's been a right shame since the school didn't open this year. Parents in town won't let their little ones outside, and even the mail order business has been right slow. What can I get you? We got a whole new shipment of Sugar Quills just yesterday."

"That's exactly what we were hoping to find," Ginny said, smiling brightly. "We'll take a box."

Harry just stared at her, dumbfounded. She elbowed him in the belly.

"We can't just trick her without buying something," she hissed under her breath.

Harry would never understand her logic, but he paid for the Sugar Quills as Ginny rolled one of Fred and George's Whiz Bangs behind the counter. It exploded with a burst of thick smoke, knocking several items off the shelves.

"What in the blazes? Hal!" the woman shouted, already picking up jars of sweets and returning them to their proper place.

Harry grabbed Ginny's hand and led the others into the back storeroom, quickly moving toward a barrel on the floor. Ron helped him push it aside, revealing the hidden trap door.

Ron pulled up the handle, and Harry led the way down the stairs and into the tunnel below. The scurrying sound of small animals moving away from the sudden light filled the silence, causing Ginny to shudder and move closer to Harry.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Secret tunnel into Hogwarts," Harry replied, leading the way into the dark tunnel, his wand held in front of them for light.

"It's how Fred and George always supplied the Gryffindor Quidditch parties," Ron replied, smiling fondly.

"Fred and George knew about this?" Ginny asked, frowning. "How come they never told me?"

"They didn't tell me, either," Ron replied, appearing a bit disgruntled by the memory. "They told Harry."

Ginny raised her eyebrow, and Harry fancied he saw a bit of accusation there. "It was during my third year when I was barred from Hogsmeade. I think they just felt sorry for me," he said, hoping a bit of that sympathy would extend to the younger Weasleys.

They were silent for a while as Ginny digested this new piece of information. Harry had forgotten how long the journey was, and they were all panting with exertion by the time they reached the slide that would deposit them by the statue of the hump-backed witch. Harry thought the slide appeared much smaller than it had the last time he'd used it.

He placed his wand against the wall where the opening should appear and said, "Dissendium."

Nothing happened.

"It's been sealed, Harry," Hermione said, leaning against the wall. She was pale, and her forehead was damp.

"Alohomora," he said, certain a simple unlocking charm wouldn't work, but he tried it anyway.

"No, it can't be something that just anyone could do if they found the tunnel," Ron said. "McGonagall's smarter than that."

"I suppose I could send a Patronus telling someone to let us out," Harry said, not fancying the idea of having to ask anyone in the Order for help. He supposed there was nothing else for it...the entrance was probably sealed with a spell he didn't know.

Suddenly, another idea occurred to him.

"Dobby!" he bellowed.

The little house-elf appeared beside him instantly, grasping his hand with glee. "Harry Potter, sir! Dobby is delighted to be seeing Harry Potter safe inside the castle. His Missus Wheezy has been in a right state wondering where Harry Potter and her other Wheezies have gone," Dobby said, his large eyes roaming over each of them and counting them off as he did.

"Dobby, d'you think you could help us out of here? We need to get Hermione up to the hospital wing, only the door's been sealed," Harry said.

Before the words were even completely out of Harry's mouth, the wall in front of them dissolved, revealing the opening into Hogwarts.

"Thanks, Dobby!" Harry said, grasping the little elf's hand.

"Dobby is very good at blocking and unblocking barriers," Dobby said proudly.

"Yeah, I remember," Harry replied ruefully. "Thanks loads, Dobby. I owe you one."

"It is Dobby that owes Harry Potter, sir," Dobby cried, affronted. "Harry Potter saved Dobby and gave him his freedom. Dobby would give his life for Harry Potter."

"Don't say that," Harry snapped, more harshly than he'd intended.

The others all looked at him, and he turned away from the sympathy in their eyes.

"Do me one more favor, Dobby, and inform Madam Pomfrey that we're on our way," Harry said, helping Hermione out of the opening. Once all four were in the corridor, Dobby resealed the entrance and disappeared with a 'pop'.

"You need to let Madam Pomfrey look at you, too, Harry," Hermione said, wincing slightly. Her arm had begun to bleed again despite Harry's Healing Spell.

"I'm fine," Harry replied, squinting as his head gave a particularly painful throb.

"You're not fine, Harry. What happened back there? That hasn't happened in a really long time," Hermione asked, frowning.

Harry shook his head. "Actually, it did. It happened the night the Death Eaters attacked Grimmauld Place."

"What? Why didn't you say anything?" Hermione shrieked.

"I forgot. There was a lot happening that night. I've been thinking about what happened today, though. I think Voldemort was trying to find out where I was," he said, speaking slowly. "He looked through my eyes like I've sometimes done through his."

"At that exact moment?" Ron asked incredulously. "Sounds a bit dodgy to me."

"I think he knows I'm staying here in the castle, and I think he knew that I'd left," Harry said. "Pansy and Draco watched us leave."

"You think Malfoy is spying?" Ginny asked, her color heightening.

"I don't know, but don't you think it's odd? How easy would it have been to just send an owl telling Voldemort that I'd left? It would certainly help to put Malfoy back in his good graces, wouldn't it?" Harry asked.

"I overheard a conversation between them the night Voldemort seized control of the Ministry," Ginny said, absently rubbing Harry's arm. "Malfoy sounded really panicked about it...I suppose he could have done something desperate."

Harry frowned. "Malfoy might be rash, but he's not stupid. He knows how Voldemort works. Even if he were to bring me to him on a platter, Malfoy would still end up dead for what Voldemort would see as a betrayal. He isn't a forgiving sort."

"What about Pansy?" Hermione asked.

"She's as much of a snake as he is," Ron said, scowling. "But what does she have to gain from spying? Voldemort killed her father. If I were her, I'd want revenge."

Harry shrugged. "I can't even begin to understand their reasoning for some of the things they do."

"Maybe she thinks she can save Draco by getting Voldemort what he wants," Ginny said, her eyes widening. "I have to admit, I felt a strange connection to her when I heard how worried she was about Draco's survival. I could understand how she feels – wanting to do anything to help."

"You'd never make a bargain with Voldemort, Ginny," Harry said vehemently.

"Of course not," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "But I was never on his side in the first place. It would never occur to me that he might let you survive."

They had to stop talking when they entered the hospital wing. Both Madam Pomfrey and Mad-Eye Moody emerged from her office. The matron was as brisk as ever, although her hair was unraveled from the bun she wore at the base of her neck, and her cheeks appeared rather flushed.

"What have you done to yourselves now?" she asked, grasping Hermione's shoulders and leading her over to a bed. She lightly pushed Hermione down and pulled the curtains around them.

"Afternoon," Mad-Eye greeted them in a remarkably chipper mood for the disgruntled old Auror.

Harry bit his tongue, attempting to hold back a bark of laughter. Ron wasn't able to do so and began sniggering behind Harry's back. Only Ginny managed some semblance of control.

"There are a bunch of Death Eaters down by the front gates," she said. "They're looking for us, and I don't think they'll leave without finding us."

Mad-Eye's magical eye spun, and Harry had no doubt he was somehow peering at the gate.

"I'll get some Aurors on it at once," he said, shuffling towards the door. "How did you get past them?"

"We used one of the tunnels. Dobby let us in and resealed it," Harry replied.

Moody scowled, but nodded.

"Mr. Moody," Ginny said sweetly. "You have something...lipstick, I think...just there," she said, pointing at his jaw.

Harry and Ron roared as Ginny let her giggles consume her. Moody shot them a wicked grin.

"I'll take care of that, lass," he said without making any move to wipe it as he thumped from the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey emerged from the curtains surrounding Hermione's bed a moment later. Her cheeks were extremely pink, but she briskly moved through them without making any eye contact.

"You next, Mr. Potter. Miss Granger tells me you tumbled down some stairs," she said, grasping Harry by the elbow and frog-marching him toward another empty bed. Harry struggled to straighten his features. No use hacking her off when she had the ability to subject him to untold medical 'tests'.

"I'm fine," he mumbled, not meeting her eyes.

"Certainly," she replied shortly. "Aren't you always?"

Several embarrassing minutes later, Harry was declared fit, and Madam Pomfrey left them in the hospital wing without another word. She slammed her office door with a bang.

"Well, that was certainly awkward," Ron said, guffawing.

"I can't believe you said that to Mad-Eye," Hermione said, scolding Ginny. "I couldn't even look at Madam Pomfrey while she was Healing my arm. It was so embarrassing."

The other three chuckled again.

"Mad-Eye went to get some Aurors to check the gates," Harry said.

"Harry, Busby Goyle was in Hogsmeade. He said he was on a special assignment from Voldemort," Hermione said.

"Yeah. I noticed," he replied.

"D'you think whatever it is he's guarding is in Hogsmeade somewhere?" Ron asked.

"It would explain why Tonks never had any luck tracking him," Hermione said, lowering her voice when she mentioned Tonks' name.

"Bugger!" Harry said, slapping his head. "It's not in Hogsmeade. It's here. It's in Hogwarts."

"Do you really think so?" Hermione asked, apparently not all that surprised. She didn't even tell Harry to mind his language.

Harry nodded vigorously. "He couldn't get inside Hogwarts to guard it directly, so he must have been watching the gates. Maybe that's how

Voldemort knew we were staying here. That's how the Death Eaters knew to follow us back."

"And he could have seen us leaving, as well," Hermione mused.

"We also don't know if Voldemort didn't sense something from me in the first place. I'm really not very good at Occlumency," Harry replied sheepishly.

"About that, Harry..." Hermione said, biting her lip.

"Don't start, Hermione," Harry said, groaning. "I can't do it. I've tried. It doesn't work for me." He ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

"I know that, Harry," Hermione said, resting her hand on his arm. "What we have to consider is how we'll work around that fact before you face Voldemort."

"Huh?" Harry asked, nonplussed.

"What good is it to come up with a plan, only to have Voldemort counteract your every step simply by peering into your mind?" Hermione asked.

"What do you suggest?" Harry asked, narrowing his eyes.

Hermione took a deep breath before stating, "You're going to have to trust us."

"Trust you? Of course I trust you," Harry replied, blinking.

"No, Harry. I mean, you're going to have to trust us to know something you don't. I know you care for us, and you need us," Hermione said, holding up her hands before Harry could interrupt. "I'm not saying that you don't, but you tend to keep the planning to yourself. I realize that you only had yourself to depend on while growing up, so of course that's how you respond. For this to succeed, however – you're going to have to have complete faith in us and that we know what we're doing. You've always been the leader—"

"But the leader has to know how to use the best abilities of all his people in order to win. That's strategy," Ron said, moving to stand next to Hermione. Ginny joined the two as they all stood facing Harry.

"What are you planning?" he asked warily, not certain he liked the sound of this at all.

"Don't worry about it, Harry. Just trust us. You go ahead and save the rest of the world – let us save you," Hermione said, her eyes filling.

Harry's throat grew very tight, and he suddenly had the strong urge to run from the room. He forced himself to remain still and face them. "I don't think you can," he whispered.

Taking a deep breath, he decided on the spot that they at least deserved the truth about what he planned to do. "It has to be done at

the same time – that's why I think the final battle should take place at the Department of Mysteries. I can use the Veil where Sirius...that Sirius went through." He cleared his throat uncomfortably, battling with himself to keep eye contact.

"How do you plan to get Voldemort there?" Ron asked, rubbing his chin, his ears turning bright red – the only indication of his discomfort.

"How hard can it be? He used my own mind to find me when we were at the Riddle House. I don't see why I can't make that work if I just open my mind to him," Harry replied, shrugging.

"It might work," Hermione said, and Harry had the uncomfortable feeling there was something she wasn't telling him.

"It still doesn't explain what you're planning, Harry," Ginny said, fear evident in her eyes.

He didn't want to hurt her, but he had to come to accept that she'd be hurt no matter what he did. Taking her hands in his own and swallowing against a painful obstruction in his throat, he whispered, "We'd both have to go through together."

"No!" his friends all cried in unison.

"It's the only way," Harry snarled, blinking back tears of his own. He didn't want to think about this. He wanted to run and hide from it until after he'd found the last Horcrux. He didn't want them to make him deal with it now.

"Harry!" Ginny said, shaking her head as tears began sliding down her cheeks.

"I want you all to have the chance to live! If I have to, I would die for you, Ginny," he said, his voice cracking slightly.

"I know, but that's not going to happen – not if I can help it," Ginny said, viciously swiping her eyes and raising her chin in defiance.

"This is the trust part, Harry. You continue working on your plans for Voldemort and let me continue with our plans. You just need to prepare yourself to trust us when the moment arrives," Hermione said, wiping away her own tears.

"I'll try. I'm going to see if Mad-Eye had any luck capturing those Death Eaters," he replied. The desperate need to get away finally won out, and he nearly sprinted from them. He had to clear his head and think.

He left them in the hospital wing but stopped outside the door and rested his head against the wall, needing to collect himself. What were they planning, and how much danger would it put them all in? He couldn't allow them to be hurt. He couldn't.

Hermione's raised voice, heavily choked with tears drifted out to him in the corridor.

"We have to try! I don't care if my only job turns out to be reminding Harry that he's not alone in this world. If that's what it takes, that's what I'm going to do."

Harry shut his eyes and hurried away from them – their love for him filled him more completely than they'd ever know – but he couldn't allow them to be hurt because of him. He wouldn't.

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Ginny,

I wish I could think of something to say to make this easier for you. I can stand to die, but I can't stand knowing that I'm leaving you in pain. I'm so sorry. Believe me when I say I know how you feel.

I'm certain no one really knows how you feel, but I hope, in time, you'll remember me fondly. I want you to go on, Ginny. I want you to be happy, to fall in love again and someday have a family of your own, no matter how much I hate thinking about that. I want everything for you, Ginny, because you gave me everything. You not only showed me how to love...you showed me how to live.

Wherever I am, I know that I miss you, Ginny. And I always will. I'm leaving you my dad's Invisibility Cloak. Use it well – that's what the note said when it was given to me. It's the one thing I have left from my family, and I know you'll take care of it – like you took care of me.

Harry pushed the letter away, scrubbing his hand across his blurry eyes. He didn't want to have to say goodbye to Ginny. He didn't want to say goodbye to any of them. A loud snore echoed across the dark dormitory, causing Harry to let his head fall onto his desk with a thump. As the snore was answered with a chorus of even louder snores, he repeatedly banged his forehead on top of the letter he'd been unsuccessfully trying to write.

He'd managed to fall asleep that evening before the Weasley symphony had begun, but his sleep had been marred by a dream. Not a nightmare, not a hormone-fest as his addled brain had been wont to do of late, but a normal dream. He and Ginny had been walking hand in hand along a sandy beach. A warm summer breeze ruffled their hair, and their two footsteps were the only thing marring the sand as they enjoyed the sunshine.

or such a brief scene, the dream had lasted for what seemed a very long time, and Harry wasn't certain why that bothered him so much. Perhaps it was his subconscious wishing for things that were never meant to be. Perhaps it was the hope that Hermione's words had flared within him. He'd begun to hope that maybe he could survive this fight – and he knew he couldn't afford the luxury of such thoughts – not if he was going to remain strong enough to do what had to be done.

It wouldn't do to dwell on dreams – no matter how pleasant the dreams might be.

He still had one more Horcrux to find before he could even think about the final battle.

Hermione had said he'd have to trust them.

Trust them? Didn't he? Dumbledore had said that this great power of his was love. Could that love mean learning to trust in his friends implicitly? ...To know that someone else would actually be there to catch him if he fell?

Harry lifted his head from the desk and ran a shaking hand through his unruly hair. He just didn't know, and he was too tired to think about it anymore.

He felt angry and had nowhere to direct that anger at present. With everything else Voldemort had done to him, did he have to leave a piece of himself behind, too? Was it just to gloat?

And how could Harry have been so stupid to have never seen it? Did other people see through the eyes of people who'd Cursed them? Did they feel their attackers' emotions? How could he have missed it? Dumbledore had practically laid it out for him in his second year when he said that the reason Harry could speak Parseltongue was because Voldemort had transferred some of his own powers to Harry when he'd tried to kill him as a baby – he'd transferred some of himself.

Damn!

Picking up Marvolo Gaunt's ring from out of his backpack, he rolled it in his hands, studying the lightning bolt crack in the stone. The crack looked remarkably similar to Harry's scar.

He lightly traced it with his finger.

He'd assumed the stone had become cracked when Dumbledore had destroyed the Horcrux within the ring, but what if that wasn't the case at all? What if the scar had been there from the moment Tom Riddle had placed a piece of his soul inside it. What if the shape marked the item as a Horcrux?

Harry scrounged through his trunk, not caring how much noise he made in the silent room. Finally locating Helga Hufflepuffs cup, he pulled it out and examined it. It was blackened and scorched, so he used one of his socks to try and clean it up. After some time, his diligence paid off. It was difficult to see, but there, on the inside rim was the same lightning bolt mark.

If he still had the locket, he'd bet he'd find it there, too.

So...the item he was seeking was inside the castle, had most likely once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw, and bore a lightning-shaped mark.

It certainly helped, although the task was still mind-boggling. Hogwarts was a big place, and there were rooms that even the Map didn't know about – like the Room of Requirement.

They'd spent the past several weeks searching and had barely made a dent in the vast number of rooms within the castle. Hell, there was no guarantee it was even in a room. It could be one of the hundreds of

things in the hallways for all he knew. After six-and-a-half years living here, he was still finding corridors he hadn't known existed.

They'd started in the most likely place – the Ravenclaw common room, but they'd finally conceded there was nothing there. They searched the Slytherin common room next, both Harry and Ron feeling an odd familiarity upon entering the dungeon dormitory.

Harry had watched and re-watched the memory of Tom Riddle returning to Hogwarts to apply for a teaching position and being turned away. He was convinced that Riddle had used that trip to hide his Horcrux inside the castle. He'd known Dumbledore would never give him the job – there had to have been another reason for his visit. Harry had even made an unsuccessful return visit to Dumbledore's portrait to ask his former Headmaster if he remembered anything else.

February had progressed into March, and all of them were feeling discouraged. They'd come so far...but this last hurdle was wearing them all down worse than the rest of the hunt.

They'd taken time out to celebrate Ron's birthday by having a feast in the Great Hall reminiscent of the feasts they'd grown accustomed to during the school year. According to Ron, he couldn't have had a better birthday if he'd picked it himself. The Aurors staying at the castle joined in the celebration, as did the Slytherins, although the latter group sat at a table secluded from the others.

Perhaps the highlight of the night was the arrival of a small group of Aurors bringing a thin and haggard-looking Kingsley Shacklebolt. Madam Pomfrey had ushered him off to the hospital wing before he'd even managed to say hello. Still, it was a small victory for the Light side.

The time since had been spent searching the castle to no avail.

Another chorus of loud snoring shook the room, causing Harry to fling his belongings back inside his backpack with disgust. There was no use trying to sleep here tonight. Pulling his woolen blanket around his shoulders to combat the night's chill, Harry padded down the stairs toward the common room.

As he passed the room that Draco and Dudley were sharing, he could hear them arguing in harsh whispers. Staying hidden in the shadows, Harry cautiously peered into the room.

The two boys were sitting cross-legged on one bed, a deck of Muggle cards splayed out between them.

"So, this Imprus Curse can make anyone do anything you want?" Dudley asked, leaning forward.

"Imperius," Draco said, sneering, "and yes, that's the idea. The Ministry deemed it an Unforgivable after the last war, but I'm certain the Dark Lord has changed that."

"Im-per-i-us," Dudley said slowly.

"How can three of one card possibly beat two separate matches?" Draco asked, scoffing. "Are you making these rules up as we go along?"

"No. I'm not making it up," Dudley replied, exasperated. "It's Poker. Three of a kind beats two pairs. Everyone knows that. It makes more sense than that game you showed me that explodes in your face no matter what card you use."

Draco chuckled, obviously relishing the memory of Dudley's introduction to Exploding Snap. "Fine. If that's the way you're going to play," he said, rolling his eyes and aiming his wand at his cards.

Dudley flinched and shut his eyes.

"There," Draco said, laying his cards between them.

"That's not fair," Dudley shouted. "That's cheating. You can't use magic in Poker!"

"I think I just did," Draco replied, folding his arms behind his head.

"It's not possible to have two sets of three of a kind," Dudley shouted, his face turning alarmingly red.

Harry pulled his head out of the door and continued toward the common room. He had to shake his head several times to process what he'd just seen. Who would've ever imagined that Draco Malfoy and Dudley Dursley would become mates? Harry was certain it was only due to circumstances, but still...

Dudley had adapted much better to life at Hogwarts than Harry would have imagined, although his fascination with the Dark Arts, while expected, was alarming. The teachers who had remained behind had all taken him under their wing, and he was receiving a private magical education while he was in hiding. The rift between Dudley and his parents appeared to widen everyday. Harry wondered what would happen when this war was finally over and everyone went back to their own lives. What would happen to Dudley?

Scratching his head, Harry stopped in front of the one and only empty room left in the boys' dormitory. What would it hurt if he just slept in there instead of using the couch again? He slipped inside the dorm and plopped down on one of the empty beds, pushing the thoughts of Dudley from his mind. He neither cared nor felt responsible anymore. He didn't want the Dursleys to be killed in all his mess, but he didn't feel any desire to know their future plans, either.

Curling into a ball, he tossed and turned before finding a comfortable spot and once again fell into an uneasy sleep.

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On a mid-March evening, Harry once again sat in the library with Ron, Hermione and Ginny, reviewing their notes about which parts of the castle had been searched. Harry had brought his backpack with the Pensieve stored inside, and they'd viewed the memory of Tom Riddle's visit to Hogwarts.

Yet again, they'd come up with nothing. When Harry moved to put the Pensieve back in his backpack, Ginny assisted him by moving several items out of the way. As he lowered the heavy basin into the magically-enlarged backpack, he heard Ginny gasp.

"What is it?" he asked, turning to face her.

She was staring at the small portrait of the Founders that he'd found in the attic at Grimmauld Place.

"I don't believe it," Ginny said, her eyes widening.

"What?" Hermione asked, peering over her shoulder to look at the portrait.

"We've been searching through book after book to see if Rowena Ravenclaw was pictured more than once with a particular item, and it's been right under our noses the whole time," Ginny said, her face reddening.

"What has?" Ron asked, perplexed.

"Look! On her head – it's Auntie Muriel's tiara – or rather, the original," Ginny said, pointing.

"You think the Horcrux is in Auntie Muriel's tiara?" Ron asked. "But it's not even real. It's worthless, really."

"Not Auntie Muriel's, you dolt," Ginny replied, smacking him on the back of the head. "The original. Why couldn't it be the tiara that he used if it was significant enough that a copy was made of it?"

"Oww," Ron said, rubbing the back of his head. "Mental, you are. So what if it is the tiara, we still don't know where to find it, do we? Have you seen a tiara lying loose around the castle anywhere?"

"Yes!" Harry said, sitting bolt upright, his heart hammering in his chest as his excitement mounted.

"What?" Ron asked, dumbfounded.

"You have?" Hermione asked.

"Where?" asked Ginny.

"In the Room of Requirement, when I hid the Half-Blood Prince's Potions book from Snape. I hid it in there and put the tiara on top of a statue so I could find it again," Harry said, recalling the panic he'd felt that day so long ago.

"You touched it?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, pushing back his chair so quickly it toppled over. He began taking long strides toward the library door.

"Wait, Harry. How do you know it was one if you touched it and nothing happened?" Hermione asked, running after him.

"I don't," Harry replied. "But I'm going to find out."

"Maybe that's why you picked it in the first place," Ron said, the only one not panting in order to keep pace with his stride. "Maybe you were doing that sensing thing you do even then without realizing it."

"Maybe," Harry said curtly. "I wasn't thinking much about it at the time. I was more worried about what I'd just done to Malfoy, and what Snape was going to do to me for doing it."

"Or maybe it's like the wardrobe in the Hufflepuff museum," Ginny said. "Maybe it only reacts negatively if the magic senses you intend it harm."

By the time they'd reached the entrance to the Room of Requirement, they were all panting slightly – excitement and adrenaline reflected in their expressions. This might be it.

Harry paced back and forth in front of the tapestry three times.

I need to go where my Potions book is hidden.

Harry recited the phrase three times but nothing happened – the door did not appear.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked.

"I don't know," Harry said, his frustration building.

"Do you remember what you asked for when you hid it?" Hermione asked, frowning. "Try using the same phrase."

Harry searched his mind to remember what he might have said. He'd wanted to get rid of his Potion book.

I need a place to hide my book.

Harry repeated the phrase three times. He knew from the gasps of the others that the door had appeared. Opening his eyes and wrenching it open, he led the way inside.

"Bloody hell," Ron said, pulling up short as the sight of the massive city-sized room full of hidden stuff. "Look! There's tons of Fred and George's stuff here."

Harry turned to see a pile of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products haphazardly thrown in a corner, as if the owner had been in an extreme hurry and simply dumped the stuff inside. Harry could picture someone being chased by Filch and trying to get rid of the evidence.

"Harry, how do you possibly expect to find it in here?" Ginny asked incredulously. "This is massive."

"I know," Harry replied, lurching down the center alley. "I used some landmarks."

He could hear Hermione in full prefect-mode tut-tutting about all the forbidden objects.

"Some of these things are dangerous," she said, appalled.

Harry turned right at the stuffed troll but came to a sudden stop when he reached the Vanishing Cabinet that Draco Malfoy had used to lead the Death Eaters inside Hogwarts on the night Professor Dumbledore was killed. Its door hung open obscenely, and it was moved slightly into the aisle, evidence that it had been used in the not-so-distant past. Professor McGonagall had said she'd had Professor Flitwick cast a Charm to seal it so that it could never be used again.

Harry clenched his jaw and continued moving, the others right on his heels. The silence amongst them hung heavy in the air. They'd all recognized the significance of that cabinet. He didn't stop until he'd reached the cupboard with the bust of an ugly old warlock perched on top. A wig and a tarnished tiara crowned the bust.

Before taking the bust down, he opened the cupboard and reached behind a cage with some unidentifiable remains left inside.

"Eww. What is that?" Ginny asked, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

"Dunno," Harry replied, pulling his beat-up old Potions book from inside and flipping through the pages.

"What do you want with that?" Hermione asked, raising her nose in the air and scowling her disapproval.

Harry shrugged, stuffing the book in his pocket. "It might be useful. Now that we know it was Snape's," Harry said, spitting the word like a swear, "it might give us a clue how to find him."

"That's highly unlikely, Harry. Even if it did have an address somewhere, it would be his childhood home, not his current address," Hermione said.

Ignoring her, Harry reached up and took the bust off the top of the cupboard, placing it on a rickety old table with uneven legs. He started to lift the tiara off its head, but Ginny grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"Don't touch it!" she cried.

He shrugged. "I touched it to put it on there and nothing happened."

"Even so...it can't be you who touches it now. Just in case something goes wrong," she said, wincing slightly.

"She's right, mate. You have to be the one go on," Ron said.

Harry balked. "Don't be ridiculous. We have to look at it," he snapped.

"Let me do it," Ron said.

"No!" Harry said, reaching out and grabbing the tiara in his hands. Nothing happened, the metal was cool and extremely dirty.

"Har-ry," Hermione said, stamping her foot. "What have I said about trusting us to do our part and not acting impulsively? Have you been listening to me?"

Harry scowled, knowing she was right yet unable to stop himself. It would only make them angry to know he had no intention of letting any of them get hurt in his place. Closing his eyes, he let his magic flow, feeling the weight of the heavy metal in his hands. His ears were ringing and chills ran up his spine.

"This is it," he said, feeling both nervous and excited.

Ron pulled the Spell Detector from his pocket and placed it on his nose. "Blimey," he muttered. "It's loaded with Dark Magic."

"Let me see," Hermione said, ripping the Detector off Ron's face and examining the tiara herself.

"It looks just like Auntie Muriel's," Ron said, grimacing. "See how those patterns look like spiders?"

Harry used his sleeve to try and polish it, looking for the lightening bolt shape. It was pointless, however, it was too badly tarnished and would need a good cleaning.

"So...if we can hold it without a problem...how do you suppose we're going to destroy it?" Ron asked, still frowning at the jewel-encrusted piece.

"I wonder..." Hermione said, drumming her fingers on the table.

"What?" the others chorused.

"Well, it's meant as decorative headwear...perhaps it needs to be placed on your head," she said, cringing.

Harry shrugged, lifting the tiara towards his head. This time, Ron stopped him.

"No, Harry. You have to be the one to battle Voldemort – everything depends on it. You can't risk an injury. I'll do this one," he said grimly. "Fred and George used to make me wear Auntie Muriel's all the time."

"Ron," Hermione said, grabbing his arm.

Harry felt panicked. He didn't want to let Ron do this, but he didn't know what else to do. He locked eyes with his friend and solemnly nodded.

With shaking hands, Ron raised the tiara and placed it atop his head, wincing as he did. Although they all held their breath, nothing happened.

"I thought for certain that would work," Ron said shakily.

Hermione grinned, leaning against him. "You do look frightfully cute with that on your head though," she said. "Do you have any other pieces I might want to borrow?"

Scowling, Ron ripped the tiara off his head while Harry and Ginny chuckled.

"What now?" Harry asked, staring at the tiara in Ron's hands.

Hermione took it from Ron, staring at it in silence for several moments. "I suppose..." she said slowly.

"What?" Harry asked, desperate for an idea.

"Maybe it has to be worn by a woman," she replied.

"What?" Ron asked sharply. "Why would you think that?"

"Well...it did belong to Rowena Ravenclaw and despite your stunning appearance, tiaras are traditionally worn by women. I think Voldemort is sadistic enough to force anyone finding the Horcrux to sacrifice his mate," Hermione said, frowning.

Both Ron and Harry stared at her, gaping.

"Well, do you have any other ideas?" she snapped. "I'll just put it on, and we'll see what happens," she said, swallowing heavily.

"No, Hermione," Ginny said, grasping Hermione's arm. "If something goes wrong, you're better at figuring out how to fix it. We need you for that. You know it. My magic didn't register before, so maybe it won't trigger this - or at least not as strongly as intended."

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. This was getting out of hand.

Ginny scowled at him. "You've both tried, and it hasn't worked. Do you have any other suggestions?"

Harry gaped, wishing inspiration would strike, but he somehow knew they wouldn't be able to remove the tiara from this room.

"It's either me or Hermione, and I think she's the bigger risk on this one," Ginny said firmly. She stuck out her chin, but Harry could see it tremble slightly. For all her bravado, Ginny was as frightened as the rest of them.

Taking a deep breath and flashing an unsteady grin at Harry, she placed it on her head. For a moment it did nothing, and Harry thought they were back at square one, but then it began to shimmer, growing brighter and brighter until the glare was so blinding that he had to shield his eyes.

He gasped, feeling his chest constrict as if he was being crushed. He had the unmistakable impression he was traveling, although it felt nothing like a Portkey or Apparation. He tried to hold out his arms for balance, but found he was completely immobilized.

The room shifted around them, and he felt as if he were spinning out of control. Just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, it stopped. His head still spun, but his vision cleared, and a bone-chilling cold swept over him.

Harry blinked several times and noticed that they'd been transported to some kind of ice palace. The cathedral windows with the heavy draperies that had been in the Room of Requirement were still in place, but the walls and furnishings were completely made of ice. The thick shrubbery he could see outside the ice caused him to think they were somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, but he'd never seen anything like it.

Goose bumps arose on his flesh as his eyes frantically sought out Ginny and the others. Ron and Hermione each stood looking around with the same gobsmacked expression he was certain covered his own face, but Ginny remained perfectly still, her mouth frozen in a silent scream.

"Ginny," Harry said, his voice hoarse.

She didn't respond, but the tiara she still wore shimmered again before transforming into a hissing serpent, coiled around her head. It was black with an obscenely large head and deadened opaque eyes.

Harry froze, while Ron shouted and took a step toward her.

"Don't move," Hermione hissed, grabbing Ron by the arm.

The snake raised its head, swaying from side to side as if ready to strike.

Ginny's eyes rolled back, and she collapsed to the floor, her body stiff and shaking violently.

"She's seizing," Harry said, panic overwhelming him. Sprinting towards her, his Seeker-reflexes allowed him to dart his hand out and seize the snake around its neck before it could bite. Try as he might, however, he couldn't pry it from her head. He wrapped both hands around the smooth, soft skin, but the snake wouldn't budge, instead wrapping itself tighter around Ginny's head and causing her to groan. Harry could see small trickles of blood leaking out from beneath the snake's body.

Ginny finally stopped seizing and her head lolled lifelessly to the side. Ron grabbed her hand and tried to wake her, but she remained unresponsive.

"Where the hell are we?" Ron asked, panic stricken. "We have to get her out of here."

"I know. I think we're in the Forbidden Forest, but I can't get this snake to let her go. I'm afraid to try Cursing it in case I hit her," Harry said, his teeth chattering from the cold.

"You can't cast any spell at it, anyway," Hermione said. "That...snake is still the Horcrux, however it's enchanted. There's no telling what you might do to Ginny if you try a Spell."

"So what do we do?" Harry asked, his eyes wild. He tugged again at the snake.

"Harry, you have to calm down. We won't do her any good if we panic," Hermione said, her own voice sounding rather hysterical.

Before Harry could even take a deep breath, Ron was tossed into the air and flung several meters across the room. He crashed onto the icy floor and slid into a table made of ice.

Hermione screeched, and Ron barely had time to rise to his hands and knees before the invisible attacker again hurled him into the air. He landed with a crash, shattering an ice pedestal that contained some kind of sculpture. His head began to bleed, and he blinked in confusion, obviously dazed.

"Ron," Hermione said, her breath visible in the icy air. She sprinted towards him, cradling his head in her lap and wiping away the blood as her body began to visibly shake.

"Hermione, don't move," Harry said, but it was already too late.

His glanced around wildly but knew he was trapped. If he released the snake, it would strike either him or Ginny, if he didn't, they were both sitting targets for whatever else was in the palace with them.

Hermione's scream caused him to look up in time to see an ugly gash appear on the side of her face. She hissed in pain and pulled Ron more securely underneath a raised platform.

In the next instant, Harry felt excruciating pain in both legs as something pinched them, yanking him into the air. He was forced to release the snake from the force of the tug, but fortunately, whatever had him moved so fast, it pulled him away just as the snake's fangs snapped in front of his face.

Harry shouted as the thing released him, dropping him to the floor with a thud. How could he fight something he couldn't see? He was struck in the chest by a powerful blow and then knocked in the other direction. Whatever it was had multiple arms.

Ignoring his aching ribs, he raised his wand and aimed it in the general direction from where he'd just been thrown.

"Sectumsempra," he shouted. He hoped if he could at least make it bleed, he'd have a better chance of seeing it.

Ice flew in bits and shards around him as several more pedestals were shattered. Harry was struck again, skidding backwards and slipping on

the slippery floor. He slid until his body connected painfully into the platform sheltering Ron and Hermione.

He groaned, his ribs aching too much to ignore.

"Diffindo," he snarled, rolling on his side. Nothing happened, and he still had no idea where the creature was.

"Stupefy," Hermione said, aiming her wand behind him.

A high-pitched squeal filled the chamber, causing Harry to cringe and Hermione to slap her hands over her ears. The platform shielding Ron and Hermione splintered into a thousand pieces. Screaming, Hermione used her body to shield Ron's.

"Leave them alone," Harry shouted, firing yet another Cutting Curse in the general direction he suspected the creature to be.

Sharp pinchers grasped him around the thigh, drawing blood and causing him to swear violently. He was dragged across the floor as the pressure around his leg tightened. He could see the smeared trail of blood across the ice from where he was dragged.

Trying to pull his leg free, he reached out and grasped onto the pincher, shuddering as he felt something hard and thin and slightly furry. The creature flung him in the air and tossed him again. He landed, slightly dazed, beneath one of the high, arched windows. Harry used the heavy burgundy drape to pull himself up, his leg screaming in protest beneath him. His weight was too much for the curtain and it tore off its hanging, bunching in a pile around him.

Dragging it with him, Harry crawled back into the center of the room.

"Come on," he said, panting. "Come and get me now, you bloody wanker."

"Harry! What are you doing?" Hermione cried.

"Shh," he hissed, motioning her to be still. "Come on. I'm right here."

Harry felt something brush against his arm before the cruel pinchers dug into his shoulder. He gasped in pain, but bunched up the heavy drapery and flung it high in the air. It fluttered down and landed on top of the creature, forming the unmistakable outline of a very large spider.

Ron, still delirious, panicked completely. He began kicking his legs as he tried to stand, but couldn't get his grip and kept slipping on the ice.

"Spider. It's a spider," he repeated frantically. "Have to get Ginny. Have to get her out of here. Spider."

Hermione desperately tried to calm him, as Harry turned his attention back to the spider.

"Incarcerous," Harry bellowed.

The burgundy material wrapped itself around the struggling spider several times, trapping it in place with heavy binding. He watched as the creature's struggles finally slowed with its exhaustion.

Grunting in pain, Harry pulled his abused body across the floor and crawled back to where Ginny still lay, unmoving. Frost had built up in her hair, and she was trembling from the cold.

His own teeth chattering, he pulled his torn and bloody robe off his shoulders and wrapped it around her as best he could, careful to stay out of the snake's reach.

It watched him with cold, emotionless eyes, hissing and testing the air with its forked tongue, although it made no move to strike. Harry conjured a stick and tried again to unravel it from her head, but the snake wouldn't budge.

Harry's body ached, and his injured leg throbbed, but the worst agony came from his chest. How was he going to get this off of her, and what was it doing to her in the meantime? He never should have allowed Ginny to help him. He knew this would happen. He knew it.

Ron and Hermione joined him on the floor in front of Ginny, Ron leaning heavily on Hermione, his expression still dazed and confused.

"What are we going to do?" Harry asked, looking at Hermione hopefully and feeling very much like a small child.

Hermione's worried gaze raked over her three companions, all of them battered and in various states of distress.

"First step is to get that snake off her head," she said, placing her wand to Ron's temple. "Episky."

The bleeding stopped, and the wound sealed remarkably tightly. Ron groaned and raised his hand to his head. "What did you do?" he asked.

"Just a Healing Spell. I've got rather good at them," she said quietly. She turned to look at Harry's shoulder, but he jerked away.

"Ginny first," he said.

"Harry, I don't-"

"Ginny first," he insisted, feeling hysterical. "What's that?"

He pointed to thin red streaks appearing along Ginny's temple and running down her face. One of the streaks had nearly reached her neck.

Hermione gasped, looking up at Harry with wide, panicked eyes. "Oh, no. I think it's poisoning her."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lifeline

Oh, no. I think it's poisoning her!

Hermione's words rang in Harry's ears repeatedly, fading in and out as if he was moving a great distance away. He ran his hand through his unruly hair, absently smearing blood on his forehead. The rope bracelet that Ginny had woven for him felt too snug around his wrist, almost like it was burning him. He didn't know what to do. He was going to lose Ginny despite all his efforts. He felt as if he were choking on his own breath, the panic bubbling in his chest and ready to consume him.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted. Her voice was insistent, and it forced him back to reality.

He blinked, dazed, desperately trying to drag his eyes away from Ginny's still form and the sinister-looking red streaks creeping down her face so that he could meet Hermione's gaze.

"Harry, you need to speak to the snake and make it let go of her," Hermione demanded, shaking his shoulder roughly.

Ron stared back and forth between the two, breathing heavily. The dark freckles on his face stood out so starkly against his pale skin it looked as if someone had smudged them there with a quill.

Speak to the snake? Parseltongue!

Harry could have slapped his head for his own stupidity. How could he not have thought of it sooner? He had to get control of himself. Ginny couldn't afford for him to come undone now. He could do this; she needed him.

Violently shaking himself out of his stupor, he turned and stared at the snake's overly-large head, narrowing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

"Release her," he demanded.

The snake's head jerked up, swaying to and fro as it stared at him.

He wondered if the snake could detect the pleading quality in his voice. He knew some animals could detect uncertainty in a human, but didn't know if that was the case with snakes. He wasn't about to take the chance.

"Release her. She's not a threat to you," he said, stronger this time and without blinking.

The snake's tongue tested the air before it hissed and slowly unwrapped itself from Ginny's head. It slithered away, coiling under a table and still hissing uncertainly. It appeared to be rethinking its decision and drew back, ready to strike.

Ron shifted into position to shield Ginny's prone form from the hissing serpent, while Hermione immediately began trying to rouse her. That left the snake for Harry. A movement on the other side of the room caught his eye, and he noticed the invisible spider once again struggling inside its bonds.

His mind raced, remembering how spiders and the Basilisk that had once lived inside the castle were natural enemies. Perhaps snakes and spiders in general could be turned against one another.

Barely aware of what he was doing, Harry quickly raised a shield around his friends. In a flash, he Banished the draperies binding the spider and then cast a Blasting Hex at the snake, flinging it forcefully through the air. It collided with the invisible spider, causing the spider to emit a high-pitched squeal of rage.

The snake twisted and struck, its mouth opening massively wide, and its sharp fangs sinking into some unseen part of the spider. The room flickered again, and suddenly the spider became visible. It was furry and brown and not quite as large as Aragog - but big enough to draw a horrified gasp from Ron.

The snake hit the floor with a thud before slithering away, leaving a bleeding and furious spider staring directly at Harry. He clutched his wand tightly in his sweaty palm.

"Inversum," he shouted.

A golden mist appeared in front of the spider, hovering in mid-air. The spider ignored it, taking a step forward into the mist before stopping, bellowing its rage and confusion. The Anti-gravity Spell had disoriented the spider, but Harry didn't know how long it would last or when the spider would realize it only had to take a step to regain its equilibrium.

"Accio snake," Harry said, finding it difficult to take a deep breath.

The snake was yet again hurtled through the air, twisting and hissing. Harry's hand darted out, snatching the creature around its large head. It writhed uncontrollably, trying to break free from Harry's grasp.

With another whine of rage, the spider broke free of the mist and barreled toward Harry. Forcing himself to remain calm, he ignored Ron's frantic shouting and let the spider get closer before tossing the snake in the air. Casting a Levitation Spell, he dangled the snake directly in front of the spider's eyes, distracting it. He then carefully led it away from where he stood, using his body to shield the others.

Concentrating intently to control the panicked snake, he led the spider as far away from them as it could possibly go when a thought suddenly occurred to him. He'd used the Basilisk to destroy the diary, the dragon to destroy the cup, and the Ineri to destroy the locket. Perhaps this spider could be used to destroy the tiara.

He stopped moving the snake away from the angry spider, leaving it dangling in the air, furiously writhing.

The spider reached out with its tentacles, snatching the snake and bringing it toward its mouth. The snake hissed and fought to get away, but it was powerless. The spider bit down on the snake's middle and a blinding light filled the ice castle.

An ominous rumble echoed around the chamber as a web of cracks began to appear in the ice, spreading and moving around the entire structure. The rumble built into a crescendo and the entire place shook under the tremendous roar. Large chunks of ice began falling from the ceiling, shattering as they hit the floor.

The snake transformed back into a tiara, and the spider carelessly tossed it aside, no longer interested. It tried to scurry away from the cracking ice, but in its haste struck a crumbling wall. The wall buckled and crashed around it, raining heavy chunks of ice onto the creature, crushing it.

Harry ran toward his friends, using his own body to cover them. He strengthened the shield around them, completely blocking them from the falling debris until the structure had entirely collapsed.

"Is it dead?" Ron asked, breathing heavily as he grimaced at the legs of the spider, poking out from the pile of ice.

"I think so," Harry said, pulling himself up and hurrying toward Ginny. He gently put his hand on her head, brushing her hair back. Angry purple bruises showed starkly on her pale skin where the snake had tightly gripped. The red streaks marring her skin had reached her neck, and were moving toward her shoulders and back.

Harry scooped Ginny into his arms, cradling her body tightly against his chest. His sore shoulder screamed in protest, and he could barely breathe through the pain in his ribs, but he only dimly registered it.

"We have to get her back to the castle. This place is utterly destroyed; I don't think it can return us," he said in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

"That was some powerful shield, Harry," Hermione said, stunned. She still hadn't risen from her seated position on the floor.

Something in her voice made him glance sharply at her face, but he couldn't read her indecipherable expression. Could it be fear that he saw in her eyes? He didn't know, and he didn't have time to think about it just then.

Nothing mattered at the moment but Ginny.

"Ron, get the tiara," Hermione said, pulling herself together. She pointed at the discarded piece of jewelry sitting harmlessly in the ice.

"How are we going to get back?" Ron asked, trotting over to the tiara and scooping it into his hands.

Still cradling Ginny, Harry lifted a jagged piece of ice from the ground. His ribs throbbed from the movement, causing him to gasp.

"This worked when we got the cup, I don't see why it won't work again," he muttered, transfiguring the shard of ice into a broomstick and handing it to Ron.

"Good idea," Ron said grimly, his eyes glued on Ginny's still body.

Harry lifted another piece of ice and repeated the spell. He lifted his sore leg over the broom, holding Ginny tightly in front of him.

"I don't think you'll be able to hold her, Harry," Hermione said nervously. "Your arm is bleeding, and I think you might have some broken ribs."

"I'm fine," he said shortly. "I won't let her go."

Before they had time to protest, he rose in the air and took off like a shot, flying high above the trees in an attempt to find the castle. Ron and Hermione followed behind him on the other broom, Hermione clutching Ron's waist tightly. She'd used a Point Me spell with her wand.

"This way," she shouted, pointing in the direction she wanted him to go.

Harry took off, letting the cold wind whip his hair. His robes were wrapped tightly around Ginny, but even that wasn't much protection against the winter night air. He pulled her closer, trying to use their body heat to keep them both warm. It suddenly occurred to him that the last time they'd shared a broom he was the one who was unconscious. He was determined that they'd try this again one day when both of them could enjoy it.

Ginny was going to be all right. He refused to let his mind consider the alternative, as it seemed wont to do. She was going to be fine. She had to be. Leaning forward, he pushed the broom faster.

He didn't know how long the spell keeping the ice as a broom would last, and he wanted to be as close to Hogwarts as possible if the spell failed. Concerned, he lowered his height to a safer distance to survive a fall - just in case.

He didn't have to worry about it, however. The spell lasted just fine. They reached the castle without incident, and he flew directly onto the front steps. Harry suspected that the chilly night air helped them. He wondered if the spell on the broom would have ended if the temperature had been warm enough to melt the ice that he'd Transfigured.

He leaped off the broom and hit the ground running, keeping Ginny tucked close to him. His shoulder and sore leg screamed in protest, but he ignored them, concentrating instead on taking short, shallow breaths. He could vaguely hear Ron and Hermione shouting to him as he ran, but he never slowed his pace.

Gasping by the time he reached the hospital wing, he burst through the doors. His legs were shaking so badly that he feared he might drop Ginny right at Madam Pomfrey's feet.

She turned when he entered, her expression stern. She looked ready to scold whoever had entered her quiet and orderly hospital wing with such a fuss. Instead, she became immediately businesslike when she saw their battered appearance.

"There," she said, pointing to the nearest empty bed, her efficient gaze raking over both Harry and Ginny. He assumed she was trying to decide which one of them needed medical attention first.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was resting in the bed next to Ginny's, his back supported by several pillows. He appeared much healthier than the last time Harry had seen him. He sat up in his bed and curiously watched the commotion unfold, his gold earring glinting in the candlelight.

"What happened, Potter?" Mad-Eye Moody asked. Harry hadn't even noticed him standing in the doorway to Madam Pomfrey's office.

Ignoring the others, Harry moved away from the bed after laying Ginny atop it. He grabbed Madam Pomfrey's arm and pushed her toward Ginny just as Ron and Hermione burst through the door behind him. His chest was constricted too painfully to speak.

Madam Pomfrey took his arm and tried to lead him toward another empty bed, but he pulled away from her, pointing at Ginny.

"I'm fine. Ginny needs help," he gasped.

When Madam Pomfrey bristled and continued attempting to lead him away, Harry refused to budge. He dug his feet firmly into the floor.

"Please!" he cried desperately.

Something in the tone of his voice gave her pause. Her stern expression softened so briefly that Harry wasn't even certain he saw it. Leaving him alone, she turned and began running her wand over the streaks on Ginny's face.

"She's been poisoned by a snake," he said, wrapping his arm around his aching ribs.

"A snake?" Madam Pomfrey asked, turning around quickly.

"Yes. Do you have a Bezoar?" he asked.

"A Bezoar won't work on a snake bite, Harry," Hermione said, leading Ron to a chair by Ginny's bed. "The poison hasn't been ingested."

Madam Pomfrey raised her chin, studying Hermione intently. Finally she nodded and began directing questions to her instead. "What kind of snake was it?"

"I don't know," Hermione replied. "It wasn't a natural snake; it had been Transfigured. After it was killed, the enchantment ended."

"I see," Madam Pomfrey said, pursing her lips and returning her attention to Ginny.

"I have a Pensieve," Harry said, his eyes darting between Madam Pomfrey and Hermione. "Would it help if I showed you a memory of what the snake looked like?" he asked.

"If it comes to it," Madam Pomfrey replied, waving her wand above Ginny and muttering to herself.

Harry's knuckles turned white as he tightly gripped the rail of Ginny's bed. He was startled when Moody grasped his elbow and pulled him toward a chair.

"Why don't you sit down, Potter? You look dead on your feet," he said gruffly.

"I'm fine," Harry lied, sinking into the chair anyway.

"He needs to be checked over," Hermione said. "Both his leg and his shoulder are bothering him, and I think his ribs are broken. Ron, too, took a nasty blow to the head, but I used a Healing Spell on him."

"The Spell on his head is good," Madam Pomfrey said, bustling around the room and pulling various phials and instruments from her cabinets. "You controlled your breathing while casting it. It's nice work. You'd make a fine Healer one day."

Hermione's cheek pinkened and a small smile tugged at her lips before it dropped completely, her eyes filling. "I didn't know what to do for Ginny."

Madam Pomfrey huffed. "Well, if it's any consolation, I don't know quite what to do for her yet, either. I want you all out of my way while I determine the best course of treatment," she said, ushering them all toward the door. "Go on, out in the corridor with the lot of you. Mr. Potter, if you try to escape before I have a good look at you, I'll follow you into Gryffindor tower and conduct my exam in the common room for all to see."

Harry couldn't even manage a blush. "I want to stay with Ginny," he said softly.

"You can come in as soon as I've finished with her. Go on," Madam Pomfrey said, and her tone left no room for argument.

"Come on, Harry. We'll wait right outside," Hermione said, gently tugging on his arm.

He limped into the corridor, blindly following Hermione.

"I need to go tell Mum," Ron said, groaning. "Merlin, she's going to have kittens."

The three of them sank wearily onto the floor outside the door to the hospital wing. Harry was having trouble catching his breath. The adrenaline rush was wearing off, leaving him tired and vulnerable. His body ached, but he didn't want to take the time to tend to it yet.

"Tell you what, Weasley," Mad-Eye said, entering the corridor with them. "You stay here in case Poppy has any questions, I'll go and fetch your parents."

"You will? Thanks! I really appreciate that," Ron said, sighing gratefully.

Moody nodded before turning in the direction of Gryffindor tower, his wooden leg thumping on the floor as he walked.

Harry leaned his head against the wall, allowing his eyes to drift closed. When Professor Dumbledore was suffering from the effects of that liquid from the cave, he'd wanted Harry to bring him to Snape, not Madam Pomfrey. He'd also said it was Snape who'd saved his hand after he'd hurt it while getting Marvolo Gaunt's ring.

While Harry wasn't certain Snape had actually helped Professor Dumbledore at all, perhaps Madam Pomfrey didn't have enough experience with Dark Magic to be able to help Ginny. She had managed to save Hermione after she was burned, but with a lot of help and research from the Order. She'd sent Ron to St. Mungo's to be treated after he'd suffered the Cruciatus.

"We need to tell Professor Dumbledore's portrait about what happened. He might have a suggestion that could help Ginny," Harry said, trying to rise. His legs simply refused to support him.

"I'll go," Hermione said, pressing her hand on Harry's uninjured shoulder, forcing him to remain seated. "You just stay there."

Harry nodded mutely, unable to muster the energy to protest.

"Ron, be certain he doesn't leave until Madam Pomfrey has a chance to take a good look at him. You need your head checked over, as well," Hermione said sternly.

Ron nodded with a faint trace of a smile. "My head is fine. Even Madam Pomfrey said you did a great job. She couldn't have done better herself," Ron said.

Hermione flushed. "She didn't say that, exactly," she said. "I'll be right back. Take care of Harry."

She turned and hurried down the corridor.

Ron smirked. "Looks like I'm on Harry-watch, mate," he said.

Harry scowled. "I already said I wasn't going anywhere," he said, disgruntled. "I'm not leaving until I know Ginny is going to be okay."

Ron's face sobered instantly. "She's going to be all right. She's too stubborn to give up now," he said, elbowing Harry slightly.

Harry lowered his eyes, unable to meet Ron's gaze. He absently picked at a spot on his jeans where blood was seeping through and saturating the fabric. The spider's pincers had apparently dug in deep.

"Harry," Ron said, elbowing him again.

"I shouldn't have let her come," he said, his voice low.

"Don't start this again, Harry. You'll only hack everyone off. We all knew what we were getting into and did it anyway. This isn't your fault. In fact, I think it was because you were so worried about her that you created that shield that protected us all when that ice palace collapsed. I still don't know how you did that, mate," Ron said.

Harry furrowed his brow, finally meeting Ron's earnest gaze. "I dunno," he said. "It just happened."

"Well, it was lucky for us, then," Ron replied.

Harry sat up straighter. He hadn't even considered the shield he'd created. He'd only been focused on Ginny at the time.

For he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...

Harry struggled to get to his feet. His legs shook beneath him, and he was left gasping by the time he could stand.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked.

"That Romanian book. It's full of Dark Magic. Maybe there's something in there that can help, Ginny," he said.

"You're not leaving, Harry. Hermione will kill me if you do," Ron said, also standing and blocking Harry's way.

"Ron! It could help Ginny," Harry said, frustrated that his body was too weak to duck by Ron.

"Then we'll have someone bring it here to us," Ron said firmly.

"Bring what, Mr. Weasley?" Professor McGonagall asked as she turned the corner and approached them.

"A book in my dormitory. It has loads of information on Dark Magic. It could help her," Harry said, pleading.

Professor McGonagall's eyes efficiently swept over both Ron and Harry. "I'll have a house-elf bring us the book," she said. "Now, I just left Miss Granger in my office. She said you two would fill me in on what has happened."

Harry and Ron looked at each other warily, realizing Hermione had found a way to ensure they stayed put after all.

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A loud, clanging sound jerked Harry into awareness. He sat up straight, wand at the ready and tossing his head from side to side, seeking a threat.

"Sorry, mate," Ron said, picking up a tray from the floor. "Didn't mean to wake you. I forgot this was perched on the arm of my chair."

Harry blinked his eyes groggily, trying to clear his sleep-addled brain. He must have nodded off at some point despite his best efforts

to stay awake. He was seated in a comfy armchair in the corridor outside the hospital wing. He vaguely remembered Professor McGonagall conjuring them as he told her an abridged version of what had happened. He'd mainly informed her that they'd stumbled across a Dark item that Voldemort had left behind in the castle.

She had pursed her lips but apparently accepted the tale. She'd Healed Harry's legs and shoulder for him, although she said Madam Pomfrey would have to mend his ribs. She'd had food trays sent up for both Ron and Harry, and Harry suspected there might have been a Sleeping Draught in his juice, because he hadn't stayed awake much longer afterwards.

He remembered a frantic Mr. and Mrs. Weasley arriving outside the hospital wing, but they'd been ushered inside, and he hadn't seen them since.

"How's Ginny?" he asked, his panic rising once again. Absently, he noticed that it was much easier to breathe than it had been. Madam Pomfrey must have Healed his ribs during the night after all.

"No word," Ron replied grimly. "I slept for a bit, too, but they haven't told me anything since I woke."

Harry stood up, attempting to work out his stiff muscles. "I need to find out what's happening."

"Ron! Harry!" Hermione said, walking around the corner. She was accompanied by the crotchety old barman from the Hog's Head. Harry now knew that he was Professor Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, although they'd never been properly introduced.

"Hermione!" Ron said, relief evident in his voice. He stood to embrace her quickly before demanding, "Where have you been?"

Excitement glittered in Hermione's eyes. "Well, after I spoke with Professor Dumbledore's portrait, he suggested—"

"This where she is?" Aberforth interrupted with a scowl, hooking his thumb toward the door to the hospital wing. His thumbnail was dirty, and his hands appeared to be waterlogged.

"Yes," Hermione said, her hand fluttering to her hair. "Madam Pomfrey should be inside with Ginny."

Aberforth nodded without a word and pushed open the door.

"What's he doing here?" Ron asked, staring after him.

"Professor Dumbledore told me to get him," Hermione said, somewhat breathlessly. "He said Aberforth had more experience with Dark Magic than Madam Pomfrey, although she'll actually be better at any Healing. He suggested they work together. Of course, it took awhile to convince Aberforth that I was serious, and he still insisted we visit the portrait so he could hear it for himself."

"Grouchy git," Ron mumbled.

Harry didn't care how grouchy he was if he could help Ginny. "I gave Professor McGonagall that Romanian book on the Dark Arts," Harry said.

"Ooh, that's a good idea, Harry. How are you two? Has Madam Pomfrey had a chance to mend your injuries?" Hermione asked, her dark eyes raking over them in careful detail.

"Yeah. She was out here just a bit ago checking my head," Ron said. "That's what woke me up. She fixed your ribs, too, mate."

"Why didn't you ask her about Ginny?" Harry demanded hotly. He tugged on his bracelet - for some reason the stone felt uncomfortably hot.

"I did! She didn't answer me, just went about her business and went back inside without a word," Ron said, disgruntled.

Hermione wearily sank into the chair next to Ron's, resting her head on the wall behind her.

"Have you slept?" he asked, his tone softening.

"Not yet," Hermione replied, keeping her eyes closed.

"Why don't you go on back up to the tower and take a kip. We'll send for you if anything changes," Ron said, gently taking Hermione's hand in his own.

"I'd rather stay here," she said, sounding as if she were already drifting.

Ron shifted, allowing her head to settle on his shoulder.

"That's nice," Hermione mumbled.

Harry looked away, roughly rubbing his forehead. He wished he just knew something. What could be taking so long? Madam Pomfrey could heal broken bones in a matter of seconds, what could be wrong with Ginny that was taking this long to heal? A little voice in his head argued that it took much longer to heal some injuries. Look at how long Ron had been in hospital when he'd been poisoned, and they'd know the exact cause of that right away.

He took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves. He hated waiting - he always had. He just wished he could see her. She'd always come to see him when he was the one in hospital.

"All right, mate?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. "Feel a bit useless."

Ron snorted.

"What?" Harry asked, looking directly at him for the first time.

"Just that it's normally all of us out here waiting while Madam Pomfrey patches you up. It's only right that you should have to see what it's like on the other end," Ron said, grinning.

Harry scowled. "Seems to me I remember doing this for you not all that long ago," he said sourly.

"Yeah," Ron said, sighing. "We've certainly kept Madam Pomfrey on her toes recently."

"And given her an excuse to see Mad-Eye," Harry said, a slow, half-grin forming.

Ron snorted. "I'd like to know what injury he has that the treatment requires getting a leg over."

Harry choked, struggling to contain his mirth and feeling tears form in the corners of his eyes.

"And get the thought right out of your head, Potter," Ron said, his laughter dying on his lips. "Whatever treatment my sister needs, that most certainly won't be it."

Harry's grin melted, his amusement fading as reality washed back over him.

Ron lightly elbowed him in the ribs.

Some time later, a large disturbance inside the hospital wing drew Ron and Harry's attention. Raised voices near the doorway caused both boys to look up expectantly. Hermione stirred, lifting her head from Ron's shoulder, blinking her confusion.

Aberforth Dumbledore stormed outside the hospital wing, an irate Professor McGonagall close on his heels.

"You can't just leave them with that, Aberforth," Professor McGonagall said, her voice shrill.

"Why not? The girl is dying. My saying it doesn't change anything," Aberforth said, only half turning.

Harry's breath caught, a shrill whine reverberating in his ears.

"So you're just going to walk away?" Professor McGonagall asked incredulously.

"I didn't say that. I can't concentrate with all that caterwauling. I need to go somewhere quiet to think. I'll get back to you," he said, raising the Romanian Dark Arts book in his hand as if to show he was going to read it.

"There wouldn't be such a fuss if you hadn't shocked them like that," Professor McGonagall said sternly. "They are the girl's parents, after all."

"That poison is slowly shutting down her internal organs. Without the snake, it's hard to find the exact potion that can counteract the venom. If you want my help, stop throwing a wobbly and let me get to it," Aberforth said cantankerously.

"What are you on about? D'you mean Ginny?" Ron asked, unable to contain his emotions any longer. He leaped to his feet, blood rushing to his face. "What did you say to my mum?"

"Bloody hell," Aberforth said, throwing his hands in the air. "How many of them are there, anyway? Place is crawling with you red-headed lot."

"What are you saying about Ginny?" Ron asked, hunching his shoulders and glowering at Aberforth, who didn't appear cowed in the least.

"What I said is the bald truth. Your sister is being poisoned from the inside out. There isn't a lot of time if you expect to have a chance to save her. How much of it do you want to waste here?" Aberforth asked.

"Ron! Let him go," Hermione said, grabbing Ron's arm and pulling him back. She rested a soothing hand on his back, whispering softly in his ear.

Ron took a deep breath, his shoulders slumping. Aberforth turned on his heel and walked away. Professor McGonagall glanced at them all, her eyes suspiciously bright before turning and re-entering the hospital wing.

Harry sat through it all unmoving. His world had tilted on its axis when Aberforth announced Ginny's imminent death, and he'd yet to get his bearings. His chest ached with pressure, and he sat stock-still trying to control his heart rate. As his thoughts raced, a fierce determination settled over him.

No.

Not again.

He wasn't going to lose Ginny, too.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked, and he suddenly realized he was on his feet with no recollection of moving.

"Library," he said shortly.

"The library?" Hermione asked, clearly stunned.

"What was that Golpy's Law?" he asked. "From Potions last year."

"Golpalott's Third Law," Hermione said automatically. "But it won't help, Harry. It's designed to find an antidote for Blended poisons, not snake venom."

"How d'you know what it was?" Ron asked, seizing on the hope Harry offered. "It wasn't even a real snake."

Hermione shook her head, grasping both Ron and Harry's arms as if she was caring for small children. "It's a wonderful idea, Harry, but we don't even have anywhere to begin."

Harry felt frantic. He had to make her understand that he needed to do something. Sitting here and waiting was making him barmy. He jerked his arm away, feeling it slap on something hard in his pocket. Furrowing his brow in confusion, he reached down and pulled out the tattered copy of the Half-Blood Prince's Potions book.

Grasping it as if he'd found hidden treasure, he returned to his chair and began frantically flipping through the pages.

"That's not going to help you, Harry," Hermione said.

Although he didn't look up, he could hear the disapproval in her voice and knew she was frowning. There was nothing written in the book about antidotes except for the note to use a Bezoar, which had already been discounted. It took some time, ignoring Hermione's huffs and Ron's eager inquisitiveness all the while, but eventually, Harry found a brief note about animals in a section near the back of the book.

When pitting animals against each other, all magical creatures have a single natural enemy. Find the correct one and the battle can go either way.

Harry sat up straight. A single natural enemy. The spider killed the snake. His memory was filled with the vision of Professor Slughorn siphoning the venom from Aragog last year. He'd said it was really valuable, and that it would still be there if the spider had just died..

"I have to go back," he said, rubbing his hand over the stubble on his jaw.

"Huh? Have to go where?" Ron asked.

"I have to go back to that ice palace. D'you think you can remember how to get back there, Hermione?" he asked eagerly, hope and adrenaline filling his veins.

"What? Why would you want to go back, Harry?" Hermione asked, concerned. She'd gently taken his arm and looked as if she thought he'd gone barking mad.

"The book says that all magical creatures have a natural enemy. Snape was probably pitting them against one another to learn which would survive. It doesn't matter right now. That spider was the snake's natural enemy. I need to go back and get some of the spider's venom," Harry said, pulling away from Hermione and sprinting toward Gryffindor tower.

"You think venom from that dead spider is going to save Ginny?" Ron asked, horror spreading across his face.

"Harry, this is mad. You can't trust anything that's in that book," Hermione argued, struggling to keep up with him.

Harry stopped short, spinning around, furious. "I am going to do this. Are you coming with me or not?" he demanded, his blood pounding.

Neither Ron nor Hermione looked happy about it, but they ceased their arguments and meekly followed him to Gryffindor tower.

Getting the venom had been easier - although admittedly disgusting - than Harry thought it would be. Given time to ponder it, Hermione had decided the idea held merit and had gone to the task with her usual enthusiasm. Harry had to give credit to Ron though. His friend had obviously been repulsed, but he'd clamped down his fear and did what he had to do for his sister. Harry supposed that for Ron, it was similar to facing a Boggart, and he had to respect him for that.

They'd run into Aberforth as they entered the castle, excitedly shoving the phials of venom into his hands. At first he'd appeared disgruntled and rather annoyed by their existence, but gradually he became interested in their tale. He took the phial from Harry's hands and curtly told him to follow him.

They'd entered the hospital wing and went directly into Madam Pomfrey's office. Harry carefully kept his gaze averted from the still figure on the bed surrounded by her family. He knew he'd never be able to pull himself away once he went to her, and he had to be certain this would work.

Ron and Hermione tip-toed over to Ginny's bedside, taking positions on each side of a crying Mrs. Weasley. Harry followed Aberforth into the office, Madam Pomfrey close on his heels.

"What is that? What are you planning?" Madam Pomfrey demanded, pointing at the phials Aberforth was holding. Madam Pomfrey obviously did not enjoy having her supreme reign over the hospital wing infringed upon.

"Spider venom," Aberforth snapped.

"You can't be serious. You're not giving an untested potion to my patient. You could kill her," Madam Pomfrey said, aghast.

"She'll die anyway if we don't try something," Aberforth said, and Harry found his dispassion disturbing.

He remained quietly beside Aberforth's side, doling out ingredients as the old barkeep asked for them. Madam Pomfrey's disapproval melted as her interest in what Aberforth was brewing grew. The two older people chatted as they brewed, but Harry barely heard them. His mind was solely focused on one person in the other room. He'd been desperate to get to her when Madam Pomfrey had first kicked him out of the hospital wing, but now that she was so close, he was hesitant. He didn't want to see his Ginny so lifeless and without her sparkle.

He swallowed hard and continued handing Aberforth ingredients. When they finally emerged from the office, the same group of Weasleys was still huddled around Ginny's bedside. Bill and Fleur clutched hands as they stood behind Ron and Hermione.

"She's growing weaker, Poppy," Mrs. Weasley said tearfully, clutching Ginny's hand. "She seems to be struggling to take a breath."

Madam Pomfrey nodded and briskly shooed Ron and Hermione out of her way as she approached the bed. She lifted Ginny off the pillows slightly and snapped at Bill. "Hold her up like that. Let me get this potion into her."

"What's the potion, and what's it going to do?" Bill asked, although he did what he was asked.

"It's made from the venom of the spider that killed the snake that poisoned her. The two venoms should attack each other rather than continuing any assault on her," Madam Pomfrey said, spooning the steaming brew down Ginny's throat.

"More venom?" Mrs. Weasley gasped, clutching Mr. Weasley's robes.

He patted her back soothingly. "Will it work?" he asked, his voice tired and strained.

"It's the best hope we've got," Madam Pomfrey replied grimly.

Harry had been silent during the exchange, finally getting his first good look at Ginny. She was ghostly pale against the crisp white hospital linens and even the vibrant color of her hair appeared dull and listless. There was no sparkle, none of the usual warmth or fire that he associated with her.

He dropped his eyes to the floor, unable to look at her for very long. When Madam Pomfrey finished giving Ginny the potion, she moved back, leaving an open space near Ginny's head. Harry felt Hermione's hand on his back, gently guiding him forward.

He kept his head lowered, unable to meet anyone's gaze.

"All we can do now is wait," Madam Pomfrey said, sighing. "There's a battle going on within her bloodstream. If one of the venoms can destroy the other, the surviving venom will be diluted - weakened from the battle. We then have to hope that Ginny is still strong enough to fight it."

Harry lifted his hand, gently brushing away the hair sticking to Ginny's cheek. "'lo Gin," he said gruffly.

"Oh, Harry," Mrs. Weasley cried. "Ron tells me you saved her again." She raised her arms and moved to embrace him

"Don't, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, recoiling from her. "We don't know if she's going to be okay, and if she hadn't been with me..." Harry broke off, unable to continue. He looked away, blinking furiously.

He heard Mrs. Weasley sigh heavily, collecting herself. She laid a gentle finger under Harry's chin and forced him to turn around. "While I've been sitting her fretting, I've been blaming myself for letting her get involved, too. I knew something like this would happen."

Harry flinched, knowing she had every right to blame him but also aware that he couldn't handle her turning on him just now.

"I had a bit of an epiphany when Ron told us what happened and how you all went after that object You-Know-Who left behind. I realized that I could never have stopped Ginny if she was determined to do something. Ever since she was a small child, she had her own mind. I have a special look - my 'mum-look', if you will. I could always cow the boys with that look - except for Fred and George, mind - but it also never worked on Ginny. I can see her with her hands on her hips, pigtails bouncing on her head and a scowl on her face if I tried to get her to do something she didn't want to do," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling sadly.

Harry snorted. He could picture just the look Ginny would've had on her childish face.

"You couldn't have stopped her, either, Harry. No matter how much you want to protect her, she's her own person, and she's determined to make her own decisions. Somehow, when I wasn't looking, my little girl has grown into exactly the kind of woman I'd always hoped to raise her to be. This isn't your fault any more than it's my fault - or Ginny's fault for wanting to do the right thing. The fault lies with You-Know-Who alone."

Harry looked at the floor, breathing deeply. Although he tried to stop it, he couldn't help it, and a small sniffle escaped.

Mrs. Weasley leaned over and kissed the crown of his head. "Why don't we all wait outside in the corridor and give Harry a moment alone with Ginny," she said, ushering her family from the room.

Harry watched the slow, agonized rise and fall of Ginny's chest until the room was quiet. Slowly, he looked up to face her, lightly stroking her cheek with his fingertips.

"Ginny," he whispered, "you can't bail on me now. You promised. You promised you'd be here to show me how things are supposed to be. We're supposed to be happy and have time to do things together and grow old and make babies and..."

Annoyed, he swiped at his eyes and blinked again. He waited a moment, allowing his breathing to slow.

"You've got to see me through to the end of this. I need you to do that. I need you to remind me why."

He took off his glasses, unable to stop them from fogging and wiped his eyes again.

"It's strange...to need someone this way," he said, sniffing. He wanted to explain it to her properly, tell her how much she meant to him, but he couldn't get the words to form. "Strange in a good way, though. Oh, Ginny. I'm rubbish at this. You know that. You keep telling me about the life we're going to have after all this is over. I want that life. I want it with you."

He wiped his nose again, staring at a distant spot on the window until he could regain control.

"You need to be here to make that possible, so you fight. Don't give up. I know how much of a fighter you can be, and you need to fight now. Fight for all it's worth to get that happily ever after...and I promise to do the same. All right, Ginny? Can you do that for me?"

She hadn't moved, and her labored breathing hadn't changed. He wished desperately that her eyes would just flutter or that she'd squeeze his hand, but neither of those things happened.

He grasped her limp hand firmly and laced their fingers together. He rested his head on the bed beside her pillow, breathing in her scent.

"I'll hang on for both of us," he said softly.

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After a tense hour waiting in the corridor outside the hospital wing, Hermione felt ready to jump out of her skin. She hated not knowing what was happening. She knew that Mrs. Weasley was right in ushering everyone outside to give Harry some privacy with Ginny, but the uncertainty was killing her.

Mr. Weasley had insisted that Mrs. Weasley needed to get something to eat, and he'd walked her down to the Great Hall. Bill and Fleur had joined them, but she and Ron had chosen to remain behind. Although she didn't come right out and say it, she'd been worried that Harry might need some moral support when he emerged.

Shannon, George, Fred, and even Iris had all stopped by to check if there had been any progress, but neither of the twins had been able to sit still and wait. Ron had promised to get word to them if anything changed.

Ron had sat in the chair next to her, absently scrubbing some of the tarnish off the tiara, but he'd promptly fallen asleep, leaving her nothing to occupy her thoughts. The spider venom had to work! She didn't even want to consider the alternative. If it failed...neither of her boys would ever be the same.

Pushing out of her chair, she paced the corridor, listening to Ron's loud snores. Finally giving in to her curiosity, she leaned her head against the door of the hospital wing, pushing it open and gingerly peering inside.

Harry sat in the chair beside Ginny's bed, his head resting on the corner of her pillow. He was awake, but his eyes looked droopy and close to shutting. He held Ginny's hand in his own, gently caressing the side with his thumb.

Hermione's heart clenched, and she had to put her hand over her mouth to quiet her gasp. He looked so lost and all alone that it made her heart ache. He'd lost so much already. Fate couldn't be that cruel to bring him this far - this close to the end - only to snatch the one

thing that had kept him going. Hermione was certain that Ginny was Harry's hope for a better future.

She quietly shut the door, leaning her head against the wall in the corridor, feeling as if she was intruding on an incredibly personal moment. As they'd grown up together, she'd always felt the obsessive need to mother Harry, to watch out for him and make certain he was okay. She knew at times it drove both him and Ron mad, but she couldn't help it. Perhaps it was because she knew no one else was doing it.

It had been different with Ron. She'd worried about him and fussed over him, of course. Merlin knew he needed a bit of fussing to get his homework done on time. Still, it wasn't the same. Everything was always different with Ron. She always felt the need to take care of Harry, but with Ron, she always felt as if he were the one taking care of her.

He was so fiercely loyal and protective of both her and Harry. Although she'd never admit it to him, she was always secretly pleased when he defended her against Malfoy or any of the other Slytherins. By the same token, it had hurt so much worse during the whole Lavender Brown debacle when he taunted her 'know-it-all' ways.

Hermione shook her head. Now was not the time to go over that whole saga again. This was about Ginny. She didn't even want to think about losing Ginny. Hermione had never had a close girlfriend before - not even in primary school where the other children had tended to mock her. Ginny had changed Hermione's life, much the same way Ron and Harry had. Maybe not as completely since Hermione had learned something about having friends before she met Ginny, but she'd had a positive impact nonetheless.

And she'd certainly had a positive impact on Harry.

Harry always got a soft, glassy-eyed look on his face when he was thinking about Ginny. Hermione had noticed it their last term at Hogwarts, and it had been ever-present during their time at Privet Drive. Hermione had found it kind of cute to see emotionally-repressed Harry walking about with a lost puppy-dog expression.

Having Ginny in his life had been good for him. No matter how hard Hermione had tried to be the one to offer him some comfort, she had to admit that Ginny was the one who'd always been able to reach him. She could make him laugh in a way Ron and Hermione never could.

Hermione had seen strong glimpses of the man Harry was becoming this year, but he still needed some guidance and reassurance. She'd thought Remus would fill that role, but he'd also been ripped away from Harry. After that had happened, Hermione had finally realized that the role of guiding and supporting Harry was left to her, Ron and Ginny. They were his lifeline, and he needed them all desperately.

Ginny couldn't break that lifeline now. The venom had to work. Hermione wasn't certain Harry would survive if Ginny died, no matter how much she and Ron were there for him. Ginny had told her that Harry always kissed her as if it would be the last time he ever got to do it, and Hermione suspected that was true. He didn't think he was going to survive the final battle

She felt a twinge of guilt for allowing that feeling to fester within him, but part of Hermione's plan hinged on that idea. Harry couldn't work Occlumency. He'd tried and repeatedly failed, so Voldemort was certain to see inside his mind once the final battle began. If Harry thought the plan was to destroy himself, Voldemort would think the same thing. Hermione was counting on it.

She'd been formulating an idea with Professor Dumbledore's portrait since she'd arrived here. He'd been really helpful in pulling her thoughts together. She'd discussed it with Ron and Ginny, and they both knew what they had to do. The only variable was Harry.

Hermione snorted, feeling a new appreciation for the Order's frustration in keeping tabs on Harry. What she was planning was meant to save him, but she had to worry about him mucking up the plans most of all. She could understand his desire to protect them - he'd lost everyone else - but he was going to have to trust them for her plan to work.

He had to be able to make a leap of faith at the most crucial moment.

She only hoped that he could do it.

Hermione had made a promise to herself after the disaster at the Department of Mysteries to have some faith in her own judgment and not blindly follow Harry's lead. He was quite a force to be reckoned with when he was angry, and his fury tended to intimidate Hermione when it was directed at her. Still, he wasn't the only one growing up, and she knew her idea could work. She'd been right in telling Ginny about the Horcruxes, and she knew she was right now.

But all of it would be mute if Ginny died. Harry wouldn't have any desire to go on after Voldemort's demise. Pushing open the door, she again peeked inside. Harry had since fallen asleep, but Hermione had to blink twice to be certain what she was seeing.

Ginny's eyes were still closed, and she appeared to be sleeping, but her fingers were gently running through the strands of Harry's hair.

"Madam Pomfrey!" Hermione hissed, alerting the matron. "I think Ginny's waking up."

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Several days after Ginny's brush with death, she was still in hospital recuperating. To everyone's great relief, she was making definite, if slow, progress. Her organs were healing, but she was still too weak to get out of bed. Her breathing remained labored, and she suffered frequent loss of breath if she spoke too long.

She bore an angry red welt across her forehead and scalp where the snake had held her. Madam Pomfrey said there most likely always would be a scar, but fortunately her hair would hide most of it. Its mere existence infuriated Harry. He seethed that all this had marked her, much like it had done to him. Still, it could have been so much worse and for that, he was grateful.

Harry had taken to using his Invisibility Cloak to sneak into the hospital wing. He'd curl up in the empty bed next to Ginny's and was actually sleeping better than he had in the loud dormitory. He felt better knowing he was beside her, just in case anything went wrong.

The gray light of dawn was beginning to seep through the windows, signaling it was time for Harry to return to his dormitory. He stretched languidly and pulled himself out of the bed, carefully re-tucking the corners of the sheets so Madam Pomfrey wouldn't know he'd been there.

He leaned over to kiss Ginny's forehead and was surprised when she opened her eyes.

"Hey," she said, sleepily. "D'you have to go already?"

A slow grin filtered across his face. "I didn't know you knew I was here," he replied, whispering.

Ginny smiled, still keeping her eyes closed. "I can always tell when you're here, Harry."

"Why? Do I stink?" he asked, raising his arm to sniff only half-jokingly.

Ginny snorted and finally opened her eyes. "No, you prat. You don't stink. Your scent is very nice, actually."

"Er...that's good... I think," he said, raising his eyebrows. "How do you feel?"

Ginny shrugged. "Still tired and a bit sore, but stronger all the time. My left leg keeps going numb, but Madam Pomfrey thinks it'll recover."

"You really scared me, Ginny," Harry whispered, tugging at a stray thread on her blanket.

"Sorry about that," Ginny replied, glancing up at the tone in his voice. "The Horcrux has been destroyed though, right?"

"Yeah. It's just a tiara again," he replied, thinking about the thin, lightning bolt mark that he'd found on the inside of the piece after Ron had finished polishing it.

"So...what now?" Ginny asked, and Harry could hear the tremor in her voice.

"Right now we concentrate on getting you better. Don't worry about anything else, Ginny," he said, locking eyes with hers.

"You're not thinking about slipping off without us, are you, Harry? I couldn't take that. I need to know you're not going to do anything rash," Ginny said, her voice very low and husky.

"I'm not going to do anything until you're well, Ginny," he said, and he meant it. He had to be certain she was well on the road of recovery before he could even consider leaving her.

"Good," Ginny replied, snuggling back beneath her covers. "What's happening back in Gryffindor Tower?"

"Not much. The strangest thing is that Draco and Dudley appear to have become mates. It's weird," Harry said, scratching his head. "Who would've ever thought Malfoy would befriend one of the most Muggle-borns of all Muggle-borns?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Well, both of them are used to having a pack, right? Didn't you say that Dudley also had a little gang of followers?" she asked. "They're both just looking to make a connection. Plus, they both hate you."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, there is that. You know, there were times before Pansy arrived that Draco had been almost...bearable. He wasn't even as nasty about the things he learned during Occlumency as he could have been. Now, with Pansy and Dudley - he's got his fan club back and has returned to gitdom."

"He never left gitdom, Harry," Ginny said, refusing to give an inch.

Harry covered a smile and changed the subject. "You know who seems to be getting along surprisingly well is Fred and Iris."

"Yeah, well...who didn't see that coming?" Ginny asked, unimpressed.

Harry's jaw fell open.

Ginny giggled and patted his hand. "Silly boy. Fred and Iris were both left out after Shannon joined us here. Besides, Fred always likes a challenge. Do you know that Mum is worried about how close George and Shannon have become? She doesn't want them to get up to anything improper."

Harry laughed, remembering seeing the pair sneak out of more than their fair share of broom cupboards.

"Yeah. She's obviously missed the fact that they've made it a mission to shag in every room of this castle," Ginny said.

"Ginny!"

"What? You'd be amazed how much people talk when they think you're incapable of hearing them," she said primly.

Harry laughed nervously, wondering how much he'd let slip when he thought Ginny was sleeping.

"Don't worry, Harry. I'll always keep all your secrets," Ginny said.

"I really need to get back to the dormitory before I get caught here," Harry said reluctantly.

"Just stay a bit more and talk to me while I fall asleep," she whispered, as if knowing he could never refuse her.

"What would you like me to talk about?" he asked.

"Tell me that dream again...the one on the beach," Ginny sighed contentedly.

Harry smiled as he once again began relaying the story of the two of them walking hand in hand along the surf without a care in the world.

It was a nice dream for someday.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Matters of the Heart

As winter slowly released its icy grip from the Scottish soil, signs of new life appeared throughout the forest and across the Hogwarts grounds. Small green buds began to pop out on previously barren trees, and the first hearty flowers poked their heads from the earth.

Ginny's recovery was moving along, albeit slowly. She still struggled for breath whenever she overexerted herself, and her leg had proven more stubborn to heal than had been expected. She walked with a definite limp. Madam Pomfrey had said something about a pinched spinal nerve, but as yet, she hadn't found the correct solution.

Ginny had adapted to the uncertainty about her leg well - better than anyone would have expected. But she chafed under her forced confinement in the hospital wing. Feeling frustrated and impatient to leave, she was prone to snap and even throw various objects at anyone within reach whenever she was denied her request to return to Gryffindor Tower.

Madam Pomfrey had been reluctant to release her before she was certain that Ginny's breathing difficulties could be managed. Mrs. Weasley followed Madam Pomfrey's instructions to the letter, further testing Ginny's already-strained patience. According to Ginny, the only positive aspect to the whole ordeal was that all the restorative potions she'd been required to take had had the wonderful side effect of speeding up her hair growth.

Ginny's fiery hair now reached halfway down her back, and she again was able to pull it back into her familiar ponytail. Once she'd realized the effect, Madam Pomfrey had even given a much smaller dose to Hermione to hurry along her re-growth, as well.

Ginny had made good use of her time in confinement, catching up on all the schoolwork that she'd been neglecting. Between her mother, Hermione, and Professor McGonagall's visits, she was bound to score well on her end-of-term exams. While Ginny revised, Harry had been spending his time training with the Aurors. He knew the time for his final confrontation with Voldemort was growing ever nearer, and he wanted to feel as ready as he could for when that day arrived.

His stomach still twisted in knots whenever he thought about it, but he knew what had to be done. He'd finished his letters to Ron, Hermione

and Ginny and knew they'd take care of Hedwig after he was gone. He'd been trying to practice the Occlumency exercises that Draco and Narcissa had shown him, but still felt it was useless. All he needed to do was break into Voldemort's mind once - that would be enough. He planned on going to the Department of Mysteries and letting the tosser know he was there.

He'd even considered again asking Draco for help but decided that would be a last option. Harry thought he'd rather face Voldemort than have to owe anything to the Slytherin prat.

On the morning that Ginny was finally scheduled to be released, Harry and Ron met her in the hospital wing.

"Out of bed, you lazy wretch. We're here to spring you," Ron said, grinning as they entered the door.

Ginny turned her head and promptly stuck out her tongue at her brother.

"Oh, that's mature," Ron said, plopping into the chair beside her bed.

Harry leaned over and gave Ginny a quick kiss before taking the other chair. "How does it feel to finally be getting out of here?" he asked, grinning. She'd been complaining to him nonstop for days.

"Brilliant," she said, sliding her legs over the side of the bed and standing up, fully dressed. Harry could see the necklace he'd given her for Christmas glittering in the sunlight streaming in from the window. "Let's hurry before she changes her mind."

"Hang on. Mum will curse me if I take you out of here, and she doesn't get to be part of it. She's bringing her camera," Ron said gleefully.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Oh, brother! What's got you so chipper this morning, anyway? Where's Hermione?" she asked.

"Dunno. She was supposed to meet us in the common room, but Fleur told us she said to go ahead without her," Ron replied, frowning.

"Those two were definitely up to something," Harry said, pleased to see Ginny looking so healthy. "D'you know anything?"

Ginny shrugged. "How would I know? I'm the one who's been stuck in here."

"Yeah, but you always know everything," Harry replied.

"And don't you forget it," Ginny said, wagging her eyebrows.

Harry chuckled, taking her hand and swinging it back and forth. His heart always felt lighter when he stood near her. The hospital door opened again, and Bill entered, followed closely by Fleur and a dark-haired Hermione. For the first time since her accident, she wasn't wearing her red wig.

"Hermione!" Ron said, sitting up straight. "You've got your own hair."

"Well spotted," Hermione said with a small smile, her cheeks turning pink. Her hand automatically fluttered up to tug on a stray curl.

"'Eet looks lovely, does eet not?" Fleur asked, beaming as if she alone was responsible for Hermione's hair growth.

"It always does," Ron replied, staring at Hermione critically. "It's different though."

Harry stared at Hermione, realizing Ron was right. Her hair nearly touched her shoulders, but it wasn't as full as Harry remembered. It was still wavy but sleeker somehow.

"It grew in less bushy," she replied, beaming. "I read that it happens sometimes, particularly after medical hair loss. Chemotherapy patients experience it all the time."

"Keemo-what?" Ron asked, blankly. "It's nice to see your own color again. It makes your eyes shine more."

Hermione looked at the floor, blushing, but her smile never dipped.

Ron's ears colored brilliantly when he realized what he'd said.

"She does look splendid," Bill replied easily. "And I think we can all be thankful the twins weren't here for that display." He gave Ron a light shove in the shoulder, causing his brother to stumble into Hermione.

Ginny snickered. "You do look lovely, Hermione, but I'm sorry to see the red go. I liked having a 'sister'."

"Thanks, Ginny," Hermione said. "The potions have really hurried it along, and Fleur cut it for me this morning."

"Doesn't eet look magnifique?" Fleur asked, fussing with Hermione's hair.

Hermione pulled her head away and moved to stand near Ron. "So, are you ready to be released? Madam Pomfrey is certain you'll be all right, isn't she?"

"She's certain I won't be kept here one moment longer," Ginny growled, crossing her arms over her chest. "I've had enough."

"That's my girl," Mr. Weasley said, beaming as he and Mrs. Weasley entered the hospital wing. The area around Ginny's bed was growing very crowded. Harry began to move aside to allow Ginny's parents to get closer, but Ginny firmly grabbed his hand, insisting he stay where he was. She squeezed it reassuringly.

"Oh, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said, elbowing her way past Ron and Hermione. "I was so afraid this day would never come." She wrapped Ginny in a bone-crushing hug and began sniffing.

"There, there, Mum," Ginny said, patting her mother's back while trying to extricate herself. "I'm fine and ready to get out of here."

Mrs. Weasley pulled her camera out of her pocket. "We need to take a photo to mark the occasion," she said, suddenly in take-charge mode. "Bill and Fleur, move around behind them. Ginny, don't slouch. Harry move closer, dear. You won't be in the picture if you stand way back there."

A blinding flash went off, causing all of them to blink.

"I told Fred and George to be here on time. Those two can't follow the simplest of directions," Mrs. Weasley said, scowling.

"Oh, Mum. Don't be cross with Fred and George. It's really not a big deal. I'd rather just go," Ginny said, her tone both hopeful and resigned. Somehow, they all knew Mrs. Weasley was determined to make a production out of this and no amount of excuses would change her mind.

Mr. Weasley smiled indulgently. "Why don't you get in the shot, Molly? I'll take the next picture," he said, holding out his hand for the camera.

"Pictures? Did I hear pictures?" Fred asked, loudly banging the hospital door open.

"You've started family pictures without us?" George asked, feigning horror. "I always knew we were the black sheep, Fred."

"Black sheep?" Fred gasped, his eyes wide with mock indignation. "I don't think we even count as sheep - more like a distant goat."

"I'll give you a goat," Mrs. Weasley said sternly. "If you'd been here on time like I'd asked you, you wouldn't have missed the picture and marred Ginny's special day."

Ginny rolled her eyes and muttered, "Good grief."

"We're here now, Mum. We wouldn't think of mucking up Ginny's special day," George said, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he caught his sister's expression.

"Leave your sister alone," Shannon said, wagging a finger at George. Her chestnut-brown hair was swept back into a ponytail that swayed as she moved her finger. "Sorry we're late, Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley deflated at the apologetic tone. "It's all right, dear. I know it wasn't your fault," she said, glaring at the twins.

"Why don't you all stand around Ginny again, and I'll take a family picture?" Iris suggested, still standing in the doorway.

Harry hadn't even realized that she'd arrived with Shannon and the twins because she was standing so far back. She appeared rather hesitant to enter, and from the looks on the assorted Weasley faces, Harry couldn't say he blamed her.

There had been a brief moment of shocked silence as everyone stared at her, apparently lost for words. Fred finally broke the tenseness by grabbing Iris's arm and tugging her into the room. "Don't be silly. Everyone can be in the picture. You can charm it, Dad, can't you?"

Mr. Weasley shook himself from his daze. "Er...of course. All right, everyone, gather 'round again," he said, positioning the camera.

Mrs. Weasley, too, smiled widely at Iris and once again began issuing orders. "George and Shannon, you stand on that side of Bill and Fleur, behind Harry. Fred and Iris, you two go on their other side, behind Ron and Hermione. Arthur, hurry with that thing and sit with me in front of them all," she said, sitting in the chair Harry had occupied.

"Where's Charlie? How come he gets out of this?" Ron asked, grumbling.

"He's back at the dragon reservation. He should return tomorrow," Mrs. Weasley said. "Arthur, is that ready yet?"

"Just let me get the focus right," Mr. Weasley said, tinkering with the camera.

"Just take the picture, Dad," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

Harry began shifting his feet.

"Da-ad. I want to leave this place some time today," Ginny moaned.

"All right, that should do it," Mr. Weasley said, sprinting back toward Mrs. Weasley and just managing to sit down before the camera flashed several times.

Harry again blinked the spots from his eyes.

"There. Now that wasn't hard, was it?" Mrs. Weasley asked, smiling.

"Let's go," Ginny said, picking up her small bag of toiletries.

"Ginny, can you walk all the way?" Mrs. Weasley asked fretfully.

"Mum, we're only going up to Gryffindor Tower," Ginny said, clearly becoming annoyed.

Knowing the feeling of being stalled when he wanted nothing more than to get out of the hospital wing, Harry took pity on her. Taking her bag and slinging it over his shoulder, he offered her his arm.

"Shall we?" he asked.

Ginny beamed, linking her arm with his. "Let's go."

Sticking to Harry's side and limping slightly, she strode purposefully toward the door. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Mrs. Weasley move to assist Ginny, but Mr. Weasley grabbed her arm and held her back, nodding at Harry.

Mrs. Weasley's gaze wavered slightly before she nodded, taking Mr. Weasley's arm and following behind them.

The large group climbed toward Gryffindor Tower, chatting merrily along the way. By the time they reached the portrait hole, Ginny was slightly out of breath and definitely leaning more heavily on Harry than she had at the beginning of their trek.

"Well, it's nice to see you back, young lady," the Fat Lady said, glancing down at Ginny.

"It's nice to be back," she said.

"Hungarian Horntail," Harry mumbled, ducking his head as the portrait swung open. The common room had been prepared for a "Welcome Back" feast in Ginny's honor. The fire blazed invitingly, and there was food and drinks spread out on several tables.

Ginny could barely contain her grin. "Hungarian Horntail?" she asked, her eyes shining brightly.

"I didn't make the password," Harry said under his breath, feeling his face heat.

"No, he didn't, but you should see the disgust on Malfoy's face every time he has to say it," Ron said gleefully.

"And we all enjoyed tormenting Harry's aunt with tales of his glory," George replied, ruffling Harry's hair. "Mum even offered to bring her out to the pitch to show her where you beat that dragon."

Harry pulled his head away, scowling.

"And Dudley's eyes were about ready to bug out of his head," Fred said, grinning. "He's not nearly as fun since he doesn't spook so easily over anything magical anymore."

"Yeah. Testing our stuff out on him isn't half the laugh it used to be," said George sadly. "Making your aunt faint is only funny for so long."

"Oh, I still enjoy it," Fred said happily.

"Have you been testing stuff on Dudley?" Harry asked curiously, disappointed that he'd missed it. "You're still producing stuff while we've been here, then?"

"Of course we are," Fred said. "The mail order business is the only thing that's thriving since no one with an ounce of sense would be seen in Diagon Alley these days. That's severely limited our pool of potential test subjects. George and I have had to revert to testing things on ourselves again."

"Oh, there's a sacrifice," Iris said, rolling her eyes.

"It is," Fred replied. "You don't know how much George and I have put ourselves through testing this on our own."

"Yes. Placing a hat atop your head to make your own head disappear is so dangerous...and hysterically funny, I might add," Iris replied in a bored voice, although her eyes were sparkling brightly.

"Loads of people think those Headless Hats are funny. We've made bucket-loads of Galleons off them," Fred said hotly.

Harry couldn't remember ever having seen Fred so off his game. Iris was really winding him up. Harry suddenly developed a new appreciation for the Slytherin girl. He, Ron, Hermione and Ginny all watched the sparring between the two as if it were a tennis match while George and Shannon had slunk off into a darkened corner.

"Well, loads of people thought Dolores Umbridge would lead them out of the grip of the Dark Lord, too," Iris countered.

Fred's face became mutinous. "The Headless Hats and all Weasley products never belong in the same category as Dolores Umbridge - may she rest in Centaur heaven."

Iris actually sniggered at that, and Harry had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep his snort of laughter inside. He didn't want either of them turning their attention on him.

"I'll concede you that point - they're a step above Umbridge. But only just," she said primly.

"What do you have against the Hats?" Fred asked indignantly.

"Oh, nothing against them. I suppose plenty of people find it amusing to see a hat floating around on its own. I simply prefer subtly in my humor," Iris said, casually pushing her dark hair off her shoulder. "If you had, say...made the hats turn the wearer's face into a celebrity. That would be amusing. You could have a friend wear the hat to a party, and you could impress the other guests with whom you know. See and be seen, sort of thing. Create jealousy with a rival or potential love interest if you show up with a professional Quidditch star, an entertainer...or even Harry Potter."

Harry had been grinning at the calculating look on both Iris and Fred's faces, but it turned into a scowl at mention of his own name. Ginny elbowed him in the ribs.

"A Quidditch player, hmmm? Someone like Oliver Wood?" Fred asked, raising an eyebrow triumphantly.

Iris dropped her eyes for a moment before shrugging. "Oliver's old news. I'd suggest someone more...current," she said, her eye twinkling.

"That could work," Fred mumbled, forgetting about his fight with Iris and rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Of course it would," Iris replied, waving her hand in the air. "A more Slytherin kind of practical joke."

"You're a devious woman, Iris Parkinson," Fred said, smiling widely. "I can work with that. Come on, we need to talk to George. He's the brain of the operation - I'm the gag man."

"I can see that," Iris smiled, smirking. She allowed Fred to take her hand and drag her over to the corner where George and Shannon were seated. George didn't appear pleased with the interruption at all.

There was a moment of stunned silence before Ron turned to look at them, his eyes wide, aghast. "They were flirting! Making eyes at each other out in the open for all to see."

"Oh, well spotted," Ginny said, giggling.

Hermione smiled, patting Ron on the arm. "At least you did notice this time, Ron. You're making progress."

"But...but... she's a Slytherin," Ron said, his eyes darting back and forth between the girls.

"Well, The Sorting Hat did always say that the Houses needed to unite," Hermione said, barely able to control her laughter.

"It didn't mean that physically," Ron said hotly.

"You mean figuratively," Hermione said automatically.

"That, too!" Ron shouted, sending both Hermione and Ginny into gales of laughter. They collapsed on the couch, propping each other up as they giggled.

"Barking mad," Ron said, shaking his head and moving toward the Butterbeer.

Harry let his eyes roam around the room. He noticed Draco and Dudley sitting in a corner, each watching the others in the room with a similar expression that Harry couldn't quite name.

When Draco noticed Harry's attention, he sat up straighter, that familiar, cocky expression returning to his features. "What are you looking at, Scarhead?" he asked.

Harry rolled his eyes, ignoring the jibe.

"Don't call him that," Ginny snapped, moving to stand beside him. Her eyes flashed fiercely, apparently taking more exception to the name than he did.

"Would you rather keep the title for yourself?" Malfoy asked, smirking. "Matching scars. Aren't the two of you pathetically cute?"

Ginny's hand instinctively went to the top of her forehead where the red mark was visible, angering Harry.

"That's enough, Malfoy," he said, seeing red as he took a step closer to the blonde. "This is her party, and you're not to spoil it."

"Keep your knickers on, Potter. I'm not going to ruin your girlfriend's little homecoming," Draco said, taking a sip of his Butterbeer and keeping a wary eye on Harry's wand.

"Hey, Ginny. Glad to see they finally sprung you," Dudley said, peering around Draco to smile at Ginny.

Harry had previously been amused by Dudley's obvious crush on Ginny, doubly so since his slow-witted cousin hadn't yet caught on to Ginny's distinct coldness towards him. But he wasn't in the mood now. He ground his teeth together as he clenched his jaw.

"Dudley," Ginny replied, coolly.

"Are you feeling better?" Dudley asked.

"If it makes you so miserable to be with all of us, Malfoy, why don't you just leave? Permanently." Ron said, elbowing his way past Harry and Ginny to stand in front of Draco with his arms folded across his chest. "I mean, no one is going to fight to keep you here."

Something intangible again flickered in Draco's eyes before a sneer crossed his lips. "I'd like nothing better than to stroll out that door, Weasel, but once again I'm waiting for Potter to quit his stalling and get this over and done."

"So, you're basically waiting for Harry to save your arse - again - and feeling frustrated that he's not doing it according to your timetable?" Ron asked, rolling his eyes.

Malfoy's face colored. "I'm biding my time to see what happens," he replied, scowling.

"No," Ron said, shaking his head, a slow grin spreading across his face. "I think you do believe Harry will win, you just don't want to admit it. It's just like out at Azkaban - when the Dementors came after you. For all your grandstanding, you turned to Harry to get you out of it."

"Dementors?" Dudley asked, his head swinging from side to side. "I've seen those Dementors. They came after me, too - when I was with him. Maybe he brings them out."

He jabbed his finger toward Harry's chest, looking to Draco for approval. Harry watched them both stoically.

Harry was shocked to his core by Draco's response.

"Lay off the Dementors," the blonde said, scowling at Dudley. He didn't meet Harry's eyes, but sneered at Ron. "I don't want to talk about Azkaban."

"Why? Did I hit a nerve?" Ron asked belligerently.

"Ease up, Ron," Harry said, knowing Draco's memories of that expedition couldn't be any better than his own. "Let's not spoil Ginny's party."

Draco's eyes briefly registered surprise before he turned and stalked away, joining Pansy as she walked down the stairs, scowling at the gathered Weasleys.

"I'm going to get something to eat," Ron muttered, moving toward the food table.

"Are you coming?" Ginny asked, tugging on his hand.

"I'll be right there," Harry said, staring at Dudley who suddenly appeared lost without Draco's company. "Give me a moment."

Ginny glanced warily at Dudley before nodding and joining Ron and Hermione at the food table.

"Dudley," Harry said, nodding. He wasn't certain why he was even bothering with his cousin. It was more than likely that Dudley would start a row, but curiosity as to how Dudley was coping with his classes was overwhelming him.

"I hear the professors have been giving you some magical tutoring," Harry said stiffly, nearly stumbling over the word 'magical'. On Privet Drive, it would have been considered foul language.

"Yeah," Dudley replied, watching Harry warily. "They've been showing me some stuff."

"Good," Harry said, feeling at a loss for words. In all his years on Privet Drive, he'd never had a civil conversation with Dudley.

"They've told me some stuff about you," Dudley said, his brow furrowing. "None of them will hear a word against you. It drives Draco barmy, mind," Dudley said, his eyes roaming across the room to where Draco stood with Pansy.

Harry's heart warmed on hearing that his professors had sided with him. That certainly had never happened in primary school.

"Yeah, well, don't believe everything you hear," he replied, shrugging.

"What happened with you and Draco and the Dementors?" Dudley asked.

"A couple of them attacked us - same way they did you and me," Harry replied, shifting uncomfortably. "Dementors are horrible creatures."

"Yeah," Dudley replied, shuddering.

"What did you see?" Harry asked. He'd always wondered about that - what Dudley Dursley would possibly see when the Dementors came too close.

Dudley looked at the floor, shifting his feet. "Your cupboard," he said, barely audible.

"Pardon?" Harry asked, stunned.

"I saw your cupboard," Dudley said, slightly louder. He shifted his gaze away. "Only it was me inside...and my parents were saying stuff. What difference does it make anyway? What do you see?"

Harry stepped back, surprised. Dudley feared his parents turning on him and treating him the way they'd always treated Harry. He suddenly felt a wave of unexpected sympathy for his cousin. "I hear my parents, too," Harry said softly, unwilling to say anymore.

"Does everyone hear their parents?" Dudley asked, confused.

Harry shook his head. "Not if you're lucky," he whispered. "I bet Draco does, though."

"Professor McGonagall told me your parents didn't die in a car crash," Dudley said, staring openly.

"No," Harry replied shortly. Hagrid had said the same thing when he'd first collected Harry from the Dursleys, but he supposed Dudley had been more concerned with the pig's tail Hagrid had given him than to pay attention to what was actually said.

"She said they were murdered by the same psychopath who's trying to kill you now, and that he tried to kill you when he murdered them, too," Dudley said, staring at Harry appraisingly. His eyes narrowed in on Harry's scar, as if just realizing its significance.

Harry didn't know what Dudley was expecting, so he merely nodded.

"You make big enemies," Dudley said, apparently impressed.

Harry couldn't contain himself. He threw back his head and laughed. Maybe it was the massive understatement, or simply because he was actually having a conversation with Dudley about magical things. Perhaps it was Dudley's obvious respect over the fact that someone could actually hate Harry that much, but it suddenly struck Harry as absurdly funny.

Tears formed in the corner of his eyes as Dudley began glancing at him the way he always used to do - as if Harry were some unstable time bomb ready to explode. This struck Harry as even funnier, and he had to grip the table for support. Dudley nodded warily and scurried away.

"Are you all right?" Ginny asked, appearing at his side.

Harry's laughter finally faded into small chuckles. "Never better," he replied, kissing the crown of her head. "Come on. Let's get something to eat."

Harry trudged wearily down the corridor, hoping to stop by the kitchens for a bite to eat before seeking the warm comfort of his bed. He was bone tired and felt as if he could fall asleep on his feet. He kept being jarred back into alertness after his eyes would droop, and his shoulder occasionally would brush against the wall as he walked. The

day's training had been intense. Kingsley Shacklebolt had run drills, and Harry's muscles were complaining of mistreatment.

Now that Ginny had recovered from her injuries, Harry felt ready to confront Voldemort. He knew with the passing of each day that he was stalling, but he just wasn't ready to really say goodbye. He knew Ron, Hermione, and Ginny wanted to be there at the end, but he was hesitant to let them. What if Voldemort delivered a fatal blow before Harry could manage to drag them both through the Veil? Voldemort would then turn and immediately kill Harry's friends. Harry wanted to at least give them a chance to go deeper into hiding if his plan failed.

But what if Voldemort didn't arrive by himself at the Ministry after Harry formed the mind-link? His plan was to let Voldemort see him alone in the Department of Mysteries, but that didn't guarantee he would react as Harry wanted. If he brought other Death Eaters with him, Harry would need the help of his friends to keep the Death Eaters back while he fought their leader. Harry was uncomfortably aware that Voldemort's plans involved capturing Harry rather than killing him. Voldemort wanted to keep him a prisoner, safely tucked away. He shuddered at considering that fate - death would be far kinder.

There was also the simple truth that he couldn't quite admit out loud - that he was afraid to die alone.

Running a hand through his hair, he sighed tiredly. Whether or not he felt ready, it was time. He had to end this. The people trapped within the castle needed to get back to their lives. Everyone needed this shroud of darkness lifted. He was pleased that he and Dudley had actually managed to get on in these final days. Knowing that Dudley feared his parents treating him the way they'd treated Harry, he'd avoided talking to Dudley where Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon could witness it. Outside of their sight, however, they'd actually exchanged a few pleasantries here and there.

Even he and Draco had managed a handful of civil words to one another. Maybe that was the first sign of hell freezing over. Still, it felt good to have all his affairs in order before doing what he had to do. He'd given his letters to Hedwig and instructed her to deliver them after he was gone. Knowing how unreliable Errol had become in his old age, he'd told Hedwig to go stay with Mrs. Weasley after the end. She'd always taken care of him, he was certain she'd take care of Hedwig, too.

"Hey! Knut for your thoughts," Ginny said, walking around the corner and joining him.

Harry started, blindly reaching for his wand.

"You look as if you're in another world. I hope it's a nice one," she said, slipping her hand into his own. Her limp seemed more pronounced this evening, so he immediately slowed his pace.

"Sorry," he said. "Long day. I was just heading down to the kitchen to nick a bite. Care to join me?"

"No! You can't go to the kitchen," Ginny said, shaking her head. "I have a better idea, anyway."

"Why can't I go to the kitchen?" Harry asked, slightly irritated as his stomach growled. "What do you mean a better idea?"

Ginny tugged on his hand until he let her change their direction. "Ron and Hermione are there on a date," she said primly.

"On a date?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. Hermione and I decided that it had been too long since we had a chance to simply spend some quality time with our boyfriends. So, we each picked a location and planned our evenings," she replied. "Of course, I hadn't planned on those Aurors keeping you so long that you nearly missed ours."

Suddenly, Harry didn't feel quite as tired or annoyed. "And Hermione chose the kitchen for their date?" he asked.

"Can you think of a spot Ron would find more romantic?" Ginny asked wryly.

"Point taken," he said, laughing. "So, where are we going for our date?"

"Upstairs," Ginny replied as they climbed.

"I'd worked that part out for myself, Ginny," Harry said.

"Then stop talking and keep walking," she replied firmly.

Feeling eager, he allowed himself to be led all the way up to the seventh floor. Ginny didn't stop until they'd reached the Room of Requirement. After she'd paced back and forth three times, she opened the door to reveal the sprawling white, sandy beach of Harry's dream. It stretched on and on as if they were entering another place entirely.

"Ginny!" he gasped.

"D'you like it?" Ginny asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"I love it," he said, trying to take it all in. "It's perfect."

"Take off your shoes," Ginny said, slipping off her own and leaving them by the entrance.

Harry complied and let the sand sift through his toes. It was soft and warm, and Harry thought it felt glorious. He smiled happily as Ginny took his hand and led him toward a small campfire on the darkening beach. Remembering his dream, he glanced back over his shoulder and was delighted to see two tracks of footprints - his larger than hers - trailing across the sand.

The sun was still setting on this hidden Hogwarts beach, and Harry enjoyed the way the colors splayed across the water. Ginny speared two sausages on some wooden sticks and handed one to Harry.

He sat down and began grilling his dinner on the open fire. He and Ginny dined on sausages, toasted marshmallows and an abundance of chilled Butterbeer, laughing at each other whenever they managed to catch their food on fire. After they'd eaten their fill, they rolled their jeans up to their knees and waded in the surf, splashing each other as they walked along.

It didn't take long before Ginny began to get short of breath. Concerned, Harry slowed down and waited for her breathing to regulate.

"I suppose there won't be any professional Quidditch in my future," Ginny said, twisting her lips. "With this limp and the heavy breathing, I doubt I'll be high on any scouting lists."

"It won't be forever," Harry said, thunderstruck. "Your breathing has been much better recently. It's just because we were running."

Ginny giggled. "I'm only teasing, Harry. It's not like I ever considered professional Quidditch, anyway. I just like to play. You're the natural - maybe you ought to consider it."

Harry scrunched up his nose. "And have to suffer through all those interviews all the time? No, thanks."

Ginny snorted. "I think you'll always have that, anyway, Harry. Might as well do something you enjoy for it."

Harry smiled, realizing he'd been talking as if Ginny's plans for a future might actually be possible. He loved that she could make him feel that way.

"What do you want to do after the war - after you finish school?" Harry asked curiously.

"You mean besides making babies with you?" she asked, her eyes sparkling.

Harry felt his own face color as if he'd spent the entire day in the blazing sun. "Er..."

Ginny laughed out loud, shoving him toward the water again. "I don't know. Definitely not something that involves sitting behind a desk," she replied.

"How about becoming an Auror? Or maybe a Curse-Breaker, like Bill?" Harry asked.

"Curse-Breaking sounds fun, but it's dirty work with a lot of Goblin rules. I don't think I'd like that. An Auror might work, or a medi-wizard for the Accidental Magical Reversal Squad," she said thoughtfully.

"What do they do?" Harry asked, furrowing his brow.

"Mostly clean up Apparation accidents, but basically rescue witches and wizards who get themselves into trouble and undo whatever havoc they managed to cause," she said.

"I could see you doing something like that," Harry said.

"I could rescue them, and Hermione could patch them up - we'd be quite a team," Ginny said, laughing.

"You think Hermione wants to be a Healer?" Harry asked.

"I think she'd be a good one, and she's certainly developed an interest since she got hurt," Ginny replied. "And you and Ron would be the Aurors."

"Yeah," Harry said softly, feeling doubtful again that he'd be part of their dream.

After the sun had set and the moon shone brightly across the water, they returned to their campfire and sat on a blanket, listening to the crashing waves.

"Enjoying our date, Mr. Potter?" Ginny asked, snuggling closer against Harry's side and resting her head on his shoulder.

"Best one yet," Harry replied, pulling her closer.

"Oh, I don't know about that. As I recall, my birthday was quite charming. You even danced with me," she said, chuckling.

"That's why this one is the best one yet," Harry replied, pressing his fingers into her side and tickling her until she begged him to stop.

"I love you, Ginny," he said happily, rolling over onto his back and spreading his arms out wide.

Looking slightly disgruntled over losing their tickling match, Ginny gazed at him for a moment before her features softened. She curled back against him, nuzzling the side of his face. "Love you, too, Harry," she whispered.

No longer tired, Harry was keenly aware of each spot where her body was touching his. His skin tingled as his blood began pumping in his veins. He rolled to his side, lightly tracing his fingers along her jaw.

Ginny gasped slightly, and tilted her face toward his. He leaned over and captured her lips with his own, running his tongue slowly over her bottom lip, seeking permission. Her mouth opened beneath his, welcoming him to deepen the kiss. She ran her fingers through his hair, drawing his head closer.

Her fingers felt like feathers and they lightly trailed down his face and over his shoulders. Their passion built quickly, and Harry knew he was close to losing his tight control. His hormonal teenage side was tempted to throw caution to the wind and give in to his body's demands, but the one small piece of sanity that managed to keep even his raging

hormones in check was the thought that Voldemort wouldn't get to take control of this moment, too.

He'd influenced and tarnished every other part of Harry's life. When Harry finally took that final step with Ginny, he was determined that it would be on their terms and no one else's - despite the fact his body was ardently protesting the restraint. Hell, the anticipation alone was enough to make him determined to return to her, somehow... some way.

The moon shone brightly above, the gentle breeze ruffled their hair and sand stuck to their skin and wet clothing, but neither of them noticed any of it. Their complete focus was on each other as they kissed in the surf until they had to return to their dormitories.

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Over the rest of that week, Harry and Ginny returned to their beach several times. They had even brought Ron and Hermione along a few times so that they could enjoy the holiday-feel. Harry had decided he would set his plans in motion the following weekend, but he was going to have one fun-filled week with his friends beforehand. If nothing else, he hoped it would leave them with good memories of him after he was gone.

After dinner one evening, Ginny insisted she had to get caught up on some of the schoolwork she'd let slide while they'd been frolicking on the beach. Ron and Hermione had disappeared together, so Harry decided to walk down to Hagrid's hut and pay a visit to his old friend. Hagrid had never quite been the same after Professor Dumbledore's death, and Harry hoped that once the war was over, he'd regain some of his former exuberance.

As he was walking along the path admiring all the new spring growth, he noticed a brief flash of silver near the edge of the forest. His curiosity piqued, he drew his wand and cautiously turned toward the forest. He'd only just entered the brush when he saw the flash again, and he realized who it was.

"What are you doing out here, Pansy?" he called, stopping in his tracks and gripping his wand. He wasn't about to allow the Slytherin girl to lead him into the forest.

Pansy whipped around quickly, the hood of her silver cloak falling back off her head. Harry was startled to realize she was crying. She had thick black smudges beneath her eyes, and she didn't bother to wipe them when she saw Harry. Crying girls had always made him uncomfortable, and he suddenly felt very wrong-footed.

"Pansy," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Er... Are you all right?"

"No," she said, sniffing. "Have you seen Draco?"

"Draco?" Harry asked, perplexed. Thinking back, he realized that the blonde hadn't been in the Great Hall that evening. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen Dudley, either.

"He was supposed to meet me for supper, and he wasn't there," Pansy said, turning around to stare at the trees. She began walking toward them again, but Harry remained rooted to where he stood.

"Dudley wasn't there, either. Maybe they just got involved in a card game or something," Harry said. "Why do you think he'd be in the forest?"

Pansy froze, keeping her back turned from him. "You might be right," she said hastily. "He's been spending a lot of time with that Mudblood buffoon lately."

Harry knew that Pansy didn't share Draco's affinity for Dudley. She frequently appeared put-out whenever she found the two blondes together. Of course, she also appeared to detest her sister's new attachment to Fred. Pansy hadn't given the impression she cared for any of them very much.

As if realizing she'd just insulted Harry's cousin, she turned around, glancing at him warily.

"Er... I mean," she said, faltering.

Harry scowled, feeling certain she was trying to hide something. "You didn't answer my question. Why do you think he'd be in the forest if he didn't meet you for supper?"

Pansy bit her lip, apparently struggling with something. "Why should I tell you?" she demanded, as if finally deciding that being obstinate was her best bet. Her eyes kept drifting toward the trees, as if she was debating making a run for it.

"Because I'm the only one here who might possibly help you," Harry replied, knowing that none of the Weasleys had warmed up to Draco.

Pansy's face faltered, and she began wringing her hands. Harry thought she was carrying the melodrama a bit far but kept that to himself.

"Draco's been feeling a bit desperate lately," she wailed, burying her face in her hands and sniffing. "I'm afraid he's done something reckless."

"What do you mean 'reckless'?" Harry asked, his stomach lurching.

Pansy swiped her nose with the back of her hand. "He's been strange since that stupid Welcome Back party for the Weaslette. He keeps talking about his father and his choices. I have to find him," she moaned.

"What about his choices?" Harry asked.

"For Merlin's sake, will you quit with the questions and help me look for him? He can't be far," Pansy said. "Come on. I haven't looked over here yet," she said, pointing deeper into the forest.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Pansy, until you tell me exactly what's going on," Harry said, crossing his arms across his chest.

Pansy harrumphed indignantly. "Oh, some hero you are! You'd better hope nothing has happened to him since it's your fault if he's in trouble," she said.

"How do you figure it's my fault this time?" Harry asked, exasperated.

"You're the one who's supposed to end this, right? Draco is trapped until you get around to doing it, and he's too proud to sit back and do nothing for long," Pansy said, scowling.

"Not my fault if he's an idiot," Harry muttered, glancing at the darkening sky. If Malfoy really had wandered into the forest, it would be dark soon. Harry didn't fancy wandering through the forest alone at night, never mind with Malfoy or whomever he might be meeting hidden there.

"He's not an idiot," Pansy said, seething. "He's got more brains in his pinky finger than you can ever hope to have."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Pansy, it's getting dark. If he really is out here, we're going to need some help. Let's go back inside and see if he's there before panicking."

"It might be too late by then," she said shrilly.

"I know where there's something back in the tower that will tell us if he's in the castle or not. It's better than searching blind," Harry said, turning around. He only hoped that she'd follow him. He really didn't want to leave her out here alone.

"Don't move, Potter," she said, snarling.

Something in the tone of her voice made him stop and glance back over his shoulder. She'd drawn her wand and had it pointed at his back. He knew she was rubbish at dueling and hadn't even managed to score high enough on her O.W.L.s to participate in Defense the previous year. Still, he didn't want to take any chances. Turning around slowly, he watched her closely as she moved forward.

"Don't try anything, Potter. I'm not afraid to use this," she said, waving her wand in the air dramatically.

Harry kept his eyes on the moving wand, struggling not to snicker at her overconfidence.

"Everyone thinks I can't hold my own in a duel," Pansy said, tossing her hair. "But I got you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you got me all right, Pansy," Harry said, slowly sliding his feet forward. "What are you planning?"

"You're going to come with me," she said, aiming her wand at him again.

Harry noticed it was shaking slightly in her gloved hands. He vaguely wondered why she was dressed so warmly. The night air really wasn't all that chilly. "Where are we going?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral.

Pansy's gaze moved to the trees, seeking a place to enter. In that moment of distraction, Harry drew his own wand in a flash.

"Expelliarmus," he shouted. Pansy's wand flew through the air in a graceful arc, landing perfectly in his outstretched hand.

Shocked, the last thing Harry saw was Pansy's smirking, triumphant face before he felt the familiar jerk behind his navel. His stomach dropped with dread as the portkey sped him away.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mortal Peril

Ginny suddenly slammed her book shut, shuddering. Glancing out the common room window at the darkening sky, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms, feeling chilled. She'd been intent on her revising when a feeling of unease had overcome her. Something was wrong.

Shaking her head and chiding herself for her paranoia, she took a deep breath and attempted to calm her racing heart. Opening her book again, she took a deep breath and tried to re-read the paragraph on Human Transfiguration that had been giving her trouble all evening. Her nerves were frayed from all her revising - not to mention everything else going on - and she was certain she was overreacting.

In addition to the huge amount of makeup work she'd had to do after her lengthy illness, she was terrified for Harry and his coming fight. Grasping her necklace and rubbing the stone in her fingers, Ginny forced her eyes back to the book. After reading the same paragraph three times yet retaining none of it, she conceded it was useless. Nightmarish images of Harry's imminent battle preyed upon her mind.

They all knew it was approaching like a thick mass of menacing storm clouds shrouding the horizon. The mood felt much as it did before a storm - everything was still and oppressed, and all living things had hunkered down for cover. Ginny knew it was on Harry's mind more than he'd admit, and she could see the wheels turning behind his eyes as he tried to discern the best way to keep the rest of them safe.

Stupid, noble, wonderful prat.

She'd never realized it was possible to love another person the way she loved him. She only wished that he'd put half as much effort into saving himself as he did trying to save everyone else. Tracing her fingers along her lips, she remembered the passionate kisses they had shared the previous evening...nearly every evening this week, as a matter of fact.

Ginny frowned and sat up straight, her heart hammering in her chest. Her mind raced as she pieced together the events of the past few days. Why hadn't she thought of it before? It was so like him to spend all this extra time - all these stolen moments - with her just before he ditched her to go do what he felt he had to do.

If he'd left her behind to go and battle Voldemort alone...Tom wouldn't get the chance to do anything to him, because she was going to kill him first. He'd promised not to do anything rash. He'd promised!

Pushing back her chair, she left her books scattered across the table as she sprinted to the window. After she'd begged off from going back to their beach this evening, Harry said he was going to say hello to Hagrid. Actually, at first he got that disappointed little boy expression on his face that nearly changed her mind. Merlin help her if he ever realized the full extent of his charm. In the end, however, she'd stood firm and told him she had to revise.

Why her mum was insisting that Ginny prepare for the end-of-term exams was beyond her. Usually the Ministry administered the exams to all home-schooled students, but it wasn't as if the Ministry was exactly functioning normally these days.

Try telling that to her mum, however. Truly, Ginny had ulterior motives for wanting to complete her sixth year studies. If she successfully finished them, she'd be in the same position as the trio and perhaps they could all return for their final year together - after Voldemort was finished. Ginny clung to that dream like a talisman. The alternative was too heart-wrenching to consider.

Shaking her head to dispel the dark thoughts threatening to overwhelm her, she peered out the window. She could see a dim light burning in Hagrid's hut. Perhaps Harry was still there chatting with his friend...or perhaps he was secretly saying goodbye. Abandoning all hope of continuing with her revising, Ginny decided to find Ron and Hermione and drag them both to see Hagrid. Perhaps they could all try and convince Harry that they needed to confront Voldemort together - that he couldn't do this alone.

Leaving the empty common room, she hurried down the main stairs, her feet barely touching the steps. Stopping on the third floor, she maneuvered through the empty corridors until she'd reached a broom cupboard hidden behind an armored knight.

Panting slightly, she wrapped her arm around her stomach, trying to catch her breath. She had no time for her body's weaknesses. Jerking the door open and shutting her eyes tightly, she stuck her head inside and hissed, "Come on out of there, you two. I need your help."

"Ginny!" Ron bellowed, his voice echoing in the empty corridor.

Ginny pulled her head out of the cupboard, shutting the door and crossing her arms around her chest.

"I kept my eyes shut, and I really don't care if you have your knickers on or not right now," she said crossly. "We need to talk to Harry."

If worry for Harry weren't clawing at her insides, Ginny might have found the situation funny. She ignored her momentary stab of guilt over interrupting them. Ron certainly wouldn't have hesitated to drag her and Harry out of that cupboard if they had been the ones engaged inside. He probably would have tried to knock Harry's head off for less.

The cupboard knocked and banged for several moments before the door swung open and Ron climbed out, his shirt un-tucked and ears blazing red. Hermione followed him, hiding behind her boyfriend while she clutched her robes tightly. She refused to meet Ginny's eyes.

"What are you on about, Ginny?" Ron demanded, towering over her and advancing menacingly.

Un-intimidated, Ginny poked him in the chest, hard. "Don't get shirty with me. This is important."

"And it couldn't wait?" Ron asked, scowling.

"I think Harry is planning on confronting Voldemort alone," Ginny said, watching Ron deflate before her eyes.

"What?" he asked blankly.

"What did he say, Ginny?" Hermione asked, finally moving out from behind Ron, concern replacing her embarrassment.

Ginny gestured impatiently for them to follow her, explaining as they walked. "It's more the way he's been acting all week. It suddenly occurred to me that he's been trying to say goodbye," she said, feeling a painful lump form in her throat. She wasn't going to go act like a girl and cry. She wasn't! She had to pull it together.

"He's going to ruin everything if he slips off without us," Hermione said, hurrying her pace. Ron's longer legs had him several steps in front of the girls.

"Well, since he has no idea what we're planning, he's kind of a wild card, isn't he?" Ron asked. "Since when has Harry ever done what he's supposed to do?"

"He's gone to Hagrid's - we can still catch him there," Ginny said, grabbing Hermione's elbow and stopping her progress.

Hermione impatiently turned toward Ginny with questioning eyes.

"Your blouse is on inside out," Ginny whispered with a smirk before hurrying to catch up to Ron. She heard Hermione yelp before a quick rush of air let her know Hermione had cast a spell to set her clothing to rights.

They slipped outside and hurried down the worn path to Hagrid's hut. Ron banged on the door, which was opened surprisingly quickly by a disgruntled-looking Hagrid.

"Oh. It's you," he said, turning his back and retreating inside.

Ron, Ginny and Hermione followed him. He sat at his massively large wooden table in front of a bowl of squirmy black things that he was in the process of shredding. The smell inside the hut was intolerable and nearly forced the three teens back outside.

"Bloody hell, Hagrid!" Ron shouted, scrunching up his face. "What is that?"

"Eh? Ah, it's nothin'. Jus' sommat I'm makin' for the vegetable garden. Helps the plants ter grow nice an' big," Hagrid said. "What can I do for yeh?"

"Is Harry here?" Ginny asked, glancing around the small hut at the sparse furnishings. It appeared empty.

"Nah. I saw 'im talkin' ter Pansy by the forest earlier. Thought he might stop by fer a visit, but he didn't," Hagrid said sadly. Ginny noticed two unused teacups by the sink, along with an uneaten plate of Hagrid's rock cakes.

"Pansy?" Ron asked. "What was he doing with Pansy?"

"Dunno. Like I said, he never came ter call," Hagrid replied, staring at all of them with confusion.

"Where could he be?" Ginny asked, alarmed. Her heart had started that painful pounding again, and her palms began to sweat. She just knew something was wrong. She held tightly to the aquamarine stone on her necklace. It felt warm and comforting.

"What does Pansy have to do with Harry going after Voldemort?" Ron asked.

"What?" Hagrid asked, alarmed. "He wouldn't."

"I don't think the two are necessarily connected, Ron," Hermione said, biting her lip. "Let's go back up to the castle and get the Map. That will tell us where both Harry and Pansy are."

"Was Malfoy with them?" Ron asked, his face reddening. "If he's done something to Harry—"

"Ron! Let's not jump to conclusions. Come on," Hermione said, tugging on his arm.

"I'm goin' with yeh. If summat's happened ter Harry, I want ter help," Hagrid said, following them out the door.

As they raced back to the castle, they found Aberforth Dumbledore pacing in the entrance hall.

"There you are," he said crossly. "I've been looking for you."

He was staring at Hermione as if she'd been purposely hiding from him.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Dumbledore?" she asked politely.

"Here," Aberforth said, handing Hermione the Romanian book that Harry had been trying to transcribe.

"Where did you get that?" Ginny asked suspiciously.

"Harry gave it to him when you were ill. I'd forgotten you had it," Hermione said, staring at Aberforth.

"I showed it to Albus's portrait. He can read Romanian, you know," Aberforth said. "There's one section that really interested him. He wants to see you."

"Of course!" Hermione said, gasping. "Why didn't I think of it? Dumbledore can speak loads of languages - even Mermish."

"Hermione - the Map," Ron said, impatiently. He was already on the bottom stair.

"You and Ginny go get the Map. I'll go see what Professor Dumbledore's portrait has to say," Hermione said breathlessly. "I'll meet you outside Professor McGonagall's office."

"What about me?" Hagrid asked. "What can I do?"

"Can you check the forest where you saw Harry and Pansy, Hagrid? See if there's any sign of a struggle," Hermione said.

Hearing Hermione say it out loud - knowing there was a chance that Harry was in real trouble - caused Ginny to race up the stairs past Ron. She'd get the Map and find his name somewhere. There had to be a reasonable explanation for why he never went to see Hagrid, and what he was doing with Pansy in the forest. There had to be.

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When the Portkey released him, Harry crumpled with a thump onto a cold stone floor. Sparing no time to orient himself, he scrambled to his feet, dropping Pansy's wand and brandishing his own. Hoping to reverse the Portkey, he quickly reached for Pansy's wand once again, but nothing happened. He had a moment to notice that he was in a small, stone cavern with a dank, moldy odor, causing him to suspect that he was underground.

Then all hell broke loose.

Half a dozen Death Eaters surrounded him, all firing spells instantaneously. Harry quickly created a shield to block the first barrage, and three of the Death Eaters fell to his Stunners before more of them entered the room. His shield began to weaken under the heavy fire, and several of the curses broke through. He felt a Slicing Hex slash deeply into his upper arm, causing his fingers to tingle. Before he had a chance to raise another shield, his legs were slammed with a Bludgeoning Curse, dropping him the ground.

Gritting his teeth, he managed to hang onto his wand, but one of the Death Eaters cast a Petrificus Spell, immobilizing him. He lay on the floor, battered and bruised, staring at the menacing faces surrounding him. Some of them were unmasked, their hard faces showing a mixture of anticipation and excitement at having captured him. Others simply glared, leering as if they were finally given the opportunity to settle an old grudge.

Harry swallowed heavily. He didn't see a way out of this one. He had to control his fear and keep his head. Lying on the floor, useless and discarded, was what was left of Pansy's wand. It had transformed into one of the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes rubber chickens.

Damn! Pansy had thoroughly deceived him.

"How nice of you to join us, Potter," a sly, oily voice murmured from the corner of the room.

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood on end. He could only move his eyes, but he could clearly see Snape standing above a cauldron, slowly stirring its contents with extreme care.

"We've been expecting you," he said silkily.

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. Expecting him? But he'd only come across Pansy by chance...hadn't he? Harry's mind worked furiously, trying to piece together the events of the evening.

Squinting his eyes against the dimness of the room, he looked around the chamber again. Beneath a perch near the open doorway lay Errol, the Weasley family owl. Harry didn't know if he was dead since Errol usually fell unconscious after a long journey.

"It's the most unreliable creature I've ever had the displeasure to meet," Snape said, noticing Harry's observance of the owl. "It passes out after each simple delivery. What more can be expected from those lowly Weasleys of whom you appear so fond?"

Harry wanted to spit at Snape, but Petrified as he was, he could only glare at his former professor. His eyes flashed with suppressed fury as he desperately tried to release the spell. So, Errol's frequent absences weren't merely the result of old age. Pansy must have been using him to communicate since the time they were all back at Grimmauld Place.

Snape glided across the room, leaned over, and plucked Harry's wand from his slackened hand. He tucked it into the pocket of his robes, patting it condescendingly.

"You won't have need of that," he said. He aimed his own wand, causing Harry to flinch inwardly. "Finite Incantatem."

Harry felt the spell being removed, and he sat up quickly, crab-walking away from Snape toward the wall. He only stopped when his back hit the stone.

"There's nowhere for you to go, Potter," Snape said, returning to his cauldron, unconcerned. "Alecto, inform our lord that his guest has arrived."

The blonde sneered menacingly at Harry before leaving the room. Another Death Eater grabbed Harry by the collar, roughly dragging him to his feet. When Harry tried to pull away, the man slammed his meaty fist into the side of his face, knocking Harry's head against the wall and causing him to see stars.

"You'll find your fame and unearned glory mean nothing here. I'd suggest you keep your mouth shut and do as you're told. There is nothing these fine witches and wizards would like more than to give you a lesson in manners," Snape said, caressing his measuring stick as he stirred his potion.

Harry tried to blink the black spots from his eyes, refusing to be goaded by Snape. He could feel blood trickling down his chin from a cut on his lip, and he tried to concentrate on that to block out the pounding in his skull. His left hand was still tingling, and he was having trouble making a fist. His legs felt bruised, but they were holding his weight. He wasn't in the best shape to face Voldemort, but it could be worse. At least, that's what he tried to tell himself.

"What's this? Nothing to say, Potter? No glib comment or sarcastic words to bolster your false bravado?" Snape asked, sneering.

Harry smiled humorlessly. "I'm just saving my lines for the big show. No need to waste them on the warm-up act."

Snape flushed, and Harry was backhanded again by one of the Death Eaters, knocking his glasses askew.

"You were warned to watch your tongue," Snape said silkily. "Fernando, show him how insolence is treated here."

A masked Death Eater turned toward Harry, raised his wand, and hissed, "Crucio."

Harry was struck square in the chest, intense pain spreading from impact out to all his nerve endings. He dropped to the ground, writhing and trying to contain his scream. He bit down on his already torn lip, the salty taste of blood filling his mouth. The pain built, overloading his senses and turning all his bones to liquid fire. The scream that was finally ripped from him felt as if it were tearing out his throat.

When the curse was eventually lifted - after what felt like an eternity to Harry - he lay on the ground, panting and feeling blood trickle from the corners of his mouth. Spitting it out, he raised himself up on shaky arms, staring defiantly at Snape and the Death Eater who had just cursed him so painfully. The man grabbed his arms, pinning them behind his back. The stone he wore tucked inside the rope bracelet that Ginny had given him for Christmas dug painfully into the underside of his wrist.

"I can see that lesson did little to control your arrogance," Snape said, sneering. His eyebrows raised thoughtfully as his head turned imperceptibly toward the door. "Perhaps the Dark Lord will prove a better teacher. He'll at least enjoy breaking your spirit."

Before Harry had the chance to reply, the other Death Eaters got down on their knees, bowing their heads. The temperature in the room plummeted as Voldemort swept into the room, his red eyes instantly zeroing in on Harry. His misshapen white head gleamed, and his eyes glowed hungrily. He slithered rather than walked into the room, and Harry's scar exploded with pain.

His hands were still held tightly behind his back, so he was unable to cradle his head. Instead, he tossed it from side to side as he attempted to shake off the pain. Harry did his best not to let his terror show, but his heart was pounding so fiercely that he thought the others were certain to hear it.

"Welcome, Harry. How nice of you to join us," Voldemort said, his eyes raking over Harry's wounds dispassionately. He slowly raised a finger to adjust Harry's glasses back onto his face. Harry jerked away from his touch.

"Yeah, it's been a real pleasure," he spat. "If you don't mind, I think I'll be going now."

Voldemort smiled lazily. "I think not," he said, fixing him with a stare that caused Harry's blood to chill. "Is the potion ready, Severus?"

"Almost, my Lord," Snape answered, bowing his head.

"Excellent," Voldemort hissed, and then he actually smiled. His skin was too tight to smile properly, so the expression caused his teeth to protrude from his mouth. The smile was so hideous and out of place on Voldemort's snakelike face that Harry thought if evil could be captured, his face was exactly what it would look like.

Harry glanced uneasily at Snape, wondering for the first time exactly what it was that the Potions master was brewing.

"You've been destroying some of my precious possessions," Voldemort said, raising a long, sinewy finger toward the gaping cut on Harry's arm. His fingernails were long and perfectly trimmed, yet they looked rotted and decayed.

"I can't allow that to go unpunished," he said, his voice soft and menacing.

Harry swallowed, warily watching the finger as it moved closer and closer to the open wound. He let out a hiss of pain, groaning slightly when it first made contact, brushing lightly against the edge of the cut.

"I thought they were the possessions of the Founding Fathers' of Hogwarts," Harry said through gritted teeth.

Voldemort paused briefly before jabbing his finger deep into the cut, causing Harry's blood to coat his hand. Harry screamed, twisting his head and trying unsuccessfully to pull away. Voldemort kept up the pressure until Harry began to see black spots on the edge of his vision.

"You've been nothing but a thorn in my side since your birth," Voldemort hissed in Harry's ear, his breath warm and much too close. "You're like salt in an open wound. Do you know how that feels, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, gasping and unable to fully concentrate on Voldemort's words. His stomach began to roil, and he thought he might be sick.

At last removing his finger from Harry's cut, Voldemort flicked his wand, and Harry felt a stinging sensation inside the wound. Soon his entire arm burned with painful intensity. Tears sprung to Harry's eyes as he gasped, fighting the pain.

"It's a raw burning, is it not? It distracts you and leaves you unable to focus on anything else...anything more important, perhaps. That is what your existence has become to me," Voldemort said, still whispering in Harry's ear.

Harry bit down on the inside of his cheeks, feeling sweat drip into his eyes. His back was drenched, and his legs began to shake. He had to find a way to get his wand and end this now.

"You'll have no need of your wand," Voldemort said, running his finger along his chin, smearing Harry's blood on his own face. "I think it's time I put a stop to your interference...permanently."

"What are you waiting on then? Go on and do it, if you can," Harry said, snarling. "You haven't had much luck yet."

Voldemort's flat nostrils flared, his eyes glowing. Harry felt reckless. If he could enrage Voldemort enough for him to lose control and simply kill Harry now, at least he'd be mortal. Perhaps someone else would then be able to kill him. He'd run out of other options.

"There you are, Potter," a familiar nasal voice rang from the doorway, distracting them all. "I bet you're sorry you underestimated me, now."

"What are you doing here, Miss Parkinson?" Snape asked, taking a step toward the door and placing himself between Pansy and Voldemort.

With a casual flick of his wand, Voldemort pulled Harry from the Death Eater's grip and bodily slammed him against the wall where he left him, hovering above the ground, spread-eagled, as if caught in a giant spider's web. Harry could move his head, but nothing else.

"Miss Parkinson, thank you for joining us," Voldemort said smoothly, his attention shifting to the newcomer.

Pansy visibly cringed, shrinking away from the malformed creature now stalking toward her. Her dark eyes were wide, panicked, and Harry was certain she'd never actually seen Voldemort before now.

"I...I d-did what you asked. I g-got Potter here, just like we planned," Pansy said, desperately looking at Snape. "I did everything you told me to do."

"You used the fake wand as a Portkey. I saw it here when Potter arrived," Snape said, casually flicking his hand toward the discarded wand. "You did well, Miss Parkinson, but why did you follow him here? That wasn't part of the plan."

"After the Portkey took Potter, I was still in the forest, and I had to walk all the way to the gate," Pansy said, pouting. "I wanted to see what happened to Potter."

Voldemort threw back his head and laughed. "This one has the heart of a true pureblood," he said, circling her appraisingly as he paced.

Harry's heart pounded as he desperately sought a way to release the spell holding him. His back scraped against the stone as he fought to get free.

"We did what you asked of us, so now Draco is free, right? You'll grant him your pardon?" Pansy asked, visibly trembling.

Harry froze, his eyes widening into saucers. Draco? Draco was in on this? Had he really decided his chances were better with Voldemort after all? Bile rose in Harry's throat over his own stupidity. He'd actually believed the Slytherin git.

"Young Mr. Malfoy didn't complete the task I'd set for him and him alone. He'll have to be punished for his failure," Voldemort said, tilting his head to the side. "Certainly you can understand that he cannot be allowed to get away with insubordination. It would set a bad precedent," Voldemort said, watching Pansy closely.

"I understand that he'll need to be punished, and he'll gladly accept that fate," Pansy said, obviously feeling more confident. "I simply want the promise that you'll allow him to live in order to make up for his mistake."

"Indeed? And does Mr. Malfoy agree to his punishment as cavalierly as you seem to do?" Voldemort asked, amused. The tension in the room was thick - none of the Death Eaters had moved or barely even breathed.

Harry gritted his teeth. He certainly felt no kindness or empathy for Pansy - it was her fault he was in this mess in the first place - but he hated seeing anyone being toyed with this way. He knew Voldemort had no intention of keeping his end of the bargain, why couldn't Pansy see that?

"Draco will do anything to get back in your good graces, my Lord," Pansy said, bowing low to the ground.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Malfoy's deeds are far too great to allow his life to be spared," Voldemort said easily, as if growing bored with the conversation.

It took a moment for his words to register with Pansy. When they finally did, her face dropped. "What? B-but...that's not what we agreed," she wailed, desperately looking at Snape.

"I'm afraid I've had a change of heart on the matter," Voldemort said in a falsely conciliatory tone.

"Miss Parkinson, remember your station," Snape said, grabbing Pansy by the shoulders and trying to lead her from the cavern.

"You promised!" Pansy moaned, turning on Snape. "I did everything I was supposed to do so Draco would be free. You promised!"

"Get control of yourself," Snape hissed.

"Severus, leave her alone," Voldemort commanded. "Your compassion for the young ones will yet be your undoing."

Snape bowed stiffly and reluctantly moved a few steps away from Pansy.

"I do apologize that we cannot grant your first request, Miss Parkinson. You have, however, performed admirably, and I would like to offer you a place amongst my ranks," Voldemort said, inclining his head slightly, his delight in tormenting the girl obvious.

"I don't want to live without Draco," Pansy said, burying her face in her hands and sobbing. "I can't. It's all been for him."

"So be it," Voldemort said coldly, casually flicking his wand. "Avada Kedavra."

"No," Harry gasped, watching the sickly green light as it whooshed towards Pansy.

Quickly lifting her face, her eyes widened in horror as she watched the curse speed toward her with a terrible rushing sound, apparently realizing she was about to die for her misplaced trust. The curse struck her in the stomach, and she crumpled to the ground.

Snape's head fell to his chest, his shoulders drooping.

"You are no longer their teacher, Severus," Voldemort hissed. "Stop trying to spare them life lessons. You spent too long in the company of that dithering old fool, Dumbledore. He's corrupted you - made you soft."

"Yes, my Lord," Snape replied, returning to his potion.

Harry could barely contain his snort of disgust. There was nothing soft about Snape and even insinuating that Dumbledore had made an impression on the greasy git was insulting to the Headmaster's memory.

"Now that Harry is about to become my permanent guest, I'm ready to move on to the next phase in my rise to ultimate power," Voldemort said.

Harry raised his head, eyeing Voldemort warily.

"I imagine you are curious about my plans for your stay, Harry," he said, grinning evilly.

"Not particularly," Harry said through clenched teeth. "I really don't plan on staying long."

Voldemort tossed his head back and laughed mirthlessly. "Always the comedian. Unfortunately, your fate has no use for your delightful sense of humor."

"My fate?" Harry asked, certain he didn't want to know the answer.

With a wave of his wand, Voldemort summoned a long wooden packing crate - a crate large enough to hold the body of a not-quite-fully-grown man.

Oh, no! No, no, no!

"Is the potion ready, Severus?" Voldemort asked.

"Almost, my Lord," Snape answered, his eyes glinting when he caught Harry's panicked expression.

"Why don't you have the honor of explaining the future to young Harry," Voldemort said, clearly pleased with the proceedings.

"If you'd paid any attention at all during your time in my class, you would have already realized which potion I'm brewing," Snape said, using that same silky voice that he'd always used in class. "Since I'm well aware of your dismal potion-making abilities, allow me to explain it to you. The Draught of Living Death is a NEWT-level potion, and its antidote needs to be administered immediately upon completion of brewing. That means it would have to be brewed right here in this room in order to awaken you before attempting an escape. A highly unlikely probability, is it not, Potter?"

The Draught of Living Death! Of course. Voldemort couldn't kill him outright or he'd destroy his own Horcrux. This potion would essentially keep Harry alive but still incapacitated and out of the way. It was a win-win situation.

Voldemort smiled at Harry's horrified dismay. Using his wand, he released Harry from the wall and levitated him across the room to the crate. Harry's struggles were for naught; he couldn't break the spell. The crate's lid lifted like a coffin, and Harry was roughly dropped inside. His breathing became labored as he tried to control his panic. This couldn't be happening.

"While Severus continues to brew the potion, listen closely to my orders, Harry. Listen to my plans to destroy the last of your strongholds - the last of your protectors," Voldemort said, his voice thick with anticipation.

Harry shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to rise.

Voldemort turned to face the gathered Death Eaters. "Bellatrix," he hissed.

"Yes, Master," the hateful voice replied.

"You and Fenrir take our forces and claim Hogwarts as ours. Now that I have the Potter boy, it's time for Albus Dumbledore's last stronghold of power to fall, thus completely marking his failure and my rise to glory. I believe the Aurors who abandoned their posts at the Ministry

are there. Kill them all. Kill the Order members who are there, as well, but bring Mr. Malfoy to me. Do what you will with his mother and the remaining Parkinson women."

"Yes, my Lord," Bellatrix replied, cackling with glee.

Harry struggled vainly against the invisible bonds holding him.

"I'll join you as soon as I see Mr. Potter's eyes close for the final time," Voldemort said, smiling.

Harry watched helplessly as Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters filed out of the room. Once it was empty, Snape turned toward Voldemort.

"It is ready, my Lord."

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Ron raced into his dormitory and dropped to the floor by Harry's bed. He grabbed the rucksack from underneath and quickly began rummaging through Harry's belongings. Finding the familiar piece of worn parchment, he bolted back down the stairs.

Ginny was waiting for him in the common room, her face taut with concern. When he found Harry, Ron was going to give him hell for worrying his sister so badly. Ginny wasn't prone to overreacting - he was more likely to do that - although he'd never admit that to her. Seeing her so obviously distraught caused the hairs on the back of Ron's neck to stand on end. If Ginny felt Harry was in trouble, he more than likely was.

Ron hated not knowing what was happening - he never could stand feeling out of control. How was he supposed to watch out for his friends if the plan kept changing? He'd promised himself that he would see Harry through this to the end, and he'd be extremely disappointed in his friend if he'd cut Ron out at the last minute. It would be so like Harry, however. He'd want to slip away quietly so he could avoid saying goodbye.

The common room was full and loud. Charlie had returned from Romania, and he was regaling Fleur, Shannon and Iris with tales of his dragon exploits - embellishing as only Charlie could. The girls appeared enraptured with his story, while Bill and the twins stood back with their arms folded across their chests. Ron could tell by the disgruntled expressions on Fred and George's faces that Charlie was due for a severe pranking.

His parents sat by the fire. His mum had her knitting needles, but he could see that they were both quietly listening and chuckling over Charlie's tales.

"Oi! Ron! Where's the fire?" Charlie called across the common room as Ron hurried toward Ginny. "Aren't you going to come and say hello? You'll love this one."

"He'll listen to your tall dragon tales later, Charlie," Ginny answered, dragging Ron by the arm. "I've got a story of my own I need to share with him right now."

She didn't give Charlie or any of her brothers a chance to respond before she pulled Ron out the portrait hole. They quickly walked down the corridor until they came to a secluded archway. Ginny pulled Ron inside.

"Open it. D'you see him?" she demanded.

"Hang on, give me the chance to get it opened," Ron said, feeling stressed. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

They watched as the Map revealed itself, and Ron was struck by how few dots there were compared to when Hogwarts had been in session. Most of the dots were converged in the Great Hall where the Aurors must be having some sort of meeting.

He traced his fingers along the outline, methodically searching for Harry's name.

"There!" Ginny said pointing.

"You found him?" Ron asked, relief washing over him.

"Not Harry - Malfoy. He's in one of the classrooms in the Charms corridor with Dudley. I don't see Harry anywhere," she said, her voice rising. She was clutching his arm so tightly, he suspected her nails were drawing blood, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her to let go.

"I don't see Pansy, either," he said grimly. "Let's go talk to the ferret."

Taking Ginny's hand, Ron sprinted ahead, tugging her along as he ran. Ginny was panting by the time they stopped at the closed Charms door, and she had to lean against the wall to catch her breath.

Ron turned the handle on the door; it was locked.

"Hey! Let us out!" Dudley whined from inside the classroom.

"Pansy, if that's you, I demand you open the door and release us at once," Malfoy said, sounding extremely angry.

"Alohomora," Ron said, but the door didn't unlock.

"Is that you, Weasel?" Malfoy asked. "Don't you think we tried that already? Unlocking spells aren't working. I can't imagine how Pansy learned to do that."

"Move back, Ron," Ginny said, pushing him aside, her eyes blazing

"What are you going to do?" Ron asked, warily doing as she'd asked.

"Move away from the door, you two," Ginny said. "I'm going to try a Blasting Hex."

"It won't work!" Malfoy shouted, sounding as if he was moving away anyway. Obviously he'd learned from experience not to trust Ginny's temper. "I've already tried it."

Ron turned his head from side-to-side, desperately evaluating his options.

"Dobby!" he shouted, remembering how the house-elf had helped them re-enter the castle after their trip to Little Hangleton.

"Yes, Harry Potter's Wheezy," the little elf said, appearing by their side. He was wearing the mismatched socks Harry had given him for Christmas the previous year.

"Dobby, Harry's cousin is locked inside. D'you think you could let him out?" Ron asked.

Dobby stared at the door suspiciously. "Dobby thinks the great Harry Potter would like it if his nasty cousin was locked inside," he said, crossing his arms. "Dobby likes him locked inside, too."

Ron groaned, unwilling to mention that one of Dobby's former abusive owners was also locked inside the classroom. "Dobby, any other time I'd agree with you and would probably ask that you help me lock Harry's cousin in there, but I think Harry's in trouble. I need your help. Harry needs your help."

"Dobby will do anything to help Harry Potter," Dobby said, his eyes wide. He reached out and easily pulled the door open as if it had never been locked. "How can Dobby help Harry Potter?"

Draco Malfoy and Dudley Dursley charged into the hallway, looking both ways and appearing agitated. Both were ruffled, and Dudley was sweating profusely.

"You!" Dobby shrieked, pointing a bony finger at Malfoy.

Draco's eyes widened in surprise. "Didn't you used to work for my father?" he asked, frowning.

Dobby turned his wide, mistrustful eyes on Ron. "Draco Malfoy is a bad boy. What does he have to do with Harry Potter?" he asked.

"I think he might have some information, Dobby. Information that could help us help Harry," Ron replied, enjoying the disgruntled expression on Malfoy's face despite the dire situation.

"What is he doing here, and what do you mean, help Potter? What's going on, Weasel, and what does this have to do with me?" Malfoy asked, clearly annoyed.

"Where's Harry?" Ginny demanded, moving to stand in front of Malfoy. Her hair was wild, and her eyes blazed fiercely. Ron noticed Malfoy taking an almost imperceptible step away from her.

"How should I know? I've been stuck in that bloody classroom since well before dinner. I have no idea where Potter is. It's Pansy I need to find," Malfoy said, regaining his composure and moving to pass Ron and Ginny.

Dudley remained against the wall, his face puzzled as he tried to follow the conversation. He kept fingering his wand, caressing it as they spoke.

Ron grabbed Malfoy by the arm. "You're not going anywhere until you tell me what I need to know."

"Take your filthy hands off me," Malfoy said, sneering.

"We can't find either Harry or Pansy, Draco," Ginny said, taking a deep breath. Ron knew from years of experience that she was desperately trying to control her temper. He also knew Malfoy was in big trouble if Ginny lost the battle. His mum got the same expression on her face before she exploded.

"Hagrid saw them speaking with each other by the forest, but now both are missing," Ginny replied in a stiff, measured tone.

"Missing?" Draco repeated blankly. "Pansy locked us in that room. She said she had something she had to do and wouldn't say anything more."

"What does Pansy have to do with Harry going off to face Voldemort alone?" Ron asked Ginny, perplexed.

"What? Facing him? If Pansy gets hurt because of Potter's stupidity, I'm going to- Ouch!" Malfoy yelled, grasping his lower leg and hopping around on one foot.

Dobby, who had remained silent during the entire exchange stood in front of Malfoy scowling, his arms folded across his chest.

"He kicked me!" Draco said incredulously.

"And Dobby will kick the bad Malfoy boy again if he keeps speaking about Harry Potter that way," Dobby said.

"Great. Another one," Malfoy mumbled, rubbing his leg and rolling his eyes.

"What if Pansy caught Harry trying to leave?" Ginny said, addressing Ron and ignoring Malfoy completely.

"Why would she lock them in the classroom, though?" Ron asked, jerking his thumb toward Malfoy and Dudley. "What was it she had to do? Something doesn't follow."

"Potter better not have taken her with him just to keep her quiet," Malfoy said. His words were cold, although his concern was obvious. "I'm going to ask Iris if Pansy said anything to her."

No one moved to stop him as he hurried away. Dudley stood looking between Ron and Ginny for a moment before following Malfoy back to the common room.

"What do you think, Ron?" Ginny asked in a small voice.

Ron thought she looked very young and vulnerable, and he suddenly wanted very much to tell her everything was okay, but he couldn't form the words. This was bad.

"Let's go find Hermione and tell her Harry's not here," Ron said, gulping. He knew there was nothing Hermione could do to find Harry, but if anyone had a good idea what to do next, Hermione would.

"He's gone to the Ministry," Ginny whispered, her eyes filling.

"We don't know that," Ron said firmly, trying to control his own frantic heart rate. "We need to talk to Hermione."

Harry's labored breathing filled the nearly silent chamber. The only other sound he could hear was the steady drip of water somewhere in the distance. He remained stuck inside the packing crate, unable to break the Immobilization Spell that Voldemort had cast upon him. He'd hoped it would have weakened and given him the opportunity to escape, but it remained as strong as when it was first cast.

"It's finished, my Lord," Snape's silky voice echoed against the stone walls.

Reeling, Harry's heart raced, and he felt sweat break out on his forehead. Visions of Muggle horror films about people being buried alive flitted through his mind until he felt his panic would overwhelm him. How was he going to get out of here?

His eyes frantically scanned the room, quickly moving past Pansy's body, which remained sprawled on the floor. The only way out that he could see was through the opening behind Voldemort, but his wand remained stuck in Snape's pocket.

They were going to permanently incapacitate him and leave him in that box.

"Excellent," Voldemort said, his crimson eyes flashing. "The potion is very quick-acting. Would you like to hear what's going to happen to you?"

"Go to hell," Harry snarled, feeling bile rise in his throat.

Voldemort's grin widened. "In order to go to hell, one must actually die - a fate which is not going to happen to either of us. After Severus administers the potion, your limbs will grow stiff and heavy. It will feel as if giant weights have been attached to them. You'll try to fight the exhaustion, of course, but you'll be powerless to do so. Your internal organs will shut down one by one until finally your heart

rate will begin to slow. You should fall unconscious at just about the time the first wave of my attack begins on Hogwarts."

Harry swallowed, clenching his teeth. "You appear extremely confident in your Death Eaters. Funny that, since they haven't been at all that successful against the Order in the past," he said.

Voldemort's grin faded. "Give him the potion, Severus."

"Yes, my Lord," Snape said, filling a phial with the thick black liquid.

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Hermione climbed down the moving staircase from Professor McGonagall's office, her head spinning with all the information her former headmaster had given her. She found Ron and Ginny waiting at the bottom. Both were pacing like caged animals.

From the looks on their faces and the fact they were here alone, Hermione knew they hadn't found Harry. It was just what she'd feared. Ginny looked as if she was about to cry, and Ron wrung his hands nervously.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Hermione stated, choking on the words. Oh, Harry!

"He's not anywhere on the Map, Hermione," Ginny said, her eyes filling. "Neither is Pansy. We found Draco and Dudley locked in a classroom. They said Pansy left them in there." Her lower lip began to tremble, and Ron wrapped his arm around her protectively.

"Pansy is missing, too?" Hermione asked, her curiosity overriding her panic.

"She's not on the Map," Ron replied, his eyes pleading with her for an answer.

Hermione wished she had one.

"He wouldn't have taken her with him," she said, chewing on her lip.

"What did Professor Dumbledore's portrait say?" Ginny asked, sniffing and obviously making a tremendous effort to pull herself back together.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. "My suspicions were correct. The act of murder always splits the soul, but it doesn't always create a Horcrux. Usually the murderer's soul is fractured within his own body. Professor Dumbledore said it changes a person, and perhaps that's the reason it appears to get easier for someone to murder again after the first time.

"He said creating a Horcrux is different. There needs to be intent, and the object must be held in your hand at the time of the murder."

"So how did Harry become one then? Was Voldemort actually holding him?" Ginny asked, aghast.

Hermione shook her head. "I suspect simply having his hand on him would have sufficed, and I can imagine Voldemort doing something like that just to torture Harry's mother," Hermione said, shuddering. She didn't like to think how awful it must have been for Lily Potter to see this madman laying his hand on the child she would die to protect.

"The way to create a Horcrux is to focus your intensity on the hatred, and the act of murder splits the soul. In contrast, I think an act of love should shield an object and hold it together," Hermione said, her excitement bubbling in her chest. "I think it can work."

"Not if we're already too late," Ginny said frantically.

"We have to get to the Ministry," Ron said, and Hermione could see that he was just as panicked as his sister.

Hermione suspected there was something she was missing, but the situation felt too urgent to dwell on it. They needed to get to the Ministry and stop Harry from doing anything foolish if he had charged ahead without them.

"All right, let's go," she said, clutching the small round object in her pocket. It had been Professor Dumbledore's idea, and Hermione thought it would work perfectly with Harry - if only they weren't too late.

As they barreled down the stairs into the entrance hall, they found Draco Malfoy standing alone by the front door looking frantic.

"She's not here. I can't find her anywhere," he said. "Iris said she hasn't seen her since dinner."

"Get out of the way, Malfoy," Ron said, bodily pushing the Slytherin aside.

"Where are you going?" Draco asked, his eyes narrowing. "You're going after them, aren't you? I'm going with you."

"Not a chance," Ron said hotly.

"You?" Ginny asked, surprised. "It'll be dangerous, Malfoy."

"I can handle myself," Draco spat. "While you three go after Potter, who's going to rescue Pansy? I'm going with you until I can get her out of there, then you're on your own."

Hermione was surprised by the depth of the feelings Malfoy obviously had for Parkinson. She hadn't expected that. He'd never been one to willingly put himself in any kind of danger. He usually let others do that. Perhaps Draco had grown up more than she'd given him credit for doing.

"You're not going anywhere with us. There's no way you're messing this up," Ron snarled, hot-headed as ever.

"Oh, stop it. You can decide who plays the role of the alpha-male later. We have to hurry before we're too late," Ginny said, pushing past both of them to exit the building.

The others followed in her wake, sprinting for the Hogwarts gates. A large, looming figure emerged from the side of the road as they reached it. Hermione gasped as Ron drew his wand.

"Oi! It's me," Hagrid boomed, his face showing in the moonlight as he came closer. "There's no sign of a struggle in the forest."

"Thanks, Hagrid," Hermione said, relaxing. "We're going after Harry."

"I'm goin' with yer, then," Hagrid said, nodding resolutely. He pushed open the gate, and they left the safety of Hogwarts grounds.

They hadn't gone very far when the unmistakable "popping" sounds of Apparition filled the night air. Dozens of masked Death Eaters appeared outside the gates, all of them with their wands pointed toward the school.

Hogwarts was under attack.

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"Just relax, Potter," Snape said, his eyes glinting. "Aside from some thirst as the potion dries up your bodily fluids, you shouldn't feel a thing. I do hope I brewed it correctly or else the results could be quite...painful."

Harry clamped his mouth shut, struggling with the invisible bonds. It couldn't end this way. Dumbledore, Sirius...Remus...all of them would have died for nothing. The Weasleys and his friends were being attacked unawares. He couldn't let this happen!

A bone-chilling cold born of sheer terror overwhelmed him. He was suddenly struck by the realization that that the first time they'd found a Horcrux, Hermione had been hurt, then it had been Ron, and finally Ginny. It had been as if Voldemort had been trying to separate them because they were stronger together. But this time he had succeeded. This time, Harry was alone.

Snape lifted the phial, swishing the ugly, thick, black liquid inside the glass.

"Bottoms up, Mr. Potter," he said, roughly grabbing Harry by the neck and forcing his head back.

Harry refused to open his mouth, and Snape hit him twice. Dizzy, Harry managed to keep his mouth closed.

"You have a penchant for Muggle dueling," Snape said, obviously still feeling bitter over their last encounter. "How does it feel to be on the other end? I could easily knock out some of your teeth. You won't be needing them."

Harry's mind raced. He had to stop this somehow. Ron and Hermione must be wondering where he was by now, but how would they know where to find him? What if they'd already been attacked and killed? Harry couldn't bear the thought. They had to be all right. Ginny! She had to survive.

Snape cast a spell, and Harry felt his jaw being forced open. He fought it until his entire body shook, but it was no use. His mouth opened, and Snape moved the phial toward his open lips.

No! No, no, no! Ginny, help me!

Smiling vindictively, Snape tipped the contents of the phial into Harry's mouth, allowing the thick substance to ooze slowly inside.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Voices Beyond the Veil

Ginny watched in horror as dozens of masked and cloaked Death Eaters appeared outside the gates of Hogwarts. She stood frozen, mouth gaping as more and more of them appeared, cackling and shouting rude comments about the destruction of the school. Hagrid grabbed Hermione and her and roughly pulled them both into the trees alongside the Hogsmeade path. Ron and Draco quickly followed, both wide-eyed, as well.

The gentle spring breeze fluttered her hair as Ginny tried to calm her racing heart. The stone she wore around her neck had been oddly warm all evening, and it now felt as if it was burning her skin. She didn't have time to ponder it, however. Brushing the distraction from her mind, she turned helplessly to Hermione.

"We have to warn everyone at the school," Hermione said, her voice a strained whisper. "They have no idea what's about to happen."

"We'll never get through that group undetected, Hermione," Ron said grimly, watching as the Death Eaters began firing spells at the gate. All the color had completely drained from his face.

"Unless... Yes, I think I can do it," Hermione said, mumbling as she moved away from them.

"I hate when she does that," Ron said under his breath. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Attackin' the school! I ne'er thought I'd see the day," Hagrid said, shaking his head sadly.

"Just stay there," Hermione said, waving her arm to indicate they should stay down. "I'll be right back."

"What is she going to do?" Ron asked.

"Who cares?" Draco said, tugging on Ron's arm. "What about Pansy? I thought you were in a hurry to stop Potter."

"I'm not about to let my entire family be slaughtered, Malfoy," Ron said hotly. "Your mother is in there, too, you know."

Malfoy paled. "I'm well aware of that, Weasel...thank you very much. That's why I think we should hurry."

"We don't even know if Pansy is with Harry, Draco," Ginny snapped. "For all we know, she could have been the one to lead those Death Eaters here."

"She never would have done that knowing I was still here - or her family, either," Malfoy snarled.

Scowling, Ginny turned away and folded her arms across her chest, knowing he had a point. No matter how much of a cow Pansy was, she did care for the prat. Still, Ginny couldn't help the nagging feeling that there was something odd about both Harry and Pansy being missing.

"Perhaps they're attacking because they've already caught Potter," Draco said coldly. "Maybe they were waiting outside the gates and grabbed both him and Pansy when they tried to leave."

Ginny whipped her head around, her throat closing as her heart attempted to leap out of her chest. "They don't have Harry," she said, her voice strained.

Still, Malfoy's words rang in her head. Could it be true? No. Harry wouldn't have brought Pansy with him if he was going to the Ministry. Perhaps he and Voldemort were already engaged in battle, and that's why the Death Eaters were here. She still didn't know where Pansy fit into it.

"Ron," she said, clutching his arm so her nails dug into his skin.

"That's enough, Malfoy," Ron snapped, stepping in between Draco and her. Ginny could see the worry in his face, however. She wasn't the only one alarmed by Malfoy's words.

She saw the bright, gleaming shape of Hermione's Patronus as it burst from the trees further down the road toward Hogsmeade. It soared over the heads of the surprised Death Eaters, zoomed through the gates, and continued traveling towards Hogwarts. Just as the otter appeared, Hermione emerged from the trees behind them.

"Good girl, Hermione," Hagrid said.

"You sent them a warning," Ron said, smiling.

Hermione nodded. "I've seen Harry do it. It was amazing. I told it to wait until I got away before sending the message, and it did," she said, speaking very fast.

The gathered Death Eaters began firing into the woods where the Patronus had appeared. Angry voices shouted into the night air, and the group split into two, one running down the road to search the trees for whoever had cast the spell, while the other continued the assault on the gates.

"I sent it to Professor McGonagall. She'll get everyone moving here. We've got to Apparate to the Ministry," Hermione said.

"Yeh go on ahead," Hagrid said. "I'm going ter keep a watch here and help ter defend the school."

"Hagrid, you can't go up against all of them alone," Hermione said, grabbing Hagrid's hand as if to pull him away.

Acrid smoke filled the air, and the visibility was dimming due to the vast number of spells being fired. The haze in front of the gates appeared to shimmer slightly, flickering bright flashes of light every few seconds.

"Don't you go worrying 'bout me, Hermione. My skin's too strong fer them to hurt. The wards around Hogwarts have weakened since Dumbledore...well, since..." Hagrid said, nodding and clearing his throat.

Hermione swallowed and nodded to show she understood what Hagrid meant.

"I don't think they'll hold fer long," Hagrid said. "If they fall before the Aurors arrive from the castle, I'm going ter try and stall 'em."

"Hagrid," Hermione pleaded, still tugging on his arm. "Even your skin isn't tough enough to last against all of them."

Excited shouts could be heard in the distance. Ginny couldn't decipher the words, but she could feel their excitement. They were getting close. She clenched her eyes tightly, saying a silent prayer that her family would be all right.

Hagrid put his massive hands on Hermione's shoulders and pulled her into a fierce embrace. "I appreciate yer worry, Hermione, but I'm going ter do what I have ter do. We all have a part ter play. Yeh go help Harry. He needs yeh more than me."

Ron swallowed heavily, pulling Hermione away. "Take care, Hagrid," he said, nodding.

Hagrid returned the nod, firmly shaking Ron's hand while holding his solemn gaze.

Ginny couldn't contain the sob that broke from her chest. Flinging her arms around Hagrid, she hugged him tightly. "Stay safe, Hagrid."

"Yeh, too, Ginny," he said, patting her on the back and nearly knocking her to her knees. "He'll need yeh most of all when this is all said and done."

Ginny nodded, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Let's get on with this," Draco said, and Ginny thought even he sounded a little choked.

A low rumbling sound suddenly filled the air, quickly gaining volume until the roar was so loud that Ginny had to block her ears. A great

gust of smoke billowed into the air, and the gathered Death Eaters began to cheer. A volley of spells hit the iron gates in tandem, causing the massive structure to shudder before finally tilting and falling backwards with a massive clang.

When the dust settled, the gate was on the ground, and Hogwarts was wide open to attack.

Hermione grabbed Ginny by the elbow, and Ron did the same to Draco. Nodding at one another, they all Disapparated with a loud crack as Hagrid bellowed a roar of combined grief and rage before charging into the fray.

The only sounds in the dimly-lit chamber where Harry was being held were the steady, almost-annoying drip of water against the stone, and the insidious pant of Voldemort's breathing. He was excited and obviously enjoying Harry's predicament. The sweet taste of victory shone in his unnaturally red eyes, and his tongue flicked out to lick his lips in anticipation.

He stood in the doorway, arms folded, his wand held casually in his fingertips, as if unconcerned that anything could possibly go wrong. He watched eagerly as Snape moved closer to Harry's immobilized form.

Harry struggled in vain as the thick black liquid filled his mouth. Snape's spell had his head pulled back and his mouth pried open, paralyzing him. Try as he may, he was unable to clamp his jaw shut. His only method of delaying the inevitable was refusing to swallow, but even that grew more difficult as Snape continued to pour the syrup-like potion.

It tasted bitter, and the foul stench made him gag. Tears leaked from the corners of his stinging eyes as he fought to keep his throat closed, feeling his panic rising inside him like a crescendo. Dark hopelessness clawed at his consciousness, whispering that it would be so much easier to simply give in and swallow. He wouldn't have to struggle anymore...

Harry shook himself mentally, refusing to travel down that dark path. Instead, he thought of his mission, and the people he sought to protect. They were a fierce group of fighters, and none of them would ever give up and simply allow Voldemort to win.

With a hollow pang, he remembered the look of determination on Remus's face before he had stood against Voldemort. Remus had sacrificed himself so the rest of them might live - Harry had to live for the same reason. He couldn't allow Remus's loss to have been in vain. He couldn't allow the rest of them to suffer the same fate, because Voldemort was certain to go after those who had been most loyal to Harry.

With renewed determination, Harry once again tried to overcome the spell. His entire body began to shake with the effort, but slowly, imperceptibly at first, he began to feel sensation returning to his limbs. It started as a tingling that gradually grew into a burning

sensation covering his entire body. Without understanding exactly how it had happened, he suddenly realized that he could move. Snape's brow furrowed in confusion as he became aware of the fact that Harry had broken the Binding Spell.

"What is it, Severus?" Voldemort asked, sounding uncertain for the first time since his arrival. He took several steps closer to try and see over Snape's shoulder. "What is happening?"

Before Snape had time to answer, the entire chamber began to shake with the raw power of Harry's unleashed magic. The phial in Snape's hand shattered, sending small splinters of glass flying and cutting into Snape's hand. The remainder of the potion spilled onto Harry's shirt.

Using Snape's moment of confusion to his full advantage, Harry pulled himself into a seated position and spat the entire contents of his mouth into his former professor's face.

"I may be ready to go - ready to die to end this - but not yet," he snarled, slamming his head forward to bash against Snape's. The impact was so quick and so hard that Harry saw stars. The roaring in his ears increased, and he had to blink hard against the darkness threatening to consume him.

Not expecting the blow, Snape flailed backwards and stumbled into Voldemort with the force of his momentum. Harry's surge of power again shook the room, causing bits of stone to crumble and fall around the chamber. Voldemort was knocked backwards through the cavernous door, just before the archway collapsed with a thunderous roar. Snape fell to the ground inside the chamber, his head striking the cold stone floor and leaving him momentarily stunned.

As quickly as he could, Harry tossed his legs over the side of his makeshift coffin and rose unsteadily to his feet. The room spun alarmingly, and he had to grab the edge of the box for balance. It was all he could do to keep his stomach's contents from spilling. His leaden limbs felt weak and unresponsive, and his vision was blurred. The stone inside his rope bracelet was burning hot against the tender skin on the underside of his wrist, but he welcomed the pain, using it to help him clear his mind.

He had to get his wand and get out of here. He reached out with his senses, and his heart plummeted when he detected that familiar hum of anti-Apparation wards. He should have known that Voldemort's fortress wouldn't be without them.

How else was he to escape? He wouldn't last long in his present physical condition. He hadn't swallowed any of the Draught of Living Death, but some of it must have been absorbed into his digestive track because he felt thoroughly awful. He was worried about how long he could manage to keep his tenuous grip on consciousness. Even now the black spots in his vision appeared to be growing and filling in the gaps.

Still, he had to do something. He couldn't simply stand here and wait to fall over. Taking a shaky step forward, he reached for Snape, who was still sprawled on the floor. The Potions master must have sensed

Harry's plan because he kicked out, knocking an already-shaky Harry backwards.

Snape crawled backwards, reaching for his wand, barely leaving Harry any time to grab for his own in order to escape. As Harry's adrenaline began to pump, it seemed to clear his head and brought some strength back to his weakened muscles.

Snarling, he lunged for Snape, determined to get his wand.

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Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Draco arrived at the Visitor's Entrance to the Ministry a moment after they'd left Hogwarts.

"The wards went down. They've got Hogwarts," Hermione said, sounding panicked.

"I know," Ron replied, putting his hands on her shoulders. "We have to trust that the Order and the Aurors can handle things there, Hermione. We have to help Harry."

Ginny's eyes widened in surprise at watching Ron take charge, and Hermione easily listen to him. When had her brother become such a strong man?

"You're right," Hermione said, pulling herself together. "Come on, it's this way."

Hermione led them toward the battered telephone box and hurried inside. Ron and Ginny quickly followed, but Malfoy stopped outside.

"You must be joking," he said, staring incredulously at the other three crammed inside the box.

"Either come with us or don't, Malfoy," Ron said irritably. "It makes no difference to me, and I don't mind the big old target on your back out here in the open."

Malfoy blanched, and he quickly crammed inside with the others. Ron didn't appear to mind the close quarters as he had Hermione pushed against one side of the box, but Ginny was crushed between Ron and Draco and couldn't move lest she'd have to touch either of them further.

"Hurry up and dial, will you?" she snapped.

"Hang on, I can't quite reach it," Ron said, elongating his words as he reached for the receiver.

"Ow!" Hermione yelped, rubbing the top of her head.

"Sorry!" Ron said, gasping. "Got it."

He dialed the number, and a cool female voice filled the telephone box.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

"Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley and Draco Malfoy," Ron said, his lip curling slightly on Draco's name. "We're here to stop Harry from doing anything stupid."

"And to rescue Pansy from Potter's mad ideas," Draco said, glaring at Ron.

Four badges slid out. Hermione grabbed them and distributed them as the telephone box began to descend.

"Visitors to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium," the female voice said.

Ignoring the voice, Ginny glanced at her badge. It read: Ginny Weasley, Rescue Mission. She shuddered as an eerie foreboding washed over her. At the same moment, the stone she wore around her neck flared painfully, causing her to wince and pull it away from her skin. Harry had to be okay. They couldn't be too late.

Ginny struggled to hold her emotions in check. Harry wouldn't like to see her falling apart when they found him. Tears always panicked him. She'd never had much patience for girls who cried, either. Perhaps it was because she had six brothers and had always been determined to prove she was an equal. She gritted her teeth, struggling not to shout in fury over the slowness of the lift.

"Why are we at the Ministry, of all places?" Draco hissed, sounding very nervous. "The Dark Lord is in control here, now. It's undoubtedly crawling with Death Eaters."

"Bit late to think of that now," Ron replied.

Ginny knew he was trying to act unconcerned for Draco's benefit, but she could see the tenseness in his shoulders and the way he was using his body to keep both Hermione and her behind him.

When they reached the Atrium and the door opened, they were stunned to find it empty even the security desk was unmanned. Once again, Ginny was eerily reminded of her previous nighttime visit to the Ministry.

"There's no one here," Ron said blankly.

"Of course," Hermione said.

"Of course what?" Draco snapped.

"He sent his forces to Hogwarts," Hermione said, sprinting towards the golden gates of the lifts that would take them into the bowels of the Ministry.

"Where are we going?" Draco demanded.

"Department of Mysteries," Ron said, and the lift began to lower.

"How do you know Potter is here?" he asked.

"I'm hoping he's not," Ron said grimly.

"And if he isn't? What do we do then?" Draco asked, his voice rising. "We can't go back to Hogwarts, and they'll all come back here when the battle is finished."

"You seem ruddy certain that they'll win," Ron said, scowling.

"We're here," Hermione said, putting a halt to the brewing row. "I need to go to the room with the Veil."

Ginny watched as the doors in the circular room spun. When it stopped, the door in front of them sprang open. She remembered being shown how to work the doors as they left the Ministry that night with Professor Dumbledore.

Holding her breath, she tried to sprint into the room but Ron held her arm firmly, not letting her rush ahead. When they tiptoed inside the room with the Veil, they found it silent and empty.

"Where is he?" Ginny asked, perplexed.

"I dunno," Ron replied, wildly turning his head from side to side. He held his wand at the ready, but it was for naught. They were the only ones in the room.

"So now what?" Draco asked, staring at the Veil curiously. "Do you have any other ideas where Potter might have taken her?"

"He didn't take her anywhere," Ginny said hotly, rounding on him. Her temper was ready to snap, and she had the perfect target.

"Draco, exactly what did Pansy say when she locked you and Dudley in that classroom?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"She said that she had something important to do and that she'd be back," he replied, shifting his eyes.

"What else?" Ginny demanded, drawing her wand.

"Put that away," Draco said, taking a step backward.

"She's very worried about Harry, Draco," Hermione said, sounding bored. "I wouldn't push her. You'd better tell us everything."

Draco stared warily at Ginny, keeping a close eye on her wand. "I did tell you," he insisted. "She didn't say anything else about locking us in there."

"But she did say something else?" Hermione asked. "What are you hiding, Draco? We all have to work together if we want to get out of here and help Harry and Pansy."

Ginny was surprised to see color suffuse Draco's cheeks. "It really wasn't anything. Just something about a private celebration when she returned."

"A celebration?" Ron asked sharply. "What does she want to celebrate?"

"She just meant some time alone," Draco said, raising his eyebrows. "Don't you and Granger ever spend any time without Potter in the room?"

"She had something she wanted to celebrate?" Hermione asked, ignoring Draco's comment completely while Ron's ears grew dangerously red.

"Mind your mouth, ferret," Ron said, glaring.

Hermione brushed him aside with a wave of her hand, her eyes wide. "Draco...have you noticed any other strange behavior from Pansy recently?" she asked urgently.

"I heard you two arguing over the fact that she's been disappearing a lot," Ginny said.

"Oh, no," Hermione said, moaning.

"What is it, Hermione?" Ginny asked, fear clawing at her throat.

"What if we're on the wrong track altogether?" Hermione wailed. "What if Harry wasn't the one who decided to go after Voldemort at all? What if Pansy was the one to take Harry?"

"What are you on about, Granger?" Malfoy demanded, his voice wavering slightly. "Pansy wouldn't have taken Potter anywhere. She had nowhere else to go."

"I think Pansy might have been in contact with Voldemort," Hermione said, clutching Ron's arm tightly. To Ron's credit, he never even winced as her nails dug into his skin.

"You're mad," Draco said, shaking his head.

"Harry mentioned something about finding her in the Owlery," Ron said, paling.

"And Voldemort has wanted to take Harry prisoner for months, now," Ginny said, gasping. Her tenuous grasp on her emotions slipped, and she had to blink the tears from her eyes.

Ron's comforting hand grasped her shoulder, and she clung to it as if it were the only thing keeping her afloat.

"That would explain what Pansy wanted to celebrate," Hermione said, breathing heavily. Ginny could see that she was trying to work it out logically, but her fear was beginning to overwhelm her, as well.

"She wouldn't have done," Draco said, but his face had paled considerably.

"She's trying to save you," Ginny whispered, as two fat teardrops leaked from her eyes and dripped slowly down her cheeks.

"He'll kill her," Draco said, shaking his head. "He'll never let me go - that's not how his operation works."

"If Voldemort has him-" Ginny said before her aquamarine stone flared with burning heat once again. Hissing, Ginny grasped it tightly in her hand, feeling a wave of intense pain, fear and desperation wash over her. The overwhelming sensations dropped her to her knees.

Ginny! Help, me!

She could hear his voice as clearly as if he was standing next to her.

"Ginny! What's wrong?" Hermione gasped, kneeling next to her.

"Harry!" Ginny whimpered.

"What's happening?" Ron asked, bewildered.

"My necklace," Ginny gasped, trying to control the nausea sweeping over her. "It burns."

"The one Harry gave you for Christmas?" Ron asked. "Why does it burn?"

Harry's words about the Merpeople legend that the Aquamarine stones helping lost lovers to find one another suddenly played in her mind. Her eyes met Hermione's, and she knew the older girl was thinking the same thing.

Trying to manage the panic growing inside her that she was now certain wasn't entirely her own, Ginny clasped the warm stone in her hand, shut her eyes and called to Harry in her mind.

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The gaping wound on Harry's arm left a trail of blood across the floor as he lunged for Snape. He could hear a low growling behind the fallen stones and knew he only had a moment to spare before an enraged Voldemort would burst into the chamber. He had to get his wand before that happened if he hoped to have any chance at all.

As if knowing what Harry wanted, Snape rolled to the side, reaching for the pocket where Harry's wand was hidden. Harry grabbed Snape's arm and slammed it into the ground before he could grab it. Scrambling, he crawled over Snape's legs, pinning him to the stone floor.

Snape grunted in pain, raising his own wand with his other hand. "Diffindo," he snarled.

A deep slash appeared across Harry's outstretched palm. He ignored it, and finally grasped his wand with his bloody hand. The stone inside his rope bracelet once again seared painfully and before he knew what was happening, brilliant color exploded before his eyes.

Voldemort's howl of rage echoed in his ears as his world began to spin. He had to shut his eyes against the fury of color, and he barely had time to register what had happened before it all faded, and he once again was locked in battle with Snape.

He was dimly aware of the difference in the floor and the absence of the dank, musty smell, but he remained focused on only Snape. They each had a tight grip on Harry's wand and rolled on the floor in a vicious tug-of-war.

"Reducto," Ginny's voice snarled, shocking Harry.

"Expelliarmus," Hermione said.

Harry's wand flew from Snape's startled grip as the force of Ginny's spell hurled the startled Potions master away from Harry, depositing him in a heap near the Veil.

The Veil.

Harry's jaw dropped as his senses reeled. He was back in the Department of Mysteries. He was here - in the same spot where he last saw Sirius. His breath caught painfully in his throat as he became aware of the distant whispering behind the gently fluttering curtain.

"Harry!" Ginny cried, throwing herself at him and nearly knocking him over. His body was weakened, and he had to clutch her for support. He felt as if she was somehow suffusing her strength into him through her embrace.

By the horrified expression on her face, he knew he must look a right mess. Hating the tear tracks he could see on her cheeks, he grabbed her head and tangled his fingers in her hair. Leaning over, he kissed her fiercely. If this was to be the end, he preferred his last memory to be of her sweet kiss rather than Snape's ugly face.

Harry held up his bloody hand, and Hermione silently tossed him his wand. By this time, Snape had rolled to his feet, brandishing his own wand.

"Very clever, Potter," Snape said, sneering. "Although I'm certain it wasn't any of your doing, else you would have escaped much sooner. The Dark Lord will not be pleased, but you won't get away for long. He's determined, and your little friends won't be able to resist him forever."

"Stupefy," Ron bellowed, but Snape easily moved to the side and the spell harmlessly flashed against the wall.

"You'll have to improve your technique if you ever expect to battle me, Weasley," Snape said.

"Incarcerous," Harry bellowed, and thin, snakelike ropes flew from his wand, attempting to bind Snape's hands.

"Serpensortia," Snape hissed, Transfiguring the ropes into snakes, which harmlessly slithered around his feet.

Harry watched as several of them slunk through the Veil, its ratty curtain billowing in the still air. He had to shake himself of the memories threatening to overwhelm him. He could hear that faint murmuring of voices behind it and knew he couldn't be distracted by it.

"You hear the voices?" Snape asked, cocking his head to the side.

Harry's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yes, I know about the voices," Snape said, rolling his eyes contemptuously. "I'm surprised you can hear them, however. It's usually only those with superior magical talent - of which you obviously have none. Then again, it's been suggested that those with questionable mental stability are also able to hear them."

Harry blasted several more Curses at Snape, all of which were easily deflected.

"Sectumsempra," Snape said vindictively.

Harry managed to dodge the curse but felt the rush of air as it zoomed past his ear. Snape jumped off the dais and moved to the steps that rose in a ring around the room. Harry climbed after him, trying to keep his own body between Snape and the others. Ron, Hermione and Ginny kept their wands pointed at the pair, waiting to see what would happen. Draco had taken cover, but Harry could see his blonde hair peering at them from behind the dais.

"Supposedly, the voices are the trapped souls who've gone through to their death. Your dearly departed godfather should be one of them, rotting just out of reach," Snape said, his eyes glittering malevolently.

"Diffindo. Silencio. Impedimenta," Harry shouted, rapidly firing at Snape, who kept backing away.

Harry was growing winded, and the climb up the stairs made his muscles groan in agony. Snape's cruel words incited the fury of Harry's friends, and they quickly joined the fray. Ron and Ginny both fired a barrage of Hexes and Jinxes towards their former teacher, but he was able to shield himself.

"Incendio," Hermione hissed, setting the bottom of Snape's robes on fire. She was the first one to actually hit him with something, and Snape was obviously surprised. He quickly doused the flames but began to struggle against the combined attack.

"Four against one, Potter?" he asked, sneering as he panted. "How like your father you truly are."

"You didn't seem to care much about a fair fight when we were back in Voldemort's lair, and it was about sixteen against one," Harry said, gritting his teeth.

"Sectumsempra," Snape snarled again, and Ginny gasped, slapping a hand to her shoulder to stop the sudden rush of blood.

Harry's vision went black with rage, and he fired a powerful Blasting Curse that hit Snape full on, sending him flying through the air. He landed in a heap on the stairs, gasping.

"Stupefy," Harry said.

Snape's head lolled to the side, his wand rolling uselessly out of his slackened hand, clattering on the floor beside him.

Harry's knees gave out, and he slumped on the stairs, panting heavily. His vision blurred, and his tongue felt too big for his mouth. He kept shaking his head, trying to dislodge the cobwebs that were surrounding his brain.

Ron rushed toward him, pulling him to his feet and helping him to descend the stairs while Hermione moved to check on Ginny. Ron sat Harry down on the bottom step beside the girls, and Harry leaned on him heavily.

"You got him, mate," Ron said shakily, never removing his arm from around Harry's shoulders. "Kind of ironic that the impulsiveness that he always gave you a hard time about was what did him in at the end." Ron tried to laugh, but it was forced, and his eyes traveled worriedly over Harry's wounds.

"I'm all right," Ginny snapped as Hermione quickly healed the bleeding gash on her shoulder.

"You'll need dittany on that, or it will scar, despite Snape's skill with that Curse," Draco said, finally joining the group.

"Thanks for all your help," Ron spat, still supporting Harry's weight.

"Snape would have killed me on the Dark Lord's orders. I wasn't about to take that risk for you," Draco said, sneering. "Where's Pansy?"

"Ginny," Harry said, gasping and ignoring Draco completely.

"I'm all right," Ginny said, reaching out to grab Harry's hand. "I'm better than you, that's for certain. What happened?"

"Where have you been, Potter? Do you know what happened to Pansy?" Draco demanded again.

Harry nodded wearily. His legs were growing heavy, and he was finding it difficult to breathe properly. Even though he wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest for a bit, he suspected his inactivity was causing his system to further absorb the small amount of the Draught of Living Death that he'd ingested.

Pushing off Ron and leaving a bloody handprint on his shirt, Harry forced himself to his feet and began to shakily pace.

"What are you doing, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Sit down and let me heal that cut on your arm."

Harry looked down and noticed that his left sleeve was drenched in blood. Despite the fact that his fingers still tingled numbly, he'd forgotten about the wound.

"You can heal it," he said, wheezing, "but I can't stay still. It gets worse when I'm still."

"What gets worse?" Hermione asked, following him as she tended his arm.

"Ran into Pansy just outside the forest," Harry said, blinking rapidly. "She said she was looking for Draco."

"She knew where I was," Draco replied tightly. "She locked me and Dudley in a Charms classroom."

Harry nodded. "She pulled a wand on me. When I disarmed her, I discovered that her wand was a Portkey."

"A Portkey?" Draco asked, sounding both alarmed and impressed. "So, she's still in the forest then?"

"Where did it take you?" Ginny asked, grabbing the hand of his uninjured arm and pacing with him. When she felt the blood on his hand from Snape's Hex, she mutely held it towards Hermione to be healed.

"To Voldemort," he replied. "Pansy followed us there. She'd made a bargain with Snape and Voldemort to spare you in return for handing me over to them."

Draco blanched. "The Dark Lord would never agree to that."

"No," Harry said simply, stopping and staring at Draco intently.

"He killed her then?" the Slytherin asked in a strained whisper.

"He reneged on his deal, then offered her a place in his ranks. She said not without you, so he killed her," Harry said, squaring his jaw. He knew he was hurting the other boy, but he felt he had to show him the callous truth. It was Voldemort's way or no way. There was no in between.

Draco dropped his head, clenching his eyes tightly.

"I'm sorry, Draco," Hermione said, her eyes bright. She gently reached out and placed her hand on his arm.

Draco nodded, firmly setting his jaw. His voice shook as he spoke, "She wanted us to have a chance for a future."

"By sacrificing Harry," Ron snapped, apparently unable to accept any grief over Pansy.

"She did the wrong thing, and I'll never forgive her for putting Harry through this, but I can understand her desperation," Ginny admitted grudgingly, her eyes sweeping over Harry.

"Voldemort wanted to keep me safe but out of the way," Harry said. "Snape brewed the Draught of Living Death, and they forced it down my throat."

"What?" Hermione shrieked.

"I spat it out without swallowing, but I think some of it was absorbed anyway. I don't feel so good," Harry said, listing to the side.

Ginny caught him and propped him back up.

Draco's head snapped up. He seemed stunned by the fact Harry was given the Draught and remained conscious. "That's not good," he said. "You'll probably not recover from that. The antidote is supposed to be given instantaneously and all in one dose."

"Thanks, Draco," Harry replied dryly.

"How did you and Snape get here, then?" Hermione asked. "Did your stone somehow tell you where we were? Ginny's has been burning all evening." Her curiosity about the stones was visibly battling with her concern over Harry's condition.

"I don't know how that happened," Harry said truthfully. "My stone was burning, too. I panicked after Snape had given me the Draught, and I somehow broke the bonds that were holding me and got away. Snape and I were fighting over my wand on the floor of the cavern one minute, and the next minute we were here still fighting. The stone must have transported us like a Portkey."

"That's not possible," Hermione said, shaking her head. "It's just a legend, and it's only supposed to help you find one another. You must have Disapparated."

"No. It definitely had something to do with the stones," Harry said, shaking his head. "Voldemort was furious. I heard him bellowing when we disappeared. There were Anti-Apparation wards all over the place."

"Yeah, but it's not like you haven't done things that were supposedly impossible in the past," Ron said, shrugging.

"I don't know," Harry replied. "We don't have time to figure it out. Voldemort sent his troops to Hogwarts. He probably went there looking for me after I disappeared. What are we doing here, anyway?"

"We thought you might have slipped away from us to take on Voldemort alone," Ron said sheepishly.

Harry looked away from them all, unable to deny he'd thought about doing just that.

"I thought so," Ginny said, scowling.

"The Death Eaters were already at Hogwarts when we left," Ron said. "Hermione sent a message to warn them."

Harry sighed heavily, his eyes roaming around the silent room and stopping to rest on the Veil. He could still hear those odd, distorted whispers behind it. He was here. This was it. The time to act and end it all was now.

"Harry, you're not in any condition to do this," Hermione said as if reading his thoughts.

"I have to, Hermione. We won't get a better chance," he replied.

Hermione looked around the room helplessly before returning her gaze to him. Her lower lip trembling, she nodded. "I've stopped the bleeding on your arm, but the wound is really deep. Madam Pomfrey will have to set it properly."

"Right," Harry replied, his throat raw.

He knew he should take a moment to tell them how much they'd always meant to him, but he couldn't manage to get his mouth to form the words. Instead, he just stood there - feeling stupid - and swallowing repeatedly.

Before he had long to contemplate it, however, his scar felt as if it had been ripped open with blinding pain. Bright shards of light pierced his field of vision, and he had to wrap his hands around his head to hold it together. He dropped to his knees, convulsing yet still trying to maintain control.

"Harry!" Ginny yelled, and he felt her cool hands on his forehead.

"Voldemort," he gasped. "He knows I'm not at Hogwarts. He's looking for me. We have to do this now. I need to show him where I am."

"I can help you do that," Draco said suddenly, surprising them all.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, moving to stand protectively in front of Harry.

"You obviously still can't shield your mind against Legilimency," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "Snape proved that."

"But he got Snape, didn't he?" Ron asked belligerently.

"Eventually, I suppose. If you think you can manage to stall the Dark Lord until you get angry enough to do something, go right ahead. Perhaps if he just kills one of the Potterettes," Malfoy said, jerking his head towards Harry's friends, "that would do it."

"No!" Harry said, suddenly sitting up straighter and blinking through the pain in his head. "Okay, Draco. We'll try this together. What do we have to do?"

"Let me into your mind. I'll direct your thoughts in order to project where we are to Voldemort, and I'll try to help you shield them once he arrives," Draco said, swallowing heavily.

"Why are you so willing to help now?" Ginny demanded.

"He killed Pansy, and I'm ready to be free. If this works, I can get on with my life while I still have it," Draco snapped.

Harry groaned again as he felt Voldemort's cold tendrils attempting to coil around his brain. "Now. We have to do it now," he said, gasping. "Ron, Ginny, Hermione, conjure some heavy stones to use as shields. They can absorb the Killing Curse when he starts using it. Conjure several in the room and practice doing it quickly. Each will only shield you from one Curse, so you'll either have to find or conjure another after yours is destroyed."

"Create a large one for me, too," Draco said. "If the Dark Lord realizes what we're doing, he'll go after me. He'll be puzzled over the fact that Harry is suddenly able to shield his thoughts, but it won't occur to him right away that Harry would willingly let someone else in his mind since he would never do so."

"Do it," Harry said, grabbing his head again.

Draco nodded. "You'll have to look in my eyes and just relax. Think about this room, and I'll help project the image to the forefront of your mind."

"When he gets here, Harry, everything will happen fast," Hermione said. "I've spoken with Professor Dumbledore about something, and you'll just have to trust us."

"Trust you with what?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"That we love you, and we know that you love us, too. Keep concentrating on that when you're dueling," Ginny said, kissing him softly on the lips.

"I love you, too, Ginny," he whispered.

Ron silently squeezed Harry's shoulder, his solemn expression saying more than words ever could.

"Focus on the love you feel for us," Hermione said urgently. "Trust us."

"This is all sickeningly sweet, but we're running out of time," Draco said.

Ginny gave Harry's hand a final squeeze before joining Ron and Hermione to help create obstacles.

Harry stared into the gray eyes of his school rival. In the end, it came down to trust. Harry didn't trust Draco, but he didn't think the Slytherin fully trusted him, either. They did understand each other enough to know that they both wanted the same thing. Maybe being able to set aside their differences and work together was part of the final test.

"Let's do it," Harry said, taking a deep breath and looking directly at Draco. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"I've been in your mind before, Harry. Nothing has changed about that," Draco said, surprisingly gentle.

Harry groaned as his head seared painfully. "There's more in there this time," he said vaguely.

Draco frowned, puzzled. "Just push the thought you want to the forefront of your mind. Legilimens."

Harry felt the familiar invasion, and he tried to will his body to relax, despite his tension. His forced prone position allowed the poison in his system to further absorb, causing his legs to feel stiff and heavy. Memories flashed fast and furious, and he struggled to keep the image of the Department of Mysteries in the forefront. He felt Draco's presence pushing it and knew instantly when Voldemort had successfully invaded.

Voldemort grasped onto the image, and Harry began to laugh maniacally as he felt Voldemort's triumphant glee. A wave of nausea rolled over him as the foreign presence pulled out of his mind. When Voldemort finally released him, Harry leaned over and promptly retched, spilling the meager contents of his stomach all over Draco.

"Bugger!" Draco shouted, leaping back. "Damn it, Potter. Scourgify."

"All right, Harry?" Ron asked from where he was still conjuring large boulders.

"He's coming," Harry said, shaking his head and forcing his protesting legs to stand. "You'd better all get behind cover. You too, Draco."

Draco remained standing, staring at Harry with the most peculiar expression on his pale face.

"What?" Harry asked, exasperated and in no mood for games. He swiped his sleeve across his mouth.

"You're going to have to die to pull this off," the Slytherin whispered, his eyes wide.

"You're just figuring that out now, Draco?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"I... He's... It... Horcruxes," Draco finally managed, bewildered.

Harry nodded curtly. He knew there had been a risk of Draco learning about the Horcruxes when he allowed him access to his mind, but supposed it didn't matter now, anyway.

"You'd better take cover," Harry said softly.

Draco swallowed audibly. For the first time in Harry's memory, the blonde boy appeared at a loss for words.

"Good luck," he finally whispered, before turning and quickly ducking behind one of the stones.

It was odd, but Harry thought he actually sincerely meant it. There was no time to contemplate Draco's motives, however, as a piercing stab of pain erupted along Harry's scar.

"He's here," Harry said, limping away from the dais. His previous fear, exhaustion, and trepidation over what was about to come melted away. He was ready. He felt as if he'd been battling his whole life for this moment, and he was ready for it - come what may. Voldemort was no longer a man, but a monster, and he needed to be terminated before he killed anyone else.

Harry's heart pumped fiercely in his chest, causing the effects of the Draught to recede. He quickly scanned the room, noting with satisfaction that Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Draco were all covered - even Snape's prone form was well hidden by the stairs surrounding the dais.

His scar seared, and the temperature plummeted as Lord Voldemort strode confidently into the room, his grotesque face twisted with rage.

"I must admit, Harry, it has been a long time since anyone was able to impress me," he hissed, slithering into the center of the room, his crimson eyes flashing.

"You'll find that you're no longer dealing with a child that you snatched from a school yard," Harry replied, calmly moving to face his foe.

"Point taken. I should have killed you straightaway in that graveyard," Voldemort said, perusing Harry appraisingly. His red eyes were glowing with an intense hunger, and his tongue darted out, snakelike, wetting his lips.

"You tried," Harry said.

"I wanted your death to become my showpiece. My grand welcome back into the Wizarding world. I should have simply eliminated the obstacle. I won't make that mistake again," Voldemort replied, baring his teeth. "Crucio!"

Harry was ready, and he quickly dove out of the way. "So, you're ready to kill me now? I thought you wanted to stow me away somewhere safe," he said. "Reducto."

The corner of the stairs exploded, hurling debris towards Voldemort, who quickly raised a shield.

"That was my original plan before you incapacitated my Potions master. No, Harry. I'm going to make you bleed like the worthless human you are, and then I'm going to dispose of you. I am Lord Voldemort, and I will find another way to survive. You thwarted my attempt to get the Philosopher's Stone, and now you've destroyed my precious Horcruxes. You will pay for that, and I will devise another way."

Voldemort blasted a quick string of curses at Harry, each of which he managed to avoid. Harry returned fire, but nothing appeared capable of

breaching Voldemort's shield. Some of the boulders placed around the room were beginning to crumble under the fury.

"Your feeble attempts at Occlumency appear to have finally yielded some results," Voldemort said, narrowing his eyes.

"So...you know I've got all the Horcruxes, then?" Harry asked, desperate for a distraction. He was sweating profusely from the exertion but knew Draco was still managing to keep the shield in his mind.

"Lord Voldemort knows everything," Voldemort said smugly. "Right down to the fact you are trying to distract me from knowing there are others in the room with us. There," he said, blasting the rock hiding Ron.

"And there," he said, destroying the one shielding Hermione.

Hermione quickly created another to duck behind, but Ron delayed in order to be certain Hermione was covered.

"Avada Kedavra," Voldemort shouted, aiming the deadly green light at Ron.

Ron froze, his eyes widening. Without thinking, Harry leaped at his friend. His body sailed through the air, impacting with Ron, and bringing them both to the ground with a crash. The sickening snap of a bone was clearly heard in Ron's wrist as they landed. They ducked and quickly rolled to their feet, a groaning Ron noticeably helping Harry.

Voldemort blasted the two of them with a barrage of curses as each boy tried to shield the other. Finally, Ron grunted in pain when a curse hit its mark. Harry shoved him toward another boulder.

"You already knew about the diary," Harry said, panting as Ron slumped, unconscious behind the rock. "That was the first one." He fired a powerful Stunner that Voldemort blocked, but for the first time, his shield flickered.

Voldemort's eyes widened, and he paused before taking a step back.

What had Hermione said? Concentrate on the love he felt for them? Professor Dumbledore said it was his unknown power, and it did appear to strengthen his Curses.

"The diary, yes. My sources tell me that you destroyed it in order to save your little girlfriend. I believe she's over there," Voldemort said, blasting away the rock hiding Ginny.

Ginny shrieked and scrambled out of the way. Voldemort followed her with his wand, repeatedly firing spell after spell. Ginny kept dodging and firing back uselessly, and Harry could see she was growing weary. His own spells did nothing to deflect Voldemort's wrath. He appeared to grow stronger, as if feeding off Ginny's fear and Harry's desperation.

"Not her," Harry growled, a great rage blooming within his heart. He fired a Cutting Curse that tore into Voldemort's side, drawing first blood. The voices behind the Veil grew louder, and the room brightened slightly.

Voldemort stopped, his eyes widening in shock as he stared at the blood seeping through his robes. Drawing his lips back and baring his teeth, he quickly fired a rapid series of spells toward Harry - like a wire short-circuiting on the ground.

Harry hissed in pain as a Curse sliced into his arm, reopening the wound Hermione had treated for him. Blood gushed from the deep cut and flowed down his arm, slackening his hand. Glancing down briefly, he was certain he could see a white hint of bone showing.

"I also know exactly how you're managing to shield your pathetic mind from me," Voldemort snarled, aiming his wand and destroying the boulder shielding Draco. The boy froze, his eyes round before he leaped to his feet and tried to run. "Extispex."

Draco collapsed, shrieking in horror as blood rapidly spread across his abdomen and his insides began being expelled through a gaping wound. Draco's horrible screams filled the cavernous room until Hermione, apparently unable to take it any more, cast a spell of her own.

"Petrificus Totalis," she shouted.

Draco's body stopped writhing and remained motionless on the floor, his entrails piled in front of him. Harry felt the last link between his mind and Draco's snap.

Voldemort turned his attention to Hermione. "Crucio," he shouted, and Hermione dropped to the ground, screaming in agony.

Gritting his teeth, Harry fired a Reductor Curse that blasted Voldemort off his feet, ending his attack on Hermione. Harry continued his rapid volley with Voldemort and the room was alight with spells hitting the walls. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ginny pull Hermione behind a large boulder.

"That's for my parents," Harry snarled, hitting Voldemort with a Cutting Curse, "and that one's for Sirius."

Each time he aimed a spell, Harry put the name of a victim to it. The room in which they were standing brightened each time, and with a shock Harry realized the light was coming from the Veil. The voices were loud and overlapping, and he didn't understand how the others couldn't hear them.

Voldemort appeared slightly alarmed by the light and sound, and distressed by Harry's success in hitting his mark. Harry thought it must have been a long time since Tom Riddle had endured the pain of being Cursed. Harry lost his train of thought as a painful Stinging Hex struck his thigh.

"So...your plan is to tug me through the Veil with you, is it?" Voldemort asked, regaining some of his bluster. "That's not going to happen today. I can accommodate you, however," he said, lifting Harry's body in the air and flinging it toward the Veil.

Harry managed to land and right himself before he reached it, his fierce desire to protect his friends ringing in his head. He fired a Bone Breaking Curse at Voldemort and was shocked to see his enemy stumble and fall.

In fury, Voldemort fired the same curse back at Harry, who felt the bones in his injured arm and the attached hand shatter. He was weakened and bloody, but it heartened him to see Voldemort in the same condition. This was it; it had to be done.

Focusing with all this might on the love he felt for his friends and his desire that they should have a peaceful life, he fired a Reductor Curse that catapulted Voldemort onto the dais where the Veil stood. "That was for Remus; and that one's for Bertha Jorkins. D'you remember Bertha? You left her body to rot in the woods. She's been avenged," Harry spat, moving down the steps and closer to the dais. The unearthly light filled the room and began to glow even brighter.

He felt Voldemort's insidious presence inside his mind - searching - seeking to know which Curse Harry was about to use. As Harry filled his mind with the love and great emotion that he had for his friends, he felt Voldemort recoil, his grip on Harry's mind weakening until it finally snapped altogether.

The light and voices from the Veil were obviously frightening Voldemort and throwing him off his mark. This was Harry's chance.

Limping, Harry stepped onto the dais, preparing to charge and ram both Voldemort and himself through the Veil. Before he could do it, however, shouting from the girls stopped him.

"Harry!" Hermione cried. "Use the Curse. The one Moody says you can do, but you didn't think you could."

Harry's brow furrowed with confusion, irritated by the interruption. He barely managed to raise his shield as Voldemort hurled another Cutting Curse at him.

"Do you trust me, Harry?" Hermione asked softly, although he could hear her clearly despite the noise in the room.

There was no question - of course he did. He'd promised to listen to her during the battle, understanding that there were things she couldn't forewarn him about lest Voldemort see it in his mind.

Ginny moved out from behind the rock beside Hermione, and with Chaser precision tossed something directly to him.

"Use the Curse," Hermione repeated as the object flew through the air.

Although his broken arm hung uselessly at his side, Harry instinctually raised his wand hand in the air and caught the tiny golden object before turning his wand on a still-shaken Voldemort and hissing, "Avada Kedavra."

Immediately as he uttered the hateful curse, his head was ripped open with agonizing pain. A crushing sensation overwhelmed him, dizzying and

disorienting him. He felt as if a part of him was being torn asunder. Memories, feelings and emotions swirled, making him feel sick and dropping him to his knees. An unbearable cold consumed him as a sickening, squelching sound filled his ears. His eyes rolled in his head. He was being torn apart. He wasn't even certain who he was. The wind howled, and his vision began to dim.

As Harry slumped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut, his hand uncurled around the object Ginny had tossed to him. The golden Snitch that had rested in McGonagall's office - the one Ginny had caught to win the Quidditch cup in the last match before Hogwarts had closed - flew from Harry's hand. It rose in the air gracefully, fluttering momentarily, before turning and hurling itself through the Veil, as if it had been Charmed to do so. The Veil fluttered briefly and the voices rose in crescendo before finally falling silent. The light around the Veil slowly began to dim.

At the same moment that Harry realized he'd created his own Horcrux, he saw Voldemort's snakelike eyes widen as he was struck in the abdomen by the spell hurled from Harry's wand. The madman's red eyes dimmed as he crumpled to the ground, lifeless. The many transformations that he'd undergone melted away, leaving the ravaged but unmistakably once-handsome face of Tom Riddle - a dead man, and no longer a monster.

The room was utterly silent and still.

Suddenly, Harry saw Snape's bruised and battered face rise from the steps. His eyes weren't quite focused but still held a vindictive gleam. His gaze wandered dispassionately over Voldemort's still form before he warily raised his hands when Harry pointed his wand. Harry could barely make sense of anything, but he was certain that Snape expected to die by his former pupil's hand.

But Harry lowered his wand, gasping in pain.

"There's going to be celebrating and victory speeches, and they'll probably even name a holiday after me," he gasped, slurring his words. "I'm certain I'll hate all of it, but there's one thing that it'll make it all worthwhile - and that's knowing that you're going to hate it more."

Snape scowled, shakily pulling himself to his feet and raising his wand. Harry simply stared, unable to muster the strength to be alarmed.

"While you are most likely right that the deluded fools will heap more unearned glory upon you, it's a pity that you won't be around to hear any of it. How pathetic to survive the great battle, only to be struck down afterwards because you were too weak to raise your wand," he sneered.

Harry expected to see a burning green light hurtle towards him, but instead a rushing mane of bright red hair blocked his vision. He heard the swoosh of a curse before a mass of mucus-covered bats exploded from Snape's nose.

"Expelliarmus," Ginny snarled, and Snape's wand flew into her outstretched hand before she cast a Binding Spell on him. "Silencio,"

she hissed, cutting off his sneer before it could start. Using her wand, she tightened Snape's bonds until he was gasping with pain.

She then dropped to her knees beside Harry, cradling his bloody head in her lap.

"Oh, Harry, look what he did to you," she said, sniffing and wrapping herself around him like a bandage.

Harry wearily shut his eyes, sinking into the warmth of her embrace. It was over. He'd done it. He could rest at long last.

"Stay with me, Harry," Ginny pleaded.

Harry's eyes fluttered, but his limbs and eyelids felt like lead. He tried to smile but failed. His vision slowly began to dim and finally faded to black, blocking out the voices as the curtain finally stilled.

Chapter Thirty

The Locked Room

Harry's world spun momentarily before a sense of cool serenity washed over him. He felt as if he was floating - drifting slowly into the air inside a bubble, swaying haphazardly, yet rising upward. He felt calm and almost disassociated from everyone else in the room. He could see Ginny cradling his broken body, crying and begging him to awake, but he felt no desire to do so. He wasn't entirely certain that he could.

He could see the dead body of Tom Riddle lying nearby, his lifeless eyes still open and staring vacantly ahead. The eyes were no longer red, but brownish in coloring. Harry dispassionately noted that Riddle's hair had gone gray since the last time he'd seen him. He half-expected the prone figure to jump or blink or for his eyes to turn back to red. His stomach churning unpleasantly, Harry turned away.

He watched as Hermione tended an unconscious Ron, but she glanced up at Ginny's shrill cry. He could see Hermione's lips moving and knew she was speaking to him, but he couldn't hear her words. None of this concerned him as he continued to drift aimlessly through the air. Not even the sight of the ancient Veil high on its dais, the same Veil that had filled so many of his nightmares, elicited any emotion from him.

He floated past Draco, lying on the floor - still petrified - with the ghastly mess of innards piled obscenely beside him. Detached, Harry noticed that Draco's eyes were closed, almost as if he couldn't bear to look at what had happened to him and settled instead for unconsciousness. Harry thought it vaguely odd that the one who had actually died was the one with his eyes open, yet both Draco's and the eyes on Harry's own body were closed.

At least, he assumed he was still alive, although he really couldn't be certain. He couldn't bring himself to care very much either way. Even the idea that it was over didn't quite register in his muddled brain. The only thing on Harry's mind at the moment was this pleasant floating

sensation. It left him drowsy, and he thought he might like to go to sleep.

Nearly as soon as the thought occurred to him, his eyes opened wide, and his heart began to race. Falling asleep was definitely a bad idea. He somehow knew he was supposed to stay awake. As he became more alert and began to look around in earnest, the pounding of his heart lessened, and the panicky adrenaline-rush subsided. Calmer, he noticed that his bubble had begun traveling further away from the chaos surrounding the Veil.

He drifted over Ron and Hermione's heads, watching as Hermione's wand traveled shakily over Ron's chest. His bubble floated out the door and into the circular room with all the doors. It moved anti-clockwise until it stopped in front of one of the doors. The door was no different than any of the others, it had no distinctive marking or shape, but Harry instinctively knew that it was the locked door. The one where he'd ruined the knife Sirius had given him while trying to open it.

What had Professor Dumbledore told him? That the room was kept locked at all times and contained the force that Harry possessed in such great quantity - love. Riddles...more riddles. Dumbledore had always liked to speak in riddles. How could a room contain love? It wasn't a tangible thing.

Harry watched, feeling disconnected as his bubble approached the door and floated right through it. He blinked and took a good look around. At first, he saw nothing but murky emptiness and darkly wondered if he'd used up all the love he'd felt in his heart destroying Voldemort. Now, there wasn't anything left but this dark, gray nothingness. It was a sobering thought, but he still couldn't bring himself to feel any emotion over it. It was as if he was an outsider, merely observing rather than living any of it anymore.

As he continued to float, he gradually became aware of a flickering light in the distance. Without his usual curiosity or burning drive to know, he merely took note of it rather than moving towards it. Gradually, however, the flickering of shadow became interesting as it was the only thing to see, and he began to drift nearer and nearer the light.

When he was finally close enough to see properly, he realized it was a simple fireplace holding a blazing fire that hissed and crackled. Although it was in the midst of great nothingness, Harry imagined it was the kind of fire he'd seen in the Gryffindor common room on many a cold night.

As soon as the thought occurred to him, the Gryffindor common room with its large, squishy armchairs and red and gold coloring appeared before him. His bubble landed on one of the chairs in front of the fire, and he stretched his long legs, feeling the heat on his suddenly uncovered toes. He rubbed them into the rich, red carpeting, resting his head on the back of the chair.

He wondered if the locked room somehow worked by thought, and he tested it by imagining a steaming cup of chocolate. It appeared on the end table next to him in a Hogwarts golden mug. Harry settled back into the cushions, gazing at the fire and wondering what it was he was supposed to do here. It seemed a funny place to be after...well, after everything that had happened tonight. Dispassionately, he realized that he was uninjured. He had full use of his arms, and there wasn't even a trace of blood on his clothing.

"I am glad to see that you have made yourself at home, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said, strolling into the room. His long white beard was knotted at the end, and he held it as he took the chair next to Harry, conjuring his own cup of hot chocolate and stretching his bare toes to the fire.

"Sir!" Harry gasped, shocked. Some of his hot chocolate dribbled down his chin, scalding him.

He wiped it quickly, blinking with astonishment and unable to voice a coherent thought. Dumbledore merely sipped his own beverage, his blue eyes twinkling, until Harry blurted, "Am I dead?"

"No, my boy, you most certainly are not dead, thank the Heavens. Your body has a long recovery ahead, but I am more concerned with your mind," Dumbledore said, the sparkle in his eyes dimming as he looked at Harry over his half-moon spectacles.

"My mind?" Harry asked blankly, feeling that he was several steps behind. He sat back and tried to relax. Dumbledore was obviously in charge of the conversation. Some things never changed.

Dumbledore raised his arms and gestured at the vast expanse of nothingness. "This room...this place...is a representation of your mind, Harry. Am I right in surmising that you are presently feeling rather desolate?"

Harry shrugged helplessly, uncertain what to say or even what to make of all the emptiness. Feeling slight embarrassed, he instead focused on their immediate surroundings. "It looks like the Gryffindor common room to me," he mumbled.

"Yes. I conjured the fire to try and light your way to me. You created the image in your mind of a place you felt warmth, some security, perhaps," Dumbledore said, nodding. "I am, of course, pleased that Hogwarts has always felt like a home to you."

"So...this place is inside my mind?" Harry asked, still feeling as if he were grasping at straws. If that were the case, it looked as if his mind was rather empty - a fact he was certain Ron would find highly amusing.

"Precisely," Dumbledore said, smiling approvingly. "The only way to enter that locked door at the Ministry is within your mind. I imagine that you are feeling lost and rather hopeless right now, and you felt the need for explanations hence, you called for me. I suppose I have traditionally been the one to offer you my advice after you have been through a trauma."

"So...you're not real, then? I'm only imagining you?" Harry asked, aware that the first real emotion beginning to swell in his chest was that of great disappointment.

"Oh, I am very real, Harry. More importantly, not everyone could simply have called me back such as you have done. Your need must be very great," Dumbledore said solemnly.

"I'm confused, sir," Harry said, shaking his head. He didn't even know how he'd got here, never mind how he'd called Dumbledore. There had to be some kind of mistake.

"I am aware of that," Dumbledore said, smiling gently. "Let me offer as much in the way of an explanation as I can. Miss Granger may have more of the answers you seek. I have been watching over you for nearly a year now, and I cannot tell you how proud I am of your accomplishments."

"I killed him," Harry said flatly. Should he be proud of that fact? Harry really wasn't certain. It had only taken two words - Avada Kedavra - the very same two words that had once vastly altered the course of Harry's life. He'd never thought the day would come that he would be the one to say those words. It seemed fate loved to toy with him that way.

He swallowed, willing the numb feeling to return. Truth be told, he didn't feel like celebrating, or crying over his losses, or anything except indifference. He was hollow inside.

"Yes. You did what you had to do, and the Wizarding world and all of your friends will be the better for it," Dumbledore said gently, watching Harry with those all-knowing eyes.

"You've been watching me?" Harry asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"I have. I have waited and delayed fully passing over, while I tried to guide you this past year. Now, it is finally my time to cross into the afterworld," Dumbledore replied, his eyes shining eagerly.

"You're leaving again?" Harry asked in a dull, flat tone. That cold dispassion had resettled, and Harry was glad for it if it meant that he didn't have to feel another loss.

Dumbledore gently rested his hand on Harry's forearm, squeezing it gently. "I departed your world a year ago, Harry. That hasn't changed. Most likely, I could have survived that potion. I may have even been able to thwart Professor Snape despite my surprise, but I would have been a frail, useless liability to you. It was better this way, and I have been able to be of greater service."

"Greater service?" Harry asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Am I right in surmising that you knew after Miss Weasley tossed you the Snitch in the Death Room, and you had uttered the Killing Curse

that you had created your own Horcrux?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes piercing into Harry's.

"Yeah," Harry replied, shrugging. "I worked that part out myself."

"Miss Granger came to me several weeks ago with her idea, and I thought it quite splendid that she had worked out so much of the detail. I merely did a bit of tweaking, as I understood some of the Romanian text better than she. The Snitch, however, was my idea for the item to be used as your Horcrux. I told Miss Granger how to charm it to make it fly directly into the Veil. Rather brilliant, if I do say so myself," Dumbledore said, smiling.

"So, I've lost part of my soul? Is that why I feel so empty?" Harry asked, his throat feeling very tight.

"No," Dumbledore said quickly. "You've lost none of your own soul, Harry. When Miss Granger told you to focus on the love that you felt for others, it is because that great abundance of love that you hold within your heart shielded your soul from splitting. The piece of Voldemort's soul that was attached to your own like a malignant growth could not understand that great love. It was that piece that was split off while your own soul remained whole."

"So...the soul is split by murder, but love can shield the soul?" Harry asked, feeling very off-kilter.

"Precisely," Dumbledore replied. "I think you will find that the Dementors are less likely to be as drawn to you now that there is only one soul within you. The other - the evil presence forced upon you - is gone."

Harry shook his head, feeling very confused. His brain was still having trouble keeping up with the evening's events, and one great piece of the puzzle still baffled him. "How did I manage to get the Killing Curse to work against Voldemort?" he asked. "He was definitely off his game tonight. I shouldn't have been able to do that. He was much more powerful than me."

"You are again underestimating your greatest strength, Harry, and Tom's utter lack of that same quality," Dumbledore replied quietly.

"Love again?" Harry asked, almost wearily.

"When you were dueling Tom earlier, each time you struck, you uttered the name of one of Tom's former victims. Why did you do such a thing?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shrugged, remembered the great fury he'd felt at the way Voldemort killed so casually. "He thought there was no consequence - that they didn't matter. Did you know that I found Bertha Jorkins' bones scattered in the woods as if she was nothing?"

"Which is, most likely, exactly as Voldemort saw her. But you buried her, and then struck back for her to let him know that she wasn't forgotten - that she did matter. You did the same for Cedric and Frank

Bryce and every other person you named. Their spirits understood this and sang your praises for it," Dumbledore said gravely.

"Pardon?" Harry asked, thoroughly confused.

"The voices, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Did you not hear the voices rising behind the Veil?"

Harry's mouth opened and closed several times before he could form the words. "I did...but I didn't think anyone else could. Snape said those voices come from trapped souls behind it," he said, squeezing his eyes shut lest they betray him.

"They are not trapped," Dumbledore said firmly, a faint trace of anger in his voice. "The Veil is merely a gateway to the Afterworld. Not everyone can hear the voices, however. It has nothing to do with magical talent - only those in the mortal world who are pure of heart are able to hear them."

"But Voldemort heard them. You just said he did," Harry insisted.

"As in most magical equations, the opposite also holds true," Dumbledore said, smiling apologetically. "Those with a heart lacking of all compassion can also hear the voices, only they are frightened and alarmed by them, as you saw with Tom. He could hear the voices rising and detected the light growing, and he knew death was nearby. Death frightened Tom more than anything else, and in the end, it was your dead loved ones who enabled you to defeat him."

"So, what happens now?" Harry asked softly, uncertain of the answer he wanted.

"The battle is still raging at Hogwarts, although the Death Eaters have begun to notice the Dark Marks on their arms disappearing, and that Voldemort is gone from their minds. They are frightened and confused which has made them rather rabid. A dangerous situation, but I suspect the Order will have it contained shortly," Dumbledore replied, closing his eyes and creasing his forehead, as if he was looking somewhere else.

"And the losses?" Harry asked, his stomach clenching.

"That remains to be seen and is something you will have to learn when your body awakens," Dumbledore said sadly. "Which brings me to my next point...you need to give your spirit time to heal, Harry."

Harry blinked uncomprehendingly, staring at the Headmaster with a puzzled expression. His spirit? Certainly his body was injured, but Madam Pomfrey had never had any difficulty patching him up in the past.

Dumbledore sighed, steepling his fingers beneath his chin. "Your body is broken, and your recovery will be slow. I suggest you use the forced confinement to allow your emotional recovery."

"I'm fine," Harry mumbled, shifting away from Professor Dumbledore.

Dumbledore's eyes rose to his hairline, and he said quietly, "Harry, the barrenness of our surrounding says differently. I suggest you allow Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger and particularly your Miss Weasley to assist you. They are your greatest strength. You do them a disservice to shut them out."

Harry couldn't bear to look into those sad blue eyes, so he looked at the fire instead, holding his tongue. He tried to hide the flicker of irritation that rose within him. He'd done what was expected of him. What more did Dumbledore want?

"It is not meant as a criticism, merely an observation," Dumbledore said gently, and Harry felt his annoyance fade. "You have been forced from one life-threatening situation to another since your arrival at Hogwarts. You have spent the better part of a year preparing for this battle and what you fully expected to be your own demise. I expect it will take some time for your mind to adjust before you are able to relax and live life to its fullest."

"It's over now," Harry mumbled.

"Killing not only takes the life of the victim, but it takes a part of the killer, as well," Dumbledore said solemnly. "For you, I hope the only part it takes is the part that ought never to have been there in the first place. You've fulfilled your destiny in regards to Tom, Harry, but not your destiny in regards to you. You are a young man with a bright and glorious future ahead of you, if you allow yourself the happiness to experience it."

Harry sat his jaw firmly and continued to stare at the fire, willing the lump in his throat to go away.

"You deserve that. Miss Weasley deserves it; and your friends deserve it. This one last burden rests on your shoulders because they won't fully allow themselves to heal until you do," Dumbledore said, smiling gently.

"I'll try, sir," Harry whispered.

"That is all I can ask of you," Dumbledore said, the sparkle finally returning to his eyes. "And with Miss Weasley's determination, Mr. Weasley's stubbornness, and Miss Granger's cleverness, I am certain it will be enough."

Harry felt a slight grin tugging at the corner of his lips. He certainly did have the best of friends.

"What about Draco?" he asked suddenly. "What will happen to him? He actually came through in the end."

"Mr. Malfoy also has a long and difficult road ahead of him, and like yours, his future is unclear," Dumbledore replied. "As with you, the support of loved ones is a key factor. I suppose an olive branch of friendship would go a long way."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I'll try, sir. He's not the easiest person to be friendly toward."

"That he is not," Dumbledore replied, chuckling. "I think it will be beyond your capabilities to do so, at first, anyway. As I said, your recovery will be longer than you expect. I was thinking perhaps your cousin, Dudley, and Mr. Malfoy should be encouraged to continue their friendship once they return to their lives. They each need a friend and confidante."

"Dudley?" Harry asked, blinking in surprise. "Oh, they make a pair, all right."

"Yes, they certainly do," Dumbledore said, smiling. "Put the bug in Miss Weasley's ear. If she knows it's something you desire, she'll move heaven and earth to make it happen. There are those in residence within my realm that fear that girl's temper."

Harry chuckled fondly, imagining the heaven's quailing under Ginny's Bat-Bogey Hex.

"Where is your realm, sir?" he asked curiously, his stomach clenching painfully once again.

"The Afterlife, Harry. Since I've been here, I've had the opportunity to speak with your parents and Sirius. They've all been watching over you. They are so proud of how far you've come, and the life you've made for yourself," Dumbledore said, watching Harry closely. Taking a deep breath, he added, "Although they did give me an earful regarding some of my choices towards you."

Harry had to blink quickly to remain in control of the emotions that suddenly washed over him. His mum, dad, and Sirius had been watching him. That simultaneously filled him with both pride and a great sense of loss, and he wasn't certain what to say.

"Your mother, in particular beams with pride when she speaks of you, and the man you've become. Your father is pleased with your choice in friends, and Sirius's comment had something to do with the phrase 'smokin' redheaded birds'," Dumbledore said, smiling fondly.

Harry chuckled, swiping absently at the corner of his eye.

"I also had the chance to speak with Remus, Tonks and Percy as they arrived. None of them regretted their decision. You haven't let their sacrifices be for naught. All of them were among the voices you heard beyond that Veil, and all of them have been avenged," Dumbledore said quietly.

"So...what happens now?" Harry asked, swallowing the painful lump in his throat.

"You shall return to your body, and the door will close once again. I shall travel beyond and continue my grand adventure," Dumbledore said, smiling benignly.

"Do you have to go now?" Harry asked, alarmed. His heart began to thud painfully once again. He didn't want Professor Dumbledore to leave so

soon after he'd found him again. He wasn't certain he could bear the loss a second time, but couldn't bring himself to say it out loud.

It appeared he didn't have to, because Dumbledore gazed at him with those kind, understanding eyes. "Eventually, but I can stay until you feel ready to return alone," he said softly.

"What if I never feel ready?" Harry asked, looking away.

"Then I shall have to give you a slight push. After all, Miss Weasley would come after me if I kept you from her for long," Dumbledore said, chuckling.

"That she would," Harry replied, a reluctant grin tugging at his lips.

"She loves you, Harry. Allow yourself to love her in return. I would like to see you return to school, not only to finish your education, but to have one year to live as a normal adolescent before real life commences. Although, I daresay you have enough detentions under your belt, I would like to see you earn a few for doing things that will give Minerva some additional gray hairs," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling merrily.

"I suppose there are a few broom cupboards that Ginny and I haven't discovered yet," Harry conceded cheekily.

"Excellent," Professor Dumbledore replied before raising his head and tilting it to the side as if listening to something at a great distance away.

"Sir?" Harry asked curiously.

"Miss Granger and Miss Weasley are perplexed over where to take you, and what to do with Tom's remains," Dumbledore replied.

Harry looked away. "Hogwarts is still under attack, and both the Ministry and St. Mungo's are under Death Eater control."

"That is how it appears," Dumbledore said mysteriously, waving his hand in the air.

"What did you do?" Harry asked.

"While it is true that Tom's legion has been withholding care at St. Mungo's, a large number of the Healers have banded together and have been running a renegade hospital, of sorts. The same is true at the Ministry. As Kingsley and Alastor have rounded up the Aurors and formed their own resistance, there are a number of Ministry workers who have done the same."

Harry sat up straighter, feeling the first ray of hope for the Wizarding population.

"Sometimes, it takes a great tragedy for the bravery within some people to show," Dumbledore said softly. "I have planted a thought within Leticia Warbanks' mind to inspect the Department of Mysteries."

"Leticia Warbanks?" Harry asked.

"She is a Ministry worker from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. She has been the focal point for the small resistance at the Ministry. She will know which Healers can be trusted at St. Mungo's," Professor Dumbledore replied.

"The Wizarding world will have to go through a long, and - I hope - thorough period of reconstruction. I hope people like Leticia, Alastor, Kingsley and Arthur are heavily involved for the betterment of all," Professor Dumbledore said. "Unfortunately for you, I do not see the public's interest in you fading any time soon."

"We all have our part to play, I suppose," Harry said, shrugging.

"A very mature attitude," Dumbledore said, beaming.

Harry really wasn't listening very closely to what Professor Dumbledore was saying. A new thought had occurred to him.

"Sir...if I imagined you here, could I imagine anyone else that I wanted to see?" he asked, barely daring to breathe.

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose, and his piercing blue eyes peered over his half-moon spectacles. "I cannot answer that query. Nothing has ever gone exactly according to the rules when it comes to you. Perhaps you should take a chance."

Harry swallowed heavily. His first thought was to try and talk with his parents, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. He'd had plenty of conversations with them as a child when he was locked alone in his cupboard, but he'd never actually expected them to answer. He wasn't certain if he could stand the disappointment if it failed.

He moved his lips but was unable to utter a sound. He looked at Professor Dumbledore helplessly.

"I wish it was something I could do for you, Harry, but it is not. This is your mind, and only your thoughts will be heard," Dumbledore said sadly.

Harry swallowed again, forcing his racing heart to calm. His nostrils flared slightly before he shut his eyes tightly and let his mind conjure an image of his godfather. For so long, he'd banished from his thoughts the image of Sirius's face and the sound of his bark-like laugh, unwilling to feel the pain of loss. Now, however, he called forth scattered memories of the closest thing to a parent he'd ever known.

Harry opened his eyes slowly, and his breath caught in his throat as he saw a familiar swagger emerging from the gray fog. As the figure walked, his shaggy, shoulder-length hair fluttered as the area around him formed into a Quidditch pitch.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Sirius demanded, sounding very irritated. "One minute I was chatting up a delectable blonde bird with

very little between her ears aside from peroxide, and the next minute I'm in the middle of nowhere - alone."

"Sirius," Harry choked.

Sirius stopped, frozen to the spot, squinting. He put his hand to his forehead, shielding his eyes. "Harry?" he whispered, astonished.

Unable to stop, Harry leaped from the chair and barreled onto the pitch, flinging himself into Sirius's arms and clutching him fiercely.

"Harry," Sirius said, wrapping his arms around Harry's shoulders and pulling him tight, pounding him exuberantly on the back. "What the... Where are we? Did you- oh, no," Sirius said, pulling away and staring at Harry, horrorstruck.

"No, Sirius. Harry is still among the living, and his body remains back in the Ministry," Dumbledore said, placing a steadying hand on Sirius's shoulder.

Sirius visibly relaxed, shutting his eyes tightly for a moment before he threw back his head and released a pent-up bark of laughter.

Harry kept his face buried in Sirius's shoulder, unable to make his fingers release their grip. He stood there, shaking, as he clung to his godfather and wondered how he could possibly pull out of this with his pride somewhat intact.

"Why don't you pull up a chair, Sirius?" Dumbledore offered, giving Harry a moment to collect himself before he had to speak.

Never releasing his grip on Harry, Sirius maneuvered them both over to a couch, where he pulled Harry down beside him. Another cup of hot chocolate had appeared on the table, and Sirius took a shaky sip.

"Bugger, Harry, couldn't you have at least laced it with some Firewhisky? This has been quite a shock for an old man," Sirius said, grinning. "So, tell me - what's happened to make this visit possible? I've never heard of anything like it done before. Have you got yourself knocked out again, Squirt?"

Harry suddenly found his voice, and he turned accusing eyes on Professor Dumbledore. "I thought you said they'd been watching me," he said, his voice croaky.

"I have been keeping an eye on you, but not twenty-four seven," Sirius said, rolling his eyes. His gaze flickered back and forth between Harry and Dumbledore. "Does this have anything to do with Voldemort?"

"He's in your realm now," Harry said softly, digging his nails into his palm.

Sirius blanched. "You did it?" he asked, holding his breath.

"Yeah," Harry replied, shifting uncomfortably.

Sirius leaped up, pumping his fists in the air and whooping with glee.

"Sirius, I think that Harry is not quite ready to celebrate yet," Dumbledore said, gently resting his hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry kept his eyes firmly on the ground, staring at the dragon-hide boots Sirius wore and trying not to think about anything.

"What? Why not?" Sirius asked, dumbfounded. He used his finger to raise Harry's chin. "You're finally free. You'll no longer be hunted. No more Dursleys, or guards, or any of it."

Harry forced himself to meet Sirius's earnest gaze, his stomach churning unpleasantly. "I know. It just... It's not real yet," he said lamely.

An incredulous expression crossed Sirius's face. "Harry, think of all the parties. Every bloke in Britain will want to buy you a drink, and every witch will want to—"

"I am certain Harry is fully aware of that, Sirius. He is merely asking for some time to adjust," Dumbledore said, interrupting Sirius before he could voice the possibilities that were blatantly on his mind.

"Right," Sirius said, clearing his throat. "Besides, you already seem to have your hands full with the one witch you've got. She's a looker, that one."

The corner of Harry's mouth quirked. "I'll be certain to pass that on," he said dryly.

"So, how long have we got?" Sirius asked.

"I would surmise not very long," Dumbledore said. "Once the Healers get hold of Harry's physical body, they will most likely ply him with potions that will break this connection. Besides, Harry has friends and family waiting for him in the land of the living."

"He's got friends and family right here!" Sirius said hotly.

"Would you choose to keep him here, then, Sirius?" Dumbledore asked, tilting his head to the side.

"What? No. I want him to live...I just want some time with him. I was robbed of that time twice already," Sirius said, clearing his throat.

"What if I want to stay?" Harry asked, leaning into Sirius. He'd only just got him back; he didn't want to think about having to leave. He didn't know if his heart could stand it again.

"Your future is in the present, not the past," Dumbledore insisted, the twinkle in his eyes dimming.

Sirius shook him roughly, looking as if he wanted to hit something. "He's right, Harry. Merlin, it's good to see you, but everything I did - I did it for you - because I wanted you to live. I may be childish, but I won't take that chance from you now that you finally have it."

Harry swelled, ready to argue his point. He was no longer a child and could make his own decisions. He was beginning to resent both Sirius and Dumbledore trying to tell him what was best for him.

Sirius diffused his anger when he laid a gentle hand on the side of Harry's face. "Don't worry about me. I'm good. I see your father and Remus every day, and when your mother lets us, we relive our glory days."

"Perhaps there are others you'd like to see before your time here is through," Dumbledore said gently.

Keeping a firm hand on Sirius, unwilling to let him go lest he disappear, Harry again shut his eyes and this time, thought of Remus. He still didn't feel quite ready to see his parents. He remembered how Remus had taught him to conjure his first Patronus, and the determined, unwavering looks he and Tonks had shared before they had died.

Harry opened his eyes in time to see a classroom taking shape not far from the common room. It was one of the Defense rooms, and held a wide variety of Dark creatures. Before Harry could call to the two figures he saw seated in the classroom, Sirius did it for him.

"Remus, you old dog! Harry's here," Sirius said, shaking Remus's hand and pointing at Harry. "Hiya, Tonks."

"Harry," Remus said, inhaling deeply. He looked much as Harry remembered him, perhaps a little less gray. Tonks's hair was its traditional bubblegum pink, and she wore a red Weird Sisters T-shirt that clashed horribly with the color.

Harry shut his eyes, breathing through his nose as images of Remus's sacrifice filled his mind. "What did you have to go and do that for?" Harry asked, his voice choked. He shook Remus's hand before pulling him firmly into an embrace. He then turned and also hugged Tonks.

"Hiya, kid," Tonks said brightly. "How are you feeling?"

"A little shell-shocked," Harry admitted, shrugging.

"I bet," Tonks replied, grinning as she leaned over to ruffle his hair. "You did it."

"We saw what happened earlier with Voldemort, Harry," Remus said gently. "You were magnificent."

"I couldn't have done it without your help," Harry said, again staring at his feet. "Professor Dumbledore told me it was you and some of Voldemort's other victims that distracted him, and Dumbledore and Hermione came up with the idea to create my own Horcrux."

Remus didn't reply until Harry was finally forced to raise his eyes to meet Remus's steady gaze. "I don't care whose idea it was - you were magnificent," he said. "Not only did you get Voldemort, but Severus is now on his way to Azkaban."

"You got Snivellus? You didn't tell me that part," Sirius said, almost accusingly. "How could I have missed that?"

"You missed everything. Where have you been?" Tonks scolded him. "Lily's beside herself."

"He got him good, Padfoot," Remus said, beaming. "You should have seen it. Actually, young Ginny even gave him a whopper of a Bat-Bogey Hex when he tried to attack Harry after it was all over."

"You saw my mum?" Harry asked, stunned.

"He attacked him after?" Sirius yelped, tossing his head from side-to-side as if deranged.

"We were with her and your dad during the battle. They're both so proud of you," Remus replied, ignoring Sirius completely.

Harry nodded, feeling worried and somewhat apprehensive of this overload of information.

"Hey! Why don't you bring them here?" Sirius asked, still frowning. "It'll be like the party we always should have had."

Harry felt as if his heart had stopped beating, and he looked away. Something about the idea of seeing his parents terrified him, despite the fact that it was what he'd always wanted. Everyone kept saying how proud they were of him. What if the real thing didn't measure up to all the hype?

"Harry will call them when he's ready, Padfoot," Remus said, his eyes peering knowingly at Harry. Remus had always been able to read Harry very well.

"What's to be ready? He called us; he can just do the same for them," Sirius said, warming to the idea. "They'll be furious if they find out we've been here all this time without them."

Harry looked away, his heart beginning to pound erratically. He was about to meet his parents for the first time, and he'd already done something to anger them. Great. He wondered if his mum could shout like Mrs. Weasley, and how it would feel if she shouted at him. And could he just call them here? He'd done it subconsciously with Dumbledore, and he'd used memories to bring forth Sirius, Remus and Tonks. He didn't have any memories of his parents - not real memories, anyway, and he didn't want to use the one he had of his mother's death.

Remus laid a steady hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezing gently. "They won't be furious," he said quietly, halting Harry's frantic musings.

"Perhaps you don't need a specific memory, but merely the feelings they inspire within you will do," Dumbledore said, laying a restraining hand on Sirius's shoulder.

Harry nodded, feeling trapped. He shut his eyes and thought of Godric's Hollow - not how he'd seen it, but how he imagined it should have been,

with lilies growing outside, and a large oak tree with a swing on a low-lying branch, and a tree house hidden behind the leaves. His father would be cutting the grass while his mother prepared a lunch for him and his younger siblings.

"James!" Sirius shouted, startling Harry from the vision.

His eyes flew open wide in time to see the little cottage just as he'd imagined it with his parents standing on the stoop. They were both very young, only a few years older than Harry at best, and he vaguely wondered if they remained stuck at the age of their death in the afterworld or were merely called forth the way Harry envisioned them.

"There you are, Padfoot, you old dog. Who is she this time? You haven't been 'round for weeks," James Potter said, clapping Sirius on the back. Even his voice sounded very much like Harry's.

"Where are we, Sirius?" Lily asked, tilting her head to the side. She was taller than Harry had expected, although perhaps that assumption was influenced by Ginny's diminutive height.

"Sweet Merlin," James said, whistling through his teeth when he caught sight of Harry.

Harry felt his knees give out, and he sank to the couch with Dumbledore's gentle assistance.

"What is it, James?" Lily asked, peering over his shoulder. She swayed when she saw Harry, and James grabbed her to steady her.

"Harry, is that you?" James croaked.

"My baby," Lily said, slapping a hand over her mouth.

Harry stared, wide-eyed, at both his parents and Professor Dumbledore, uncertain what he should do. He felt frozen in place, unable to make either his mind or his body work properly.

Lily broke his trance. She rushed toward him, flung her arms around him, and hugged him fiercely, sobbing into his chest. Harry gaped at Professor Dumbledore, who only smiled benignly.

Harry had never done well with crying girls, and this was somehow much worse. This was his mother! His head knew that, but sitting there with this young, attractive woman, barely older than himself, crying all over him was disconcerting.

One thing he was definitely aware of - she hugged even tighter than Mrs. Weasley.

He raised panicked eyes to his father, who gently came toward them and pulled Lily back.

"Come on, Lily. Let him breathe. You're embarrassing the poor bloke," he said, grinning. His hazel eyes sparkled as they raked over his son, and he stood in front of Harry, grinning widely.

"I am not embarrassing him," Lily said, indignantly slapping James on the arm.

"Oh, you so are," Sirius said, grinning. "Our Harry here embarrasses quite easily, actually. I used to like to make sport of him and see how red he would turn."

Harry scowled at Sirius, who only laughed harder. Lily reached out and gently brushed the hair back from Harry's scar. He let her stare at it for a moment before shifting uncomfortably.

"I've enjoyed watching you play Quidditch," James said brightly. They all appeared to be searching for the right thing to say. As far as Harry was concerned, Quidditch always worked, and he instantly warmed to James.

"Yeah? I've played since my first year," he said.

"I know! I was so proud when that happened, wasn't I, Lily? When you were born, I bought you this little toddler starter broom. Your mother was furious and insisted that I couldn't put you on it for at least five years, but I knew you'd be a natural," James said, beaming.

Lily shook her head, but she kept smiling as she reached out to straighten the sleeve on Harry's shirt, and brush the hair from his collar.

"I had plans to build our own pitch in the woods behind the house at Godric's Hollow. Did you notice it? There was plenty of room for a secluded clearing, and I thought it would be great to play with the smell of the ocean on the breeze," James said, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Oh! I did see the wood there. That would have been a great place for a pitch," Harry replied, happily contemplating the idea of a pitch at his own home. He could have had friends over for pick-up matches during the summer.

The Quidditch talk continued for some time while Lily kept reaching out to stroke Harry's hair. Although disconcerted at first, Harry eventually relaxed and stopped flinching at her touch. She was very much like Mrs. Weasley in that way.

"You never could have built that pitch," Sirius said, snorting while shaking his head. "The Ministry denied that request because you were foolish enough to give them your lighting specifications."

"Well, what's the use in having an ocean view if you can't see it at night?" James asked, sounding insulted. "I could have cast the Muggle-Repelling Charms myself. It wouldn't have caused them any trouble."

"We know, dear," Lily said, placating him.

James sulkily folded his arms across his chest.

"I think it would have been brilliant," Harry said, feeling bad for his dad. He could see how much that pitch meant to him and knew how it felt to be disappointed. There was something about the idea that his dad had these huge plans for him and his future siblings that filled Harry's heart. His dad had wanted to play Quidditch with him! His own dad.

"It would have been, wouldn't it?" James asked, the boyishness returning to his face. "I wish I could have finished it before...well, I wish I could have left it for you. Your friend Ron and you would have had a grand time."

"You like Ron, then?" Harry asked, trying to sound casual. Somehow, he desperately wanted James to approve of all his friends.

"Of course I like Ron," James said, nonplussed. "You've got the best set of friends I could have ever wanted for you, and I thank Merlin for them everyday."

Harry beamed.

"We were both happy with the friends you made that first year at Hogwarts," Lily said. She'd taken the seat next to Harry and clutched his hand as she spoke.

"Ron will be okay, won't he?" Harry asked, remembering the curse that had struck Ron during the battle.

Lily smiled sadly. "I don't know."

"Why don't you know?" Harry asked, fear rising like a bubble in his throat. "You said you've been watching everything."

"The future is never concrete, Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "It is ever moving and changing. It shifts according to how events unfold. We are mere observers."

"It's probably time for me to go back," Harry whispered thickly, his throat very tight. James, Sirius and Remus had gone back to their argument over the Quidditch pitch, but Lily was still listening to their conversation, and he found it hard to meet her gaze.

"And it is time for me to move forward," Dumbledore said, nodding. "Do you want to say your farewells?"

"I think it would be easier if I left first," Harry said, knowing he couldn't stand watching them all disappear one by one again.

Dumbledore's eyes dimmed sadly, but he nodded his understanding. "Go forward knowing that your departed loved ones are all watching over you."

Lily sniffed, leaning over and grabbing Harry's hands. Her green eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them back resolutely. She tugged at a lock of his hair, smiling sadly.

"Your hair has always been so soft. I used to play with it when you were a baby. I thought it was just baby hair, but it's still just as

soft as it was then. I missed so much - we missed so much," she said sadly, biting the corner of her lip.

Harry swallowed. What could he say? There was no denying her words, and he was at a loss how to make either of them feel better. The past had happened and couldn't be changed. Perhaps that was the reason for his visit here in the first place. Maybe this locked room inside the Ministry - the one used to study the great mystery of love - was meant to show him that even though he'd come through a tragic past, it was the love of the people who'd touched him that was pushing him toward his bright future. Perhaps that was love's greatest gift.

Knowing what he had to do, he tried to smile and pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly. "Take care of the Marauders. I want to leave remembering them this way," he said, his vision blurred. James, Remus and Sirius were laughing and good-naturedly shoving each other in the shoulder on occasion. It seemed the way it was supposed to be.

"I will," Lily said quietly, sniffing back her own tears. "Always remember that we love you, and that we're all so proud of you. You've grown into a fantastic young man, and I can't imagine a better son. I'm very pleased with the girl you've chosen. Be a gentleman and let her inside your head as well as your heart. Take care of each other."

Harry nodded, sniffing.

"I'm not going to make a horrid scene," Lily said, laughing through her tears. "I'll let you play macho. I love you, Harry."

Harry blinked, stunned. He'd never thought he'd hear his mother say that. He could feel his eyes filling and panicked that he was about to lose control.

"Oh, now I've done it," Lily said, swiping Harry's eyes and pulling him into a hug. "I'm going to stand with Tonks so you can return to the life you've made. It's a good life, son. Let yourself really live it."

Before Harry could reply, she hugged him once more and walked over to Tonks. Tonks wrapped her arm around the other woman and guided Lily's head to her shoulder.

"Live well, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said, dragging Harry's attention back to the matter at hand.

Harry nodded and got to his feet, looking anywhere but right at Dumbledore's eyes. He allowed the Headmaster to lead him quietly from the common room, stealing one glance back at the laughing Marauders and noticing his mother still watching him.

When they reached the entrance where the portrait hole should have been, Professor Dumbledore stopped. Before he could think about it enough to stop himself from doing it, Harry flung his arms around the headmaster and held on fiercely. Dumbledore wrapped his arms around Harry's shoulders and enveloped him in a warm embrace.

"You can always find me here, Harry," he said, resting his hand over Harry's heart, "even if we can no longer have our little chats."

Harry nodded, unable to speak.

"Simply imagine yourself going back, and your mind will do the rest," Dumbledore said.

Harry blinked and looked ahead of him, vaguely noticing that the great expanse of gray had brightened slightly. He could see most of Hogwarts and the Burrow dimly lit in the distance. He could even hear the crashing of waves and knew his and Ginny's private beach was not far.

As he began looking around and taking notice of places, shapes, and events in his life, he'd started forward, again floating above it all as his body moved toward the locked door. Craning his neck around, he realized he could still clearly see the common room, but it was vacant - a few empty mugs were the only indication that it had recently been used.

Harry shut his eyes to block the tears. It was time to go back.

Chapter Thirty-One

Survivors

Ginny stared out the window of the double room in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, watching the sun rise gloriously over the just-awakening city streets. There wasn't a single cloud marring the sky. She could see birds fluttering around the trees in a park at the corner, and even the smog from the morning rush of Muggle traffic appeared absent this day. It was as if nature itself was rejoicing over Voldemort's fall the previous evening.

The bright sunlight and vibrant colors contrasted starkly with the somber mood inside the room where Ginny sat. Throughout the rest of the hospital, Healers had been rushing to and fro nearly non-stop since she had arrived. Even with the vast number of injuries they were treating, the Healers could barely contain their jubilation. Those injured who were still conscious waited for hours, celebrating in the corridors and chatting with strangers and acquaintances alike over the defeat of the Dark Lord. From her hidden spot, Ginny overheard the story of Voldemort's defeat growing taller each time it was retold.

The only exception to this euphoria was inside the sterile, antiseptic room where Harry lay, still unconscious. A serious, nearly awed reverence fell upon anyone entering the room, and the Healers checked his vital signs with wide-eyed astonishment. If Harry were awake, Ginny was certain he'd hate every minute of it. She tried to assuage her increasing worry by telling herself that he was only staying asleep to avoid the hero-worship.

When his eyes had rolled back and he'd lost consciousness at the Ministry, Ginny had felt a brief, heart-stopping moment of panic. She'd truly thought she'd lost him. His body had gone limp, and his presence - that same powerful aura around him that had always attracted her - seemed to just fade away.

Hermione had insisted that his heart was still beating, but Ginny hadn't been convinced. When Ministry workers, led by a witch called Leticia Warbanks had stormed into the Department of Mysteries and taken control, they'd assured Ginny of the same thing. Harry's heart was, indeed, still beating. It had been Leticia Warbanks, a stern-looking witch with black hair streaked with gray and smile crinkles around her eyes, who had immediately decided to transport Harry to St. Mungo's.

Hermione and Ginny had protested, fearing the Death Eaters still in charge at the hospital might further harm him in retaliation for killing their Dark Lord. Leticia insisted that there were people at the hospital who could be trusted. She said that once the news of Voldemort's defeat began to spread, there would be a bunch of volunteers lining up to protect Harry from any wayward Death Eaters.

She'd been right, too. As the news of Voldemort's fall traveled from the bowels of the Ministry up through the building and onto the streets, the Wizarding world that had long been held oppressed began to turn on their tormenters. A mob mentality overcame them, and many of the Death Eaters who hadn't been involved in the attack on Hogwarts were hunted down and slain in the streets.

They had been executed within the Ministry, in their homes, even in the corridors of St. Mungo's by the Healers sworn to preserve life. The general consensus appeared to be that they would never allow this to happen again.

There were parties and fireworks and loud celebrations in the streets all across Britain. Harry's name was toasted in pubs and on the streets to anyone who would listen. Ginny couldn't even imagine what the Muggles must be thinking about it all.

Leticia Warbanks had been the only Ministry worker who hadn't completely panicked over the sight of Voldemort's dead body, and she simply radiated authority. She and a small handful of Ministry employees had tried to maintain order and speak reason with the rampaging mobs of celebrating people to no avail. Instead, they'd focused their energy on restoring the hospital in order to treat the wounded and to assist in the battle at Hogwarts.

As in other places, the Death Eaters who had been attacking the school had turned on one another. Some tried to bargain and give up the names of their cohorts to save themselves, but most of them simply battled their own confusion, refusing to believe that Voldemort could really be gone.

Several of the captured Death Eaters had claimed to be under the Imperius curse, but their claims were met with deaf ears, and they were either slain or packed off to holding facilities before they could be sent to Azkaban.

Ginny had yet to see anyone from her family, and she waited on tenterhooks for any news. She and her group had all been treated when they'd first arrived, but only Ron and Harry had been admitted. The curse that had struck Ron had done a large amount of internal damage. The Healers had patched him up and repaired his broken wrist, but

they'd insisted he needed to stay in bed for a couple days. Everyone had agreed that it would be best to keep the boys in one room. This way, the Ministry could monitor their visitors, and Hermione and Ginny could keep an eye on both of them. Hermione had curled up in a chair by Ron's bed, and they'd both been sleeping peacefully for hours.

Ginny wished she could do the same. She'd managed to drift off at one point during the night, but her uneasy sleep had been plagued by strange dreams. Professor Dumbledore had appeared and told her it was down to her to save Harry. She supposed it was simply her anxiety playing havoc on her mind, but she still couldn't shake the dream.

She wrung her hands, staring at Harry's pale and bruised face. The Healers insisted that it wasn't the injuries that he'd received during the battle that kept him unconscious - although they were many and vast - it was the Draught of Living Death that he'd ingested that was keeping him from regaining consciousness. His vital signs all showed that he was alive, but none of their scans had picked up any brainwave activity.

They said it was a unique case, and they weren't entirely certain how long it would take him to wake up. Ginny suspected that unique case meant they just didn't know. The side effects of the antidote they'd given him were nausea and fever. The potion forced his body to fight in order to expel the poisons, so even after he'd regained consciousness, Harry was in for a rough recovery. Ginny couldn't even bring herself to think about what the lack of brain activity could mean. It was simply more than she could bear at the moment.

The Healers still didn't know anything about the Horcrux that had resided within Harry's soul. Ginny had nearly blurted everything when they'd begun examining him, but Hermione held her back, insisting it was better not to reveal anything about the Horcruxes lest any other Dark Lord wanna-be's got any ideas. Ginny knew she had a point but would only agree to remain silent unless it looked as if they couldn't treat Harry. Hermione readily accepted this condition.

Although she'd known what was supposed to happen when Harry caught that Snitch and uttered the Killing Curse, Ginny had been completely unprepared for the sheer agony that Harry underwent. His scar, which had been extremely red and hot to the touch, literally burst as the dark piece of Tom's soul was expelled. It had bled profusely, but he hadn't even appeared to notice. And then Snape...

Ginny scowled as she remembered how her former Potions master had attempted to curse Harry when he was too weak to defend himself. Leticia had promised that Snape would be transported directly to Azkaban, but without the Dementors there, Ginny thought that was too good for him.

Her face softened as she glanced over the bed and watched Harry sleep. She was still having a hard time believing it was really over. She picked up his limp hand and brushed her lips across his bruised knuckles. His long, slender fingers seemed almost delicate despite his calloused skin. They suited Harry - something soft and vulnerable beneath a tough outer shell.

She sank into the chair beside his bed once again, resting her head in her hands. A soft voice sounding from the doorway startled her.

"Am I intruding?"

Ginny looked up quickly to see a tired and drawn Leticia Warbanks. Stray wisps of peppered hair had pulled loose from the bun she wore at the nape of her neck. Something told Ginny that it was very rare for anyone to see Leticia in this disheveled state.

"No, Mrs. Warbanks. Come in," Ginny said, smiling tiredly. She sat up straight, suddenly feeling very awkward.

"My dear, I told you to call me Leticia," the elder woman said, smiling kindly as she tiptoed past Hermione and took the chair on the other side of Harry's bed.

Ginny smiled uncomfortably, causing Leticia to laugh outright.

"In all fairness, I should be the one offering you the salutation of respect," she said, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow. "After all, it was you young people who freed us all from this tyranny."

"It was Harry," Ginny replied, her gaze flicking back to the sleeping figure on the bed.

"Has there been any change?" Leticia asked quietly, careful not to wake Ron or Hermione.

"No," Ginny whispered, blinking the moisture from her eyes.

Leticia nodded, pursing her lips. "I've placed a guard outside this room and given him the list of names you approved for entrance."

Ginny's eyes widened in alarm. "Has there been an attempt already?"

"No, not at all. I suspect it will take some time for the scattered remains of the Death Eaters to regroup, if they ever do," Leticia replied. "I'm more worried about the press. They've reorganized and are growing desperate for a statement."

Ginny let out an exasperated breath, blowing her fringe in the air. "He couldn't give a statement even if that's what he wanted to do!"

"No. And as soon as they realize that, it will be you, your brother, and Miss Granger whom they'll be seeking," Leticia said.

"Better us than him," Ginny mumbled.

A gentle smile lit Leticia's stern face, softening it. "You're very protective of him. I hope he appreciates it."

Ginny shrugged. "He's been through a lot."

The smile slipped from Leticia's face, and she nodded gravely. "I'll handle the reporters as best I can until he's stronger. He will have to give a statement eventually if he ever hopes to have any peace."

"Is there any news from Hogwarts?" Ginny asked, not particularly caring what the reporters wanted at the moment.

"The Death Eaters have been contained, and some of the wounded are beginning to arrive. I'm sorry I don't have anything more specific for you," Leticia replied.

Ginny's shoulders slumped. She desperately wanted some news about her family and had to blink repeatedly to keep her eyes from filling. For the first time, she understood her mother's obsessive need for that family clock. She nearly jumped out of her skin when the door burst open again. She grasped her wand and waved in frantically at the intruder.

"Mum!" she said, flabbergasted.

"Ginny," her mother cried, stopping short when she saw Leticia sitting in the chair opposite Ginny. Hermione shifted in her sleep, but she didn't wake.

"Hello, Molly," Leticia said softly. "Ginny was just filling me in on some of the details."

"Oh, Ginny! You're all right," her mother said, collecting her wits and rushing into the room to gather Ginny into her arms.

Ginny buried her face into her mum's shoulder and breathed deeply. Even after a battle, her mother still managed to smell of warm bread. Ginny suddenly missed the Burrow more than she had at anytime during the entire war. She wanted to go home.

"What happened?" she and her mother both asked simultaneously.

Laughing and crying at the same time, her mum swiped at Ginny's tears and led her back to her chair between the two beds. "Are you hurt?" she asked, touching the red skin on Ginny's shoulder that was revealed when her shirt pulled back as they hugged.

"It's just a cut. The Healers already mended it," Ginny said. "What happened at Hogwarts?"

"What about Ron?" her mother asked, still not answering Ginny's question. Her gaze swept the sleeping figure of her son, looking for signs of damage.

"Here, take my chair," Leticia said, rising. "I've got other things to check on, and you have catching up to do."

"Thank you, Leticia," her mother said as the other woman bid them farewell.

"Ron's all right," Ginny replied. "He had some injuries, but nothing they couldn't fix. He has this scar on his chest right underneath his armpit, and he told the Healers he wanted to keep it."

"He what?" her mother shrieked, causing Hermione to shift and turn her head to the other side before she resettled once again.

Her mum had visibly paled when Ginny had mentioned Ron's injuries, but her temper was getting the better of her. "What is he thinking? Why would he want to keep such a thing?" she asked huffily.

"Since Harry and I already have scars, he wasn't going to be left out," Ginny said, chuckling at the memory. "He said his isn't as fancy as a lightning bolt, but Weasleys are used to being frugal."

Her mother frowned and folded her arms. "You and Hermione are all right, though?" she asked, her head turning as she inspected the two girls.

"The Healers took care of us, Mum. Don't worry," Ginny replied, knowing it was the same as asking the other woman not to breathe.

"What about Harry?" her mother asked, flinching when she looked at his unnaturally still form.

"They don't know yet," Ginny whispered, her eyes filling again. "He hasn't regained consciousness since it all happened."

Her mother jumped up and once again gathered Ginny in her arms. "There, there. It's all right. Not to worry - he'll be fine," she said soothingly.

Ginny shifted in her chair, allowing her mother to sit beside her. The chair really wasn't made for two people, but at the moment, Ginny really didn't mind the close quarters.

"He ripped Harry apart, Mum," she said, shuddering as she remembered the battle at the Ministry.

"They said...I mean...the rumor is," her mother said, faltering.

"Harry killed Tom," Ginny said flatly, a single tear slowly dripping from her cheek. She'd frozen in place when Voldemort's body had transformed back into the face she'd once known. She'd only managed to shake off the trance when Harry collapsed. Even now, thinking about Tom Riddle caused her to want to run and hide.

"I was told they dueled right in the Atrium at the Ministry," her mother said.

Ginny forcibly shook off the memories trying to claim her. "Not exactly. It was in the Department of Mysteries. Tom followed Harry there, and they...I've never seen anything like it. He's dead and good riddance, only he did his damn utmost to take Harry with him."

"But it's over now, and we'll all be certain to help Harry recover. He can really live now, Ginny. We all can," her mother said, bristling.

They fell silent as a Healer entered the room. She was a middle-aged witch with light brown hair and a pear-shaped figure. She hovered by Ron's side momentarily, waving her wand over his sleeping form. She

appeared pleased with the results, for she nodded in a self-satisfied way before moving toward Harry.

She waved her wand over him the same way she had done to Ron, only this time the results made her frown.

"Is everything all right?" her mother asked, voicing Ginny's concern.

"Your son is mending nicely, Mrs. Weasley," the Healer replied.

"There's still no change in Mr. Potter, although it is time for another Restorative Potion."

She slid her sturdy arm beneath Harry's shoulders and lifted him slightly. His head lolled to the side, but with a practiced hand, the Healer took a phial from her tray and poured it down his throat. He made choking sounds and some of the thick purple fluid dribbled down his chin, but she quickly uttered an Anti-Gagging Spell, and the rest of the potion slid down Harry's throat.

Ginny waited for the Healer to leave, keeping a close watch on Harry and barely daring to breathe. She'd give anything to see his bright green eyes looking back at her at the moment, but he remained still.

"What happened at Hogwarts, Mum?" she asked, sighing. "Why won't you tell me?"

"I'm not hiding anything from you, Ginny," her mother said, pulling her tight. "I simply don't know much myself, and I'm trying not to think about it."

Breathing very hard, her mother ran her hand on Ginny's hair, patting her with a shaky hand. "Hermione's message reached us in the common room at about the same time we heard the wards come down. Most everyone went outside, but I went up to the hospital wing with Poppy to prepare to treat the injuries."

Ginny sniffled, searching her mother's face.

"After it was all over, I left Poppy back at Hogwarts and came here with George," her mother said, her lower lip trembling.

"George?" Ginny asked, rasping, a leaden feeling consuming her stomach.

Her mother swiped a tear from her eye. "Both he and Shannon were badly Cursed. George was the worst, so Poppy sent him ahead while she tried to tend Shannon," she said.

"Why didn't she just send both of them?" Ginny asked, finding it hard to take a breath.

"The hospital still isn't running at full strength, Ginny, and there are a lot of injuries. I know a large number of the Aurors were also hurt, not to mention the townspeople in Hogsmeade," her mother said, sighing.

"What about Dad?" Ginny asked, biting her lip.

"I don't know. I couldn't find him, so I know he never came up to the hospital wing, but-" her mum broke off with a sniffle, burying her face in her hands.

"He's all right, Mum," Ginny said, wrapping her arm around her mother's back and patting it gently. She felt slightly disconcerted by this sudden role reversal.

"What's wrong with George?" she asked, trying to distract both herself and her mother from dark thoughts about her dad.

"The Healers are working on him now. They said they'd come and get me here when I could see him," her mum said, wiping her nose. Her eyes were very red, and Ginny could see the effort it took to pull herself together. "Anastasia Parkinson saved both George and Shannon."

"Mrs. Parkinson?" Ginny asked, nonplussed.

"She was frantic when Dudley told us that Harry and Pansy were missing. Do you know what happened to Pansy?" her mum asked.

"She's dead," Ginny replied flatly.

"Oh!" her mother gasped, putting her hand on her chest. "Poor Anastasia."

"Pansy betrayed Harry and gave him to Voldemort," Ginny said, gritting her teeth. No matter the circumstances, she could find no compassion for Pansy Parkinson at the moment.

"She what?" her mother asked, stunned. Two high points of color rose on her cheeks.

"She was trying to save Draco, but Voldemort, of course, reneged on their deal. I don't know the whole story. There wasn't enough time for Harry to tell us," Ginny said.

"How did Harry get away?" her mother asked.

"It's a long story, and it doesn't really matter now. You said Mrs. Parkinson saved George?" Ginny asked, sagging back against the chair. She could feel her exhaustion catching up with her as she rested her head on her mother's shoulder.

"Anastasia ran outside with everyone else, determined to find Pansy. When she saw the Death Eater attacking the children, she turned her own wand on him - and she knew who he was, but she killed him, anyway. She said she wouldn't allow another mother to feel what she was feeling," her mother said with watery eyes. "Oh, she'll be devastated."

Ginny couldn't help the grin that pulled at the corner of her mouth as her mother referred to her of-age brothers as 'children'. Some things would never change, and she found she was glad for it.

"What about Iris? Is she okay?" Ginny asked.

"I don't know. She was told to stay inside, but she doesn't listen any better than my children do," her mother said, frowning.

Ginny snorted, unabashed.

"I can't believe it's finally over," her mum whispered.

"I know," Ginny replied. "I've been thinking the same thing all night."

"When it ended the last time - during the first war, I'd already lost my brothers by the end, and you kids were all babies. We celebrated when we heard the news like everyone else, but it wasn't quite the same sort of...anxious relief," her mother said, smiling wistfully. Her gaze roamed to Harry's heavily bruised face sleeping on the pillow next to their chair. "Harry was just a larger-than-life storybook hero. After it was over, I never really considered the true implications for him. Now that I'm sitting here worrying about the rest of my family, I can see the other side of the story."

Ginny sniffled. "The other side?"

"That while we all celebrated and praised his victory over evil, he was a little boy who was left all alone. That's happening now. People are out cavorting in the streets, while there are many families just like ours holding their breath and waiting for news," her mother said softly, dabbing her eye with a handkerchief.

She and her mother sat together in that lumpy chair, their heads each resting on the other until they'd nearly drifted to sleep. When the door to Harry's room opened, they both turned with a start and were relieved to see her dad and Charlie stroll inside. Charlie was limping, and the clothes he wore were singed, while her dad had a bandage above his left eye and his arm was in a sling.

"Arthur!" her mother shouted, her voice cracking. She jumped from the chair and rushed into his arms.

He grabbed her and kissed her hard, causing both Ginny and Charlie to look away, grimacing. Charlie scooped up Ginny, nearly squeezing the life out of her.

"Are you all right?" she asked, noticing him wince as he put her down.

"Yeah," he said gruffly. "I've just left one wound unhealed, and you managed to touch it."

"Why is it unhealed?" her mother asked, finally releasing their father and turning her owl-sharp gaze upon them.

"So he could keep the scar," her father said excitedly, pulling up his own sleeve. "Look!"

He showed them a long, thin, jagged scar running from his hand all the way up to his elbow.

"The Healers downstairs told us about Ron keeping his, and we couldn't let him nick all the glory," Charlie said, conjuring several more

chairs. Ginny knew that had it been a normal situation, this many visitors would never have been allowed in the hospital room. Today was anything but normal, however.

Charlie glanced over at a sleeping Ron proudly, beaming at his unconscious younger brother.

"Honestly, Arthur," her mother scolded in a hushed voice. "I was planning to have a talk with Ron about this ridiculous idea. He doesn't need you encouraging him."

"It's not ridiculous, Mum," Ginny whispered, smiling brightly at her father. "I think it's brilliant, and I know Harry will be touched."

Her mother's eyes drifted warily to Harry's sleeping face, and she visibly deflated. How could anyone deny him anything right now?

"All right, Ginny?" her dad asked, pulling her into a hug. His fingers lightly traced the scar on Ginny's hairline.

"I'm fine, just tired," she replied.

"George is still with the Healers," her mother said. "Do you know anything about Fred, Bill or Fleur?"

"I haven't seen them," her dad said, his face sobering. "We arrived with Shannon and Hagrid."

"Hagrid?" Ginny asked, gasping. "Is he okay?"

"He's really in bad shape. Those Death Eaters gave him a thrashing before we realized what was happening. It was Grawp who saved him," Charlie said.

"You know about Grawp?" Ginny asked blankly.

"Contrary to popular belief," her mother said, rolling her eyes, "some of the adults are aware of what goes on at that school, young lady. Yes, Hagrid kept the Order well informed about Grawp."

"When Grawp saw them hurting Hagrid, he went wild," her father said, shuddering. "He'd decimated half the Death Eaters before the rest of us even got out there."

"Even then we didn't have to do much. They had already begun turning on each other," Charlie said.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"It started with Narcissa Malfoy," Charlie replied. "She threw a wobbly when she heard Draco had gone after Pansy with you lot. She tore out of the castle and fled toward the Death Eaters."

"Toward them?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"Yeah. It was as if she thought Draco and Pansy would be with them," Charlie said, scratching his head.

"I wonder if she knew," Ginny muttered, speaking more to herself.

"Knew what?" her father asked.

"Pansy sold Harry out and delivered him to Voldemort," Ginny replied.

"What?" both Charlie and her dad shouted, glancing at Harry as if to confirm he was really there.

"D'you think Mrs. Malfoy knew?" Ginny asked. "Because Draco didn't."

"I don't know, and it's likely we never will," her dad said, sighing. "She and that mad sister of hers started talking - shouting at each other, really - and then Fenrir Greyback appeared out of nowhere and killed Narcissa without a word."

"What?" Ginny asked, shocked.

"Bellatrix Lestrange went ballistic. She turned and started hurling Unforgiveables at Greyback. I couldn't believe it! I thought they were going to take each other out before we even had to get involved," Charlie said.

"Certainly none of us rushed to either of their defense," her dad said, slightly amused. "Of course, no one from their own side did, either."

"So, what happened?" Ginny asked.

"Greyback won. He killed her and then the fighting really began in earnest. I lost sight of Greyback in the crowd after that," Charlie said grimly.

"Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange are both dead," Ginny said, trying to wrap her mind around it. It certainly wasn't the way she'd expected them to go. "Someone will have to tell Neville. He'll want to know."

"I'll take care of it," her father said, nodding. "Neville was there today."

"What?" Ginny asked, stunned.

"After news about the siege at Hogwarts spread, witches and wizards began Apparating to Hogsmeade from all over the country. They all said the same thing - that they'd attended Hogwarts and didn't want to see it fall," her dad replied. "Neville arrived with a group of your DA members."

"Is he okay?" Ginny asked, feeling extraordinarily proud of her friend.

"Yeah, he was fine. I saw him with a blonde girl. I think she might have been hurt, though. She looked very confused," Charlie said.

"No, that's Luna," Ginny said, giggling. "She always looks that way."

"All the DA really performed splendidly," her dad said.

"Someone will have to tell Draco about his mother," Ginny said, feeling uncomfortable. She was surprised to find she actually felt bad for Draco. "If he survives, that is. He was hurt really badly."

Hermione's compassion and quick-thinking had saved Draco's life. By Petrifying him, she'd kept his entrails from being entirely expelled, and the Healers were able to patch him back together. Vaguely, Ginny wondered how the Slytherin would feel about owing his life to Hermione.

"Since when do you care what happens to Draco Malfoy?" Charlie asked incredulously.

"Since he helped Harry beat Voldemort," Ginny replied, shrugging.

"He helped, you say?" her father asked, his eyes opening so wide that his glasses slipped down his nose.

"Yeah, he did. He was upset that Voldemort killed Pansy, so he offered to help. It was a good thing too, because Harry couldn't have done it alone, particularly not in the condition he was in at the time," Ginny said.

"He killed Pansy?" her father asked, wincing. Although her dad had grown accustomed to all of them actually saying Voldemort's name, and he no longer winced when he heard it, he still couldn't bring himself to actually say it.

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked. "What happened, anyway? I heard Harry killed him with his bare hands."

"He killed him with a wand," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

She met her father's eyes over Harry's bed and knew he understood what that meant and which curse Harry used. She hadn't really thought about it at the time, but she couldn't imagine Harry would get in trouble for it since everyone knew Voldemort had to be stopped. Besides, it wasn't as if there even was a Ministry to enforce the rules at the moment. Her dad blinked and waited for her to continue. He obviously wasn't going to make a fuss about it.

"Pansy tricked him into disarming her, and her wand was a Portkey. Voldemort was waiting at the other end," Ginny said, wondering if she should just wait for all her family to be together so she wouldn't have to keep repeating this story. Then she thought that if it meant that the rest of her family could all survive, she'd gladly repeat it every time. "Harry got away, but not before Snape poured a phial of the Draught of Living Death down his throat."

"What?" her family shouted together, causing Hermione to sit up straight, blinking groggily. She stared in confusion at the mass of Weasleys who had infiltrated the hospital room while she slept.

"There was no time to get the full story. Harry said he spit it out, but he was obviously unwell. He couldn't sit still or the effects became worse," Ginny said, shuddering as she remembered how pale and sickly Harry had looked when he first appeared in the Death Room.

"That's why he's still covered in bruises. The Healers said they won't disappear until the potion is completely out of his system."

"Sweet Merlin," her mother said, raising her hand to her throat. She jumped from her chair and proceeded to unnecessarily straighten the blankets covering Harry.

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said, finally awake. "You're all right! Ron will be so happy to see you all here and safe. He was so worried."

The door swung open again, and Bill poked his head inside. Relief washed over his face as he counted the number of redheads in the room. Fleur kicked the door open the rest of the way with her foot and helped Bill inside. Although he was covered in new cuts and obviously in pain, Ginny noticed that he seemed far more concerned with Fleur's well-being. She didn't appear injured and instead tried to steer Bill to an empty chair.

"Bill! Fleur!" her mother shouted, causing Ron to stir. He sat up quickly, blinking and turning his head from side to side. Hermione got up and took his hand, reassuring him.

"I'm all right, Mum," Bill said, grunting and dragging his leg behind him. "No. You take it, Fleur." He nodded toward the chair where Fleur was trying to get him to sit.

Rolling her eyes and tossing her head in the air, Fleur sat down, muttering, "Zo stubborn."

It was only once she was seated that Ginny realized how pale and tired Fleur looked. A lot of her vitality appeared to be missing, and Ginny became uneasy with the odd glances that kept passing between Bill and his wife.

"All right, son?" Mr. Weasley asked, his eyes flickering to Fleur speculatively.

"I'm brilliant, Dad," Bill replied, his appearance denying his words.

"Where's Fred?" Ron asked, rubbing his eyes. He and Hermione had been whispering, and Ginny surmised that Hermione had been filling him in about everyone else.

"Haven't seen him," Bill said uneasily.

"What happened to you?" Charlie asked.

"Ran into an old foe," Bill replied, clenching his jaw. "Fenrir Greyback."

Her mother gasped, her hand reaching out to touch the fresh wounds on Bill's face.

"It's all right, Mum. Again, it wasn't a full moon, and he didn't get nearly the chance to do as much damage as he did the last time," Bill replied.

"You killed him?" Charlie asked.

"Non," Fleur said, raising her chin. "I did."

Everyone in the room save Bill gaped at her. He beamed proudly at his defiant bride. "She was amazing. If she only has a quarter Veela blood, I never want to cross a real one."

Fleur blushed and kissed Bill's hand.

"What happened?" Ginny asked, glancing back and forth between them.

"I don't know exactly. Fleur came over the hill and saw us fighting and she...she sort of transformed. She looked like some kind of bird of prey, and she just attacked him. She ripped him apart, and then she said the most amazing thing," Bill said, staring with adoration at his wife, who murmured something softly.

"What was that?" her dad asked, his eyes twinkling oddly.

"I said zat no one is going to take away ze fazer of my bebe," Fleur replied, her nose in the air.

It was as if her mother knew what Fleur was going to say. She leaped from her chair and wrapped both Bill and Fleur in a crushing embrace before Ginny had even comprehended what Fleur's words meant. Her father and Charlie slapped a beaming Bill on the back, while her mother hovered over Fleur.

"Congratulations," Hermione said, smiling softly.

Ginny found she suddenly had to blink her eyes to dispel the moisture. She was going to be an aunt. Something good and beautiful was already emerging from all the darkness that had plagued their lives for so long. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Fleur's news filled Ginny's heart with hope for the future.

"I'm so happy for you," she choked, throwing her arms around her eldest brother. Despite his injuries, Bill lifted her in the air and squeezed her tightly. "Thanks, Squirt," he said, gruffly.

"Wait...you mean...you're having his baby?" Ron asked, staring blankly at Fleur. It was as if his groggy mind simply couldn't wrap itself around the fact.

Bill and Charlie laughed heartily.

"Dad did give you the talk about the birds and bees, didn't he, Ron? Or in Dad's case, the one about plugs and batteries?" Charlie asked, laughing.

Ron's ears colored brilliantly. "Shut it, you," he said, frowning.

Ginny eased herself towards Fleur and threw her arms around her sister-in-law. She may have taken awhile to warm up to this woman who had

pushed her way into Ginny's family, but as far as Ginny was concerned, Fleur had irrevocably won her place in all of their hearts.

"Congratulations, Fleur," she said, her eyes dropping to examine Fleur's flat stomach.

"Zank you, Ginny. My zon weel need zome cousins to keep him company, zo you all have zome catching up to do," Fleur replied.

Both Hermione and Ginny colored brightly, and her mother cleared her throat. "There's plenty of time for more weddings now that the war is over. Let's just take the time to enjoy this first grandbaby," she said firmly.

Ginny saw her father start coughing, turning an alarming shade of red.

"So, what's this I hear about Harry?" Bill asked, his eyes glancing at Harry's still figure. "One of the attendants said he battled Voldemort atop one of the dragons from Gringotts."

"Oh, he did not!" Ginny exclaimed, exasperated.

Before she had time to clarify, the hospital door swung open, and a male Healer entered. He stopped short, surprised by the number of people inside the room. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but the protective stance all of the Weasleys took around Ron's and Harry's beds must have dissuaded him.

"I'm just going to see how you're doing," he said, clearing his throat and waving his wand over Ron. "Everything looks good, but you'll still have to stay in that bed."

Ron scowled, and Ginny suspected the Healer was merely trying to reassert his control rather than any real need for Ron to stay in bed. When the Healer checked Harry, he frowned in the same way the other Healers had done. As he picked a phial off his tray, Ginny hurried over and gently slipped her arm beneath Harry's shoulders, raising him slightly.

The Healer's eyes widened in surprise, but he nodded, accepting Ginny's help. She felt her family's eyes upon her as she gently supported Harry's head as the Healer administered his potion and cast the Anti-Gagging Charm.

She lowered Harry back onto his pillow, gently swiping some of the potion from the corner of his mouth. Harry didn't show any response.

Her father cleared his throat and gently squeezed Ginny's shoulder. She turned and leaned against him, letting his strength fill her once more.

"Hey, Ron," Bill said, pulling up a trouser leg and pointing at a large and ugly arrow-shaped gash. "Check out my scar."

Charlie laughed. "Here's mine," he said, raising his shirt to show a round wound on his chest.

"Mine's on my arm," her dad said, pulling up his sleeve again.

"Honestly!" her mother huffed.

Ron stared at them all, perplexed.

"We couldn't let you and Ginny be the only ones," Charlie replied, grinning.

"All ze Weasleys have them," Fleur said, pulling back her hair to show a jagged wound beneath her ear. Ginny was doubly impressed that she'd left it on her face - the same face that she'd always taken such pride in.

"You all kept scars?" Hermione asked, staring at them blankly.

"This is getting ridiculous," her mother huffed.

"No, it's not," Ron said, beaming. "It's a way to remember. Everyone is saying that we'll never let anything like this happen again, but time will pass, and it will fade. This is a way to keep the memory alive. You can't push it aside if there is a reminder staring you in the face everyday."

Hermione stared at Ron with tears shining in her eyes. "I don't have one," she whispered.

"Don't worry, Hermione. When Ronnie here finally gets his act together and asks you to marry him, we'll just have to take you out and Curse you," Charlie said, grinning.

Hermione's eyes widened in alarm before Ginny burst into giggles.

"Charlie!" her mum said, slapping his arm although her eyes were twinkling.

"And you do have your own sort of scar, Hermione," Ginny said. "Your hair is different."

Hermione pulled at her less-bushy curls. "That is true," she said, smiling happily.

Her dad patted her mum on the hand, smiling fondly. "Now, if Fred would just walk through that door, and George and Harry would hurry and wake, we'll truly have something to celebrate," he said.

"Does anyone know where Fred was during all the fighting?" Hermione asked.

"George would've," Charlie said quietly, and a somber mood fell across the inhabitants of the room.

"Maybe he finally worked up the balls to kiss Iris, and she Hexed him," Bill said, attempting to lighten the mood.

"Bill!" her mum said, scowling.

"Iris wouldn't Hex him," Fleur said, smiling knowingly. "Eets more likely she was ze one to jump him. You Weasley boys take too much time to take action in matters of ze heart."

All the Weasleys in the room stared pointedly at Ron, even her mum.

"What?" Ron said indignantly, his ears burning.

Her mother sniffled, rose from her chair and threw her arms around Ron. "Oh, my baby boy," she cried.

Ron shifted uncomfortably but patted her back nonetheless. "I'm fine, Mum," he said.

The door swung open and the final missing Weasley appeared, looking pale and grave and far too serious for Ginny's liking. It wasn't right to see Fred without a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"Fred!" her dad said, rising quickly but freezing on the spot as he caught a good look at Fred's face. "What is it, son?"

"Katie Bell is working here; I saw her when I arrived. She said to tell you that you could see George now. They're just waiting for him to wake up," Fred said, his voice deadened. He had a long gash on the side of his face, and his arm was also in a sling.

"What aren't you saying, Fred?" her mother asked, holding her breath.

"They couldn't save his leg," Fred replied. "They had to remove it below the knee."

A chorus of gasps and startled exclamations sounded across the hospital room. Her father's loud clear voice rang out, silencing them all.

"But he's alive. We all are, which is far more than we expected earlier this morning. George is going to survive, and he has all of us around him to help him cope. Molly, let's go see our son."

Her mother nodded and grasped her father's hand. The two of them left the room in silence, their heads held high. Ginny took a deep breath. Her dad was right. The remainder of her family had survived the war, and that was reason for celebration. George could be fitted with an artificial leg that Muggles would be hard pressed to identify as a replacement.

She shook her head. She'd grown too accustomed to Mad-Eye's wooden peg leg. Her dad had told her that he only used that because he liked the effect. No, George would survive this, and they'd all help him adapt. Just like Harry would survive it. He had to - it wouldn't be right otherwise.

Staring across the room at the faces of all her siblings plus Hermione and Fleur, Ginny met their dazed stares with one of her own. It was over. It was truly over.

Ginny released an exasperated breath, blowing her hair out of her face. She glanced through the large, heavily-draped window at the approaching storm clouds. It wouldn't be long before the rain began to fall. She thought the dismal gray skies better suited her mood than the bright sunshine of the past few days.

It had been nearly a week since Voldemort's defeat, and the Wizarding world was still celebrating, although its savior remained unconscious. The hospital staff and administrators had regained organizational control and had moved Harry to the Minister's suite. Apparently, when Cornelius Fudge had been in office, he'd had regular treatments for a recurring boil on his foot, and he'd arranged for the elaborate room during his stays.

Ginny knew it was something Harry would hate when he realized it, but she had to agree with everyone else that it was safer to keep him away from the public. The reporters had been relentless, and even the staff and general public had tried to sneak in to steal glances at him.

While she waited, Ginny was sitting for her end-of-term exams. Hagrid was acting as her sponsor, although he was currently asleep and snoring loudly on the red velvet couch in front of Harry's bed. He'd had nearly every bone in his body broken, but he insisted he was too tough to be kept down for long. He was being released from the hospital in one more day, and Ginny knew she'd miss his optimistic presence terribly.

Her eyes roamed the elaborate room, finally resting on the Soul Balance that Hermione had brought from Hogwarts. The strange silver instrument rested on the table beside Harry's bed. Hermione insisted it would make Harry feel better to see the proof that Voldemort was really gone from his soul. Professor Dumbledore's portrait had explained how to use it, but Hermione hadn't got any readings when she'd used it on Harry. It was as if there was no soul inside him at all. Hermione planned on trying it again after he awoke.

Ginny shuddered and looked away, blocking the thought from her mind. She just wanted him to open his eyes and smile that magnificent smile, but she was beginning to fear it wouldn't happen.

She finished the last of her exams and pushed the parchment away from her with a sigh. Her mum would be happy, anyway. Hagrid, Draco, and Harry were the last of their party still in hospital. George had gone back to the Burrow two days ago. Ginny had never been so happy as the day she'd moved home with her family. The wards at the Burrow had been reset, checked, and double-checked and since there had been no sign of any renegade Death Eater activity, her parents had decided it was time to go home.

She'd been Flooing to St. Mungo's each day to sit with Harry. Ron and Hermione had been there, too, although they had more freedom to come and go since they could Apparate. Hermione had moved back home with her parents for the first time since before her sixth year.

George was adjusting remarkably well to the loss of his leg. He had an appointment scheduled to be fitted with an artificial replacement, but he had to wait until the tissue healed completely. He kept joking that

it was much better than if he'd lost a hand. This way, he could still keep working and other people had to bring his stuff to him.

It was the rest of the family that was having a harder time with it. Ginny had noticed how they all - herself included - walked on eggshells around him, uncertain what to do or say. It was Fred who had adapted the quickest. At first, he'd made a great show of bending to George's every whim and demand, but soon had given up on that and told George to do for himself.

Her mum had been scandalized, shouting at Fred for his insensitivity. Somehow, however, Ginny suspected that it was exactly what George had been waiting for. He still enjoyed taking the mickey out of them on occasion and seeing how far he could push their patience, but for the most part, he was already becoming self-sufficient even without the artificial limb.

Everyone knew how remarkably similar Fred and George were, but Ginny knew there were also some distinct differences. She supposed that if one of them had to lose his leg, it was better that it was George.

She flushed, feeling horrible for the thought, even if it were true. Fred was always, by far, the more exuberant of the pair. He simply couldn't sit still. Fred was the idea man, while George could make things happen. Fred would think up a product or some silly new invention, and George was the one who could make it work. They were quite a team, her brothers.

Although Shannon had moved home, she was a frequent visitor at the Burrow and still worked at the twins' shop. Diagon Alley was getting ready for a grand re-opening in another week, and the shop needed to be restocked. In fact, Ginny wouldn't be surprised if George was the next one to announce his engagement.

Ginny hadn't seen as much of Iris. Mrs. Parkinson had taken Pansy's death very badly, and Iris was trying to help her cope. The two of them had returned to their own family home, but Fred told Ginny that Mrs. Parkinson was planning on selling it and starting over somewhere else. That, at least, let Ginny know that Fred was still in contact with Iris.

Draco Malfoy was also still hospitalized. Although the Healers had managed to save him, they said it would take some time for his insides to function properly again. After he'd regained consciousness, he'd become extremely sullen and bitter over the loss of his mother. Ginny had visited him once, but he made it clear that she wasn't welcome, and she hadn't tried to go back.

She'd seen Dudley visiting his room several times. The Dursleys had returned to Surry, but Dudley was obviously keeping his ties with the Wizarding world. Dudley had even stopped by to check on Harry once, but his outright fascination with the spells used during the battle and how Harry had gained the power to defeat Tom unnerved her. There was something about pudgy Dudley Dursley that made her very uncomfortable.

Ginny glanced up as the first drops of rain spattered against the window. She watched as tiny rivulets began to trickle down the pane,

lulled by the calming sound. Allowing some of her tension to ease, she wasn't quite aware when Harry began to move. A slight moan finally caught her attention, causing her eyes to widen as she became fully alert.

She watched his eyelids began to flutter - something that hadn't happened at all over the past week.

Barely able to breathe, she reached out to run her fingers through his hair. "Harry," she whispered.

His head moved slightly. "Mum," he moaned.

Ginny pulled back, her heart racing. Mum? Harry didn't even know his mum, poor thing. It seemed odd that he would be calling for her. Her heart began to race, the fear of what damage might have been caused to his brain bubbling to the surface. She prayed he was only dreaming. Her heart lurched, and she wanted to choke on her grief over the idea that Harry was dreaming of his dead mum. Her helplessness was overpowering.

"Harry, can you hear me?" she gasped, sinking to the floor beside his bed because her legs refused to support her. "Open your eyes, love."

His eyes fluttered once again before slowly blinking open. He squinted and shut them against the brightness of the room.

"Nox," Ginny whispered tearfully, and the voice-activated overhead lights dimmed.

Harry slowly opened his eyes once again. The usually vivid green orbs were dull and clouded with pain. He furrowed his brow as he fought the confusion that was overwhelming him.

"It's all right, Harry. We're at St. Mungo's," she whispered.

He was still covered in a mass of deep purple bruises. The Healers said that the Draught of Living Death had simply slowed down all his internal organs, hindering his ability to heal. Now that he was awake, things would finally improve.

His eyes rolled back slightly, but he blinked and tried to focus. A thin sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead and upper lip as he struggled to gain his bearings.

"Relax, Harry. Everything's going to be okay," Ginny said soothingly.

His breathing became increasingly labored, and his eyes grew wide with panic. She could feel his body trembling slightly, although he was still too weak to put up much of a struggle. His lips looked dry and cracked, and he tried repeatedly to wet them.

"Hagrid!" she hissed, waking the sleeping half-giant.

"What? Wha's goin' on?" he mumbled sleepily.

"Hagrid, Harry's awake," Ginny said, trying to convey her urgency to him without alarming Harry. "Go get one of the Healers, please. Hurry."

"'Arry?" Hagrid boomed, jumping from the couch and lumbering toward them. "Blimey, 'arry! It's good ter see ya again."

Hagrid's appearance seemed to alarm Harry more than comfort him, and he began gasping for breath.

"Go now, Hagrid," Ginny said, taking both Harry's hands in her own. "It's all right, Harry. Everything is okay. You're here with me, and you're going to be fine. Ron and Hermione are fine, too," she said, hoping that would calm him.

He gripped her hand tightly with his right hand, but his left remained slack and unmoving in her hand. His left arm had been the one to receive the deep Slicing Hex, and the Healers had been worried about nerve damage.

"Just look at me, Harry. Look into my eyes and breathe with me," she said, locking her eyes on his panicked green ones. "I'm not going to leave you. I'm right here."

She wasn't even certain if he could hear her, but his body relaxed slightly, never breaking eye contact with her. She could see her own face reflected in his wide, trusting eyes.

A team of Healers burst into the room, pushing her out of the way and converging around his bed. As soon as she was pushed back, she could hear his breathing grow labored again.

The lead Healer waved her wand over him while two others tried to calm him.

"No," he gasped, weakly attempting to push the wand away.

A fourth Healer gathered several potions and began trying to pour them down Harry's throat. He spit out the first one, his head thrashing from side to side. His voice was hoarse and scratchy, and she couldn't understand his words.

"You're frightening him!" Ginny snarled, pushing her way between them and re-claiming her place by Harry's side. Taking his good hand in hers, she clutched it to her face.

"Please move aside, Miss. We need to tend to his injuries," a young Healer said arrogantly.

"Yeah, you're doing a really good job of that," she said sarcastically. "The last thing he remembers is fighting Voldemort for his life. Before that, he was being held prisoner and had a potion that would relatively render him a zombie poured down his throat. Of course he's fighting you! He'll calm down if you let him know you don't mean him any harm."

All four of the Healers gasped when she said 'Voldemort'. One of them even took a step back, raising her hands protectively in front of her face. Ginny was livid.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, he's dead!" she snapped. She furiously spun away from the Healers, instead turning her attention back to Harry. "Listen to me, Harry. It's okay. They're here to help you."

His eyes moved around the room wildly. She kept a grip on his good hand, while using her other to stroke the side of his face. She whispered calm, soothing words, and he began to regain control of his breathing.

He looked up at her - desperate and bewildered - and her throat tightened, wanting this to end for him. She knew her presence was calming him, but he still hadn't shown any sign that he actually recognized her. She desperately wanted to ask him if he knew her, but understood that would sound shallow and vain in front of all the other possible health concerns he was facing. She couldn't help the feeling, however.

She wanted him back - and she wanted him with her.

Harry calmed enough to allow the Healers to administer their potions. He took them meekly, although never letting go of Ginny's hand. The Healers cleared out of the room, several of them lingering unnecessarily. They said that the Healing potions would finally begin to work now that he was conscious, but he was obviously exhausted.

His eyes began to droop heavily. She watched, amused, as he attempted to fight the sleep that was trying to claim him.

"Shut your eyes and rest, Harry," she whispered, brushing her lips across his damp forehead. "I'll be here when you wake."

She'd brought her bear, Snot, from home. Originally, she'd hoped it might bring Harry some comfort, but she'd found herself using it while she waited for him to wake. She rested the bear on the pillow beside him, pleading with her old faithful friend to watch over him.

Harry turned his head toward her and quickly drifted off to sleep with his face resting on Snot. Ginny continued to stroke his hair, feeling lighter than she had in days. She still had the nagging worry about his mind, but there was one thing that brightened her thoughts. Every other year of Harry's schooling, they'd sent him home battered to recover under the questionable care of the Dursleys. This year - this time - it would be different. Harry would come home to the Burrow, and all of them would see to it that he finally got all the positive attention he so deserved.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A New Beginning

A low, distant rumbling intruded upon the quiet, dragging Harry back to consciousness. The noise sounded far away, but it was persistent, piercing the warmth and darkness that surrounded him. His mind struggled to hold onto the last vestiges of sleep, but a giant boom cracked overhead, causing his eyes to fly open with a start, his breathing fast and irregular.

The room where he lay was dim, lit only by a single candle hanging on the wall in a far corner. Without his glasses, all he could see was a fuzzy blur of light, anyway. The heavy curtains next to his bed hid the night sky, although he could hear a heavy downpour of rain splattering against the window.

He blinked, feeling very disoriented. He could tell he was in hospital and had a vague memory of Ginny being with him, but he couldn't grasp the details. Distorted memories of his parents and others that he'd lost filled his mind, confusing him. He couldn't focus his thoughts, however, because his body's various aches and pains began demanding his attention.

An invisible weight pressed down on his chest, and his limbs felt leaden. Although no Petrifying Spells or ropes were holding him, he was completely immobilized. He was incredibly sore, and he desperately needed a drink to quench his intense thirst. Above all the other aches and pains - even his thirst - his head hurt the worst. He was grateful for the dim lights, because he didn't think he could handle any brightness just then.

He briefly considered closing his eyes and drifting back to sleep, but he needed to know what had happened to everyone else. His confused mind refused to give him any details, but he knew the others were in trouble. He groaned, attempting to rise on his pillows and was dismayed to realize that he couldn't do it. His right arm was weak and shook when he tried to move it, while his left was completely unresponsive.

Panicking, he tried to reach for his glasses on the bedside table. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he strained to reach them, but his arm felt like lead. He finally had to give up, and, panting, he laid his spinning head back on the pillow. His breathing hitched, and he groaned again. What's wrong with me?

"Harry!" Hermione shouted, opening the door to find him so agitated. "Merlin! How typical of you to stay asleep the entire time I'm sitting here and only wake up when I take a moment to use the loo."

She walked across the room, reached for his glasses, and gently placed them on his nose. Her concerned face came into focus as he struggled to control his rapid breathing. He gazed at his surroundings, not recognizing the room but knowing he wasn't in the hospital wing at Hogwarts.

"Wh-" he croaked, his voice scratchy and dry from lack of use.

"Shh. Take it easy," Hermione whispered, wordlessly conjuring a glass of water.

She slipped her arm beneath his shoulders and gently hoisted him so he could swallow it. It felt wonderfully cold and refreshing sliding down his throat, relieving the burning pain.

"You're in St. Mungo's," Hermione said, adjusting the pillows behind Harry's back. "Do me a favor and pretend you slept through the night. Ginny is going to be so livid. Mrs. Weasley insisted that she needed to

go home and get some sleep, and the Healers didn't think you'd wake up again before morning. We've all been taking shifts sitting with you, but Ginny was adamant that she'd promised you she'd be here. She didn't want to leave."

Another loud crack of thunder rumbled outside the window as if in support of Hermione's words.

"Volde-" Harry asked, losing his breath.

"He's gone, Harry," Hermione said, her eyes suspiciously bright. "It's really over. How much of it do you remember?"

Harry scrunched his forehead, trying to piece his scattered thoughts together. Everything was jumbled, but he could picture Tom's flat, distorted face staring at him with an intense hunger. He remembered a nauseating flash of bright white light but couldn't say what had happened.

"It's all right," Hermione said, taking his hand and gently squeezing his fingers. "The Healers said that you'd experience some confusion at first. It'll come back to you."

"Arm," Harry mumbled, again trying to move his left one. The covers were pulled tightly around him, and he'd begun to fear it was gone. It certainly didn't feel as if there was anything there.

"Does it hurt?" Hermione asked, plucking needlessly at his blankets while not looking directly at him.

Harry's alarm grew. "Can't...feel," he gasped.

Hermione looked up quickly, resting her hand on his shoulder and squeezing it. "It's okay. Don't get upset. The Healers said that the calmer we could keep you, the quicker all the Restorative Potions would work."

"Arm," Harry repeated, still trying to move it. His exhaustion grew with each attempt, but he continued to struggle. His vision swam and foggy spots encroached upon the edges. The thunder cracked loudly, sounding as if it were right above the hospital. Rolling echoes continued long after the initial crack had passed.

"Listen to me, Harry," Hermione said, forcefully grabbing his shoulders in order to keep him still. "You're not helping. You have to stay calm. One of the Curses that struck your arm was deep, and it caused some nerve damage. The Draught of Living Death slowed down your bloodstream and all your internal organs, so it's going to take some time to heal. Now, I know patience isn't your strong suit, but you really don't have a choice."

Something about her no-nonsense tone reminded him of Madam Pomfrey, and it alarmed him. Ron had always said she could be scary, sometimes. His anxiety must have shown, because her eyes softened.

"Will...heal?" he asked, feeling incredibly vulnerable. He fought the exhaustion, determined to get some answers. Thunder cracked again, weaker this time.

Hermione blinked rapidly. "We think so."

That didn't sound as confident as he wanted. His heart rate increased again, and he had to take short, shallow breaths. He suddenly wanted very badly for Ginny to be the one there with him.

"Ginny?" he asked, cringing inwardly at the pathetic tone in his voice.

"She'll be here in the morning," Hermione said, her lower lip starting to tremble. "We were so afraid we'd lost you."

Harry took several deep breaths, forcing the air out through his nose in an attempt to calm down.

"Ron?" he asked as scattered memories began to return to him. Ron had been hit and knocked out by some random curse.

"He's all right. He was in a double room with you for a few days, but you know Ron. They couldn't keep him still for long, and they finally kicked him out so he'd stop pestering them," she replied, sniffing. She began running her hand up and down his good arm, trying to soothe him.

His chest felt heavy, and a large lump grew in his throat. He cast his eyes around the room, desperately seeking a distraction before he really embarrassed himself. He tried to listen to the torrents of rain pelting against the window, waiting for the next boom of thunder.

"Draco?" he asked when the vision of the horrible curse that had struck the Slytherin filled his mind.

"He's in another room," Hermione said vaguely. "The Healers put him back together, but he's got a long road ahead of him."

Harry knew there was more that she wasn't telling him, but he couldn't get the words to form. He was so very tired, and he struggled to keep his eyes from closing.

"You did it, Harry. It's really over," Hermione whispered. "We're all so proud of you. Now we can focus on what we want to do with our lives."

"Dumbledore told me," he whispered, closing his eyes.

"Dumbledore?" Hermione asked sharply.

Harry's eyes flew open. Why did he have the distinct impression of Dumbledore telling him it was time to live? Hermione was staring at him as if she thought he'd gone mad. Perhaps he had.

He blinked, looking away from her concerned stare. He tried to focus on the shiny silver instrument resting on the bedside table where his glasses had been. Hermione, of course, noticed.

"Oh! I brought that from Hogwarts, but we couldn't get it to work while you were unconscious. Do you want to try it now? It should only take a minute, and I'm certain you'll see that he's really gone," Hermione said, her eyes shining with excitement.

Harry's breath hitched again. He really didn't know what was wrong with him, or why he wanted Ginny there so badly. He was being a baby, and he knew it, but he couldn't admit that to Hermione.

Again, she must have noticed his distress and was kind enough not to mention it.

"Why don't we wait for Ron and Ginny? I'm certain they'd like to be here, as well," she said.

Harry's eyes felt very heavy, and his willpower to keep them open was waning.

"Go to sleep. Everything is okay. I promise," Hermione whispered, gently kissing him on the forehead.

Harry sank into the comfort of the pillows, listening as the thunder rolled and letting the darkness consume him once more.

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The next time Harry opened his eyes, his room was brighter, although he could still hear the patter of rain against the window. His body ached, but the pounding in his head was slightly better - he could tolerate the light, anyway. Everything was blurry, but he still didn't have enough strength to raise his arm and reach his glasses. He blinked several times, trying to decipher the various blurs.

His glasses were slipped on his nose, and Ginny's smiling face came into focus. She was pale, and her freckles stood out distinctly.

"Hi, bright eyes," she said, leaning over to kiss his forehead. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you awake."

Harry closed his eyes again, enjoying the warmth of her kiss. His heart felt lighter simply because she was there. He was about to tell her how glad he was to see her when Ron's voice alerted him to the fact they weren't alone.

"All right, enough of that. Let me get a good look at him. You've left me alone with crying girls for a week, mate."

Harry glanced over Ginny's shoulder to see Ron and Hermione standing behind her. Hermione looked drained, but she was beaming at him.

"Hi," he mumbled hoarsely, his throat burning.

"How are you feeling this morning, Harry?" Hermione asked, while Ginny helped him take a sip of water.

"'M fine," he mumbled, letting water sooth his throat.

"You're still dreadfully pale," Hermione said.

"Bloody hell, Hermione. He just defeated the most powerful Dark Lord ever and saved the world - again. He's allowed to look a little peaked," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

"Language, Ron," Hermione scolded, but her eyes shone brightly. "I was just about to head home and catch some sleep, but since you're awake, why don't we use the Soul Balance? Professor Dumbledore told me exactly how it works. It's fascinating, really, and I've been so eager to try it."

Harry's stomach lurched uncomfortably. He was feeling slightly nauseous, anyway and vaguely wondered how long it had been since he'd eaten. The idea of getting a confirmation from the Soul Balance - regardless of which result it would give - filled him with dread.

"Maybe it's too soon, Hermione. He just woke up," Ginny said, eyeing Harry carefully.

He leaned into her hand as she gently stroked his hair.

"Why? What do you mean, it's too soon? We're all here, and he must be dying to know. I know I would be. I mean, it's not like we don't know what the results will show. Voldemort wouldn't have died if all the Horcruxes hadn't been destroyed, but I know if I were him, I'd want to see it for myself," Hermione said, pushing the bedside table so the Soul Balance came clearly into Harry's view.

He swallowed heavily. He didn't see a way out of this without appearing weak but talking about Horcruxes was forcing him to think about things he didn't want to think about right now. His nausea increased, and a thin sweat covered his body.

"Ginny's right. I think we should wait," Ron said, being far more astute than usual.

Harry refused to meet Ron's eyes, feeling very ashamed that his weakness was showing. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He glanced up at Hermione's bright, eager expression. She obviously wanted to know. She must have spent as much time agonizing over the Horcrux inside Harry as he had. They all had in their own ways. He couldn't deny them the answer since they were the ones who had worked out the riddle in the first place, no matter how much it made his insides squirm.

"S'alright," he said shakily. "Do it."

Now that he'd committed, he just wanted them to get it over with.

"Professor Dumbledore said that they are usually attuned to the owner, but he adjusted this one to pick up your aura. It should only take a moment," Hermione said, poking at the silver instrument.

"Just relax," Ginny whispered. "You don't have to do anything." The gentle pressure of her fingers stroking his hair was comforting, and he tried to sink back into the pillows and simply not think.

Hermione tapped her wand against the silver instrument and mumbled a string of enchantments under her breath. It sounded as if it was another language, but Harry was too focused on watching the small puffs of smoke beginning to rise from the shiny silver tube to ask. A thrill of apprehension ran down his spine, and he really feared he might be sick.

"All right, Harry?" Ron asked, and Harry suspected he'd turned an ugly shade of green.

Hermione glanced over at him, her eagerness suddenly replaced by concern. "Should I get a Healer?"

"No," he said, clenching his eyes tightly and willing the nausea to pass.

"That's the antidote they gave you," Ginny said, placing a damp cloth on his forehead. "They said it would make you nauseous."

Harry didn't respond but instead opened his eyes to peer at the green smoke now rising steadily from the Soul Balance. It twisted and turned and looked as if it was forming a shape.

He distinctly remembered that he'd seen two snakes the previous time he saw this thing working, but this shape looked more like a round mass. He watched as it elongated but his jaw dropped in amazement as tail feathers appeared on the smoky object, and it suddenly unfurled its wings. The smoke hadn't formed into the shape of a snake at all, but instead, it was the image of a glorious bird. He felt tears form in the corner of his eyes as the sound of phoenix song filled the room.

"Harry!" Hermione breathed, her eyes wide.

"Blimey," Ron muttered.

"It's beautiful," Ginny whispered, watching until the last of the smoke had dissipated.

"Does that answer any lingering doubts?" Hermione asked, beaming.

"You never do anything just halfway, do you, mate?" Ron asked, grinning madly.

Harry smiled, feeling enormous relief - even his nausea had abated. It was true. He was really free for the first time since he was a baby. He felt dazed and out of sorts.

It was really over.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted," Hermione said. "I'm going to go home and catch some sleep. I'll return later, Harry."

She stood up and kissed him on the forehead.

"I'll walk you out," Ron said, standing to accompany her.

Harry silently watched them go while Ginny hovered over him, adjusting his pillow and needlessly straightening the bed linens. He enjoyed the attention, and a small smile flitted across his face while he watched her do it.

"All right, Harry?" she finally asked, raising her eyes. A light pink blush stained her cheeks. She knew he'd been watching her.

"Better now," he whispered. "Glad you're here."

"I'm glad I'm here, too. You really scared me," she said, her eyes filling. She resolutely blinked back the tears.

"Sorry," Harry said, alarmed.

Ginny shook her head, straightening her shoulders and adopting a fierce expression. "I'll let you get away with it this time, but I'm warning you - you've had your last free pass. From now on, I never want to sit by another hospital bed waiting for you to wake up. I mean it. Not so much as a sprained toe."

Harry felt the corner of his mouth twitch. "Yes, ma'am."

"No more Dark Lords, Death Eaters, Dementors, dragons, Horcruxes, potions, prophecies..." Ginny said, running out of words.

"All right, all right," Harry replied, chuckling. "I'll do nothing but listen to Quidditch on the wireless and drink butterbeer until my belly grows big."

Ginny scowled, crinkling her nose. "Well, I wouldn't like that, either."

Harry grinned, feeling winded from his long speech. "I love you," he blurted.

Ginny's eyes softened. "I love you, too."

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply. "It feels good to be able to say that without worrying."

Ginny brushed the hair off his forehead. "You feel warm," she said, sniffing.

"Did I make you cry again?" he asked, groaning.

"Who's crying?" Ron asked, re-entering the room. "Did you make my sister cry, Potter?"

"Seems I've made it a bad habit," Harry replied, his eyes beginning to droop.

"That's something that's going to have to change then, isn't it?" Ron asked, grinning to soften his words. "Now that Voldemort's no longer around to make your life hell, you'll only have to deal with me."

"Seems like a bargain," Harry said, smiling weakly. "It's hard to believe it's really over."

"Dad said you might need some time to adjust to it all," Ginny said.

"Yeah," added Ron. "Just think, next year at this time, no one should try to kill you."

Harry snorted, his eyes drifting shut. Ron and Ginny stayed and chatted with him for a while, filling him in on all the details he'd missed. He felt very guilty about worrying so much about his arm after hearing about George's leg and how well he was handling it. He hoped that he'd have the same courage as George to face it if he never regained the use of his arm.

He drifted off to sleep at some point, secure in the knowledge that Ginny, Ron, Hermione, or somebody, would be there when he awoke.

Over the next several days, Harry was able to stay awake for longer and longer stretches, enabling him to get a better grasp on what was happening in the Wizarding world. He also became aware of the media's increasingly desperate attempts to gain access to his room. The Healers, medi-witches, and various visitors continued to keep a close eye on him as he suffered from the nausea and fevers caused by the antidote they had given him. In short, between his injuries, the side effects, and everyone's fretting - Harry was feeling extremely confined.

Leticia Warbanks had been appointed as the Reconstruction Minister. The Wizengamot had decided that after she'd had the chance to get things up and running smoothly, there would be a general vote to decide if she would become Minister for Magic. Harry was pleased to see the sweeping changes she was attempting to put in place already.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had taken the position of Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Alastor Moody had come out of retirement to take the position as Head of the Department for Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, and Arthur Weasley had been promoted to Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

Ron said his dad was working very closely with the Muggle Prime Minister to recreate the harmonious co-existence the two worlds had enjoyed for so many years. He said he thought his dad simply liked going to visit the man to try out all his Muggle gadgets.

The Daily Prophet was up and running again, regaling readers with stories of Harry's life. Ron told him that a hefty reward was being offered to anyone who could get a direct quote from Harry. He then tried to bribe Harry into admitting that the Chudley Cannons were the best in the League by threatening him with a list of "direct quotes."

Harry had used his good arm to reply with a very rude hand gesture.

Professor McGonagall had dropped by and informed him that Hogwarts would be opening in the autumn. She invited him back to complete his seventh year if he wished. He'd told her he'd think about it. Kingsley Shacklebolt had also told him there was a spot for him on the Auror training squad whenever he wanted it.

Vague thoughts and memories flitted in and out of his consciousness, hinting to him that his parents would want him to finish his schooling. Perhaps it was only because Mrs. Weasley was insisting that Ron should do so, but he couldn't shake the feeling.

He thought perhaps he'd dreamt about his parents while unconscious.

It seemed to him that everyone was getting up and moving on with putting their lives together except him. He was tired of feeling weak and uncertain and wanted to get out of this bed.

The problem was that the Healers insisted his body wasn't ready for it yet, and his friends were adamant about listening to them. He'd waited very impatiently for a moment like this to arrive.

His friends tended to stay with him all day until he fell asleep at night, but sometimes, in the early morning, he had a few minutes on his own before anyone arrived. He awoke one morning to just such a moment and was determined to make the most of it.

He'd waited for the medi-witch to come in and do her morning check and give him his potions. Then he sat up and shakily swung his legs over the side of the bed. He'd grown proficient at sitting up with the use of only one arm but hadn't fully anticipated how weak his legs would be. After lying prone for nearly two weeks, they simply didn't want to support him. He was determined not to give them the choice.

His head swam as he sat fully upright for the first time. He had to take a minute, blinking, for the fuzziness to leave and to regain his equilibrium.

Setting his jaw, he pushed himself to a standing position, his left arm dangling uselessly at his side. The room spun again, and his legs burned and shook as they supported his weight. Breathing through his nose, he slid one leg across the floor rather than lifting and placing it.

Sloppy, but it was a start.

He could feel a trickle of sweat running down his back, and his legs were actually shaking with fatigue. The wall on the other side of his room suddenly appeared much further away than it had when he'd been sitting in his bed. He had to prove to himself that he could do this. He'd never be able to work crutches with one arm, anyway. There was nothing wrong with his legs, and he'd convinced himself that if he couldn't make it over to that wall, it would somehow prove Snape right about Harry's weakness.

He dragged his other leg forward to meet the first, holding his hand out in front of him for balance. His knees buckled, however, and he crashed to the floor with a grunt.

"Bugger it all, Harry!" Ron shouted, entering the room just as Harry hit the floor. "What are you trying to do to yourself, and why are you doing it on my watch? Hermione and Ginny are going to kill me."

He bent down and wrapped his arms around Harry's torso, hoisting him back to his feet. Harry's entire body was shaking madly, and he had to lean heavily on Ron, which only increased his irritation.

"I just wanted to walk across the floor," he snapped, panting, "and I don't want any help to do it."

"Well, you're just going to have to swallow that Short-Snout-sized pride and suck it up because you do need help," Ron said grumbling. He slung Harry's good arm over his shoulder but instead of turning back for the bed, he proceeded slowly toward the wall.

Harry's irritation fizzled. He was very glad Ron and not one of the girls had found him on the floor.

"I'm sick of that bed," he mumbled, hanging his head. His legs were shaking so badly he could feel his knees knocking together.

"I know you are," Ron said quietly. They'd reached the wall, but Ron was now supporting Harry's full weight. "Are you going to continue being a pillock about walking, or can I Levitate you back to the bed?"

"You're not Levitating me," Harry said, snorting. "I've seen your Levitation Charms, remember?"

Ron grinned. "Better be nice to me, mate. I'm not one of the girls - I'd really drop you."

Harry chuckled, hating the exhaustion fighting to claim him.

"Accio Hover Chair," Ron said.

A floating cushioned-chair appeared in the doorway. Harry thought it resembled something that belonged in a pool. Ron lifted him up and plopped him onto the chair. Using his wand to direct it, he turned the chair around, and they moved into the corridor.

"We're leaving?" Harry asked, both excited and alarmed. He'd desperately wanted out of that room, but he knew the reporters had been hovering. He really didn't want to deal with any of them yet. In the quietness of his room, he could deny the reality of everything that had happened for a little while longer.

"We're not going far," Ron said. "There're only a few patients in this section, and you have to go through a security check to get here. I thought you wanted out."

"I do!" Harry said eagerly, his tiredness rapidly replaced by open curiosity. Ron pushed him from the lushness of the Minister's Suite

into the cold, antiseptic hallway. Even magic couldn't erase the sterile feel of a hospital. "Who else do they have hidden here?"

"Malfoy's in that room," Ron said, nodding toward the closed door next to Harry's. "I hear he's been talking loads of rubbish about the deplorable conditions. You know Malfoy."

"I want to talk to him," Harry said.

"Don't do that to yourself, Harry. Wait until you're fully recovered," Ron said, scowling.

"I'm fine," Harry replied.

"Sure you are," Ron said, rolling his eyes. Still, he stopped the Hover Chair and knocked on the door before pushing it open. "Oi, Malfoy! Believe it or not, you've got visitors."

Draco was lying in bed in a much smaller and less lavish room than the one Harry was using. Harry felt heat creeping up his neck, and he was eternally grateful that Malfoy didn't know about the difference...or maybe he did. It was certainly something Ron would enjoy lording over him.

Draco looked waxy and pale against the crisp white hospital linen. Much of the usual vigor and venom seemed to have drained from his eyes. He turned his head to listlessly stare at them.

"Oh, look. It's Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. Can this trip down the rabbit hole get any worse?" he asked, rolling his eyes but never raising his head from the pillow.

"Does that make you the Mad Hatter?" Ron asked, sniggering.

"Since when do you two know about Muggle children's stories?" Harry asked, feeling nettled at seeing the Slytherin boy looking so weak. It was unnerving.

Draco scowled, but Ron stared at Harry blankly. "That's a Wizarding children's story about a Muggle girl who accidentally stumbled across the Wizengamot."

Harry shook his head. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"Oh, I think even your lame power of deductive reasoning can figure that one out, Potter. I had my insides physically pulled out because I helped you. How do you think I'm doing?" Draco asked scornfully.

Harry swallowed heavily but fought the piles of guilt Draco was trying to lay on him. He'd had enough guilt to last a lifetime. "Thanks for helping with the Occlumency. I couldn't have done it without you. Without any of you," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, it's over now, and you're everybody's hero - again. Doesn't do much for the rest of us, does it?" Draco asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron asked. "Harry and Hermione both saved your useless arse. You're alive, you're no longer being hunted, and you're free to go back to your life and do whatever it is you do."

"Yeah, I'm free," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "My mother's dead, the woman I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with is dead, and it'll take me months to recover enough to take care of myself properly. My life is just perfect."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked quietly.

"It's not like I have a choice. The Ministry still hasn't released its hold on Malfoy Manor, and I can't go there alone in my condition, anyway. So, I'm forced to rely on the pity of distant relatives," Draco said, gritting his teeth. "My mother's sister, Andromeda, and her Muggle-born husband have agreed to take me in - under the condition that they'll be well-reimbursed for my care."

Ron's expression turned gleeful. "D'you mean to tell me that you're being looked after by your aunt and uncle - your Muggleborn uncle - who most likely blame you for the death of their daughter?"

Draco scowled. "What of it?"

"Well...at least they probably won't make you live in a cupboard," Ron said, obviously delighted by the irony.

Draco's eyes flicked to Harry before his expression darkened. "Get out. Now. GET OUT!"

"Go, Ron - just go," Harry said, before Ron could continue antagonizing Draco. It wasn't as if Draco wouldn't have done the same thing to Ron - wasn't as if he hadn't done the same in the past - but he'd still helped Harry in the end, and Harry couldn't forget that.

Ron moved the Hover Chair back into the Minister's Suite while Harry fought the fatigue that was finally overwhelming him. He barely remembered how he actually got back into bed before the darkness claimed him once again.

Several days later, Harry's sleep was broken by a loud clicking sound, startling him into full alertness. He rolled over quickly and fumbled on the nightstand for his glasses. He heard a male voice utter a locking spell and a loud grunt as something was wedged in the door. Harry's heart beat frantically as he stuffed his glasses onto his face. He was dismayed to realize his wand wasn't on the table. He was trapped.

Turning slowly to face his attacker, he was blinded by several bright flashes of light. He squinted, his panicked brain gradually focusing on the camera and the Quick-Quotes Quill hovering beside the intruder.

"Harry, I've got a family to support and a quote from you can feed 'em for a year. Just one more photo," the reporter said, the camera continuing to click as Harry turned his face away. He tried to pull the

blanket up to cover his useless arm. He felt incredibly exposed sitting there in his pajamas.

"Open this door! Alohomora," a stern voice shouted from outside the thick hospital door. Harry noticed the reporter had wedged a chair behind it.

"They can undo the magic, but the Muggle tricks always slow 'em down," the reporter said, grinning. He was tall and reedy with extremely slick hair that he wore combed over to the side to try and cover the balding spot atop his head. "How does it feel to have defeated the Dark Lord, Harry? How did you do it? Did you have to use Dark Magic to accomplish it? Everyone is speculating on how You-Know-Who actually fell. Tell me about it - in your own words."

"Get out," Harry said, his teeth clenched.

"One quote, Harry," he said, ignoring Harry's anger. The Quill scribbled madly despite the fact Harry had only said two words. "What's wrong with your arm? Why are you still hospitalized? Will there be permanent damage from the battle?"

"Get out," Harry repeated, yanking open the drawer on the bedside table and searching for his wand.

The door behind the reporter suddenly imploded, blasting shards everywhere. The reporter was knocked to the ground, his camera skidding across the floor. An enraged Charlie Weasley stood behind it, his arms bulging, and his wand gripped tightly in his hand. He was covered with soot, which Harry barely recognized at first because he was so focused on the murderous expression on Charlie's face.

Charlie grabbed the reporter around the neck and hoisted him to his feet. The man scrambled frantically, his face awash with terror. Harry leaned over and picked up the camera, holding it tightly while Charlie confiscated the Quick-Quotes Quill.

"How did you get in here?" Charlie demanded.

"The people deserve some answers," the man gasped, struggling to breathe. Charlie had him pinned against the wall with his forearm pressed against his throat.

"That's enough, Mr. Weasley," an Auror said, entering the room, his crisp Ministry robes neatly pressed. "We'll take it from here."

"Yeah, as if I trust you can do that. Where was the guard?" Charlie snapped.

Harry could tell the man was blushing deeply, despite his dark skin.

"There will be a full investigation," he said. "Please release him, Mr. Weasley. I don't want to have to Stun you."

"You could try," Charlie said through gritted teeth. He pressed his arm tighter against the reporter's throat. The reporter's eyes bulged with horror, and he desperately grasped at Charlie's fingers.

"Come on, Charlie," the Auror said, dropping his formal tone. "Everyone needs to use the loo. I'll take it from here and make certain the guard is firmly reprimanded."

Charlie let go with a snarl, and the reporter slumped to the floor. "You do that, and see to it that his camera and Quill are erased before they're returned."

"You can't do that," the reporter whined.

"Watch me," Charlie snapped. Taking the camera from Harry, he raised his wand and blasted the camera into smithereens.

The Auror roughly dragged the swearing reporter outside as he continued to threaten to press charges.

Harry was slightly taken aback by Charlie's intensity. True, it had been a rude awakening, and Harry really didn't want to talk to any reporters, but Charlie's reaction seemed over the top. Even now, he was pacing in front of the ruined door like a caged animal.

"All right, Charlie?" Harry asked tentatively. "He was a nuisance, I know, but he's just a reporter. I suppose I should just talk to them and get it over."

Harry was startled when Ginny appeared in the doorway, looking just as smudged and ruffled as Charlie. She sprinted in the room and flung herself at Harry, her eyes raking over him as her hands rapidly smoothed his hair.

"Are you all right?" she cried.

"Of course I'm all right," Harry said, growing increasingly baffled. "He just caught me off guard - I was sleeping. What are you two on about? One of those reporters was bound to get lucky sooner or later. They've been trying to sneak in here for ages."

"It makes no difference that it was only a reporter," Ginny cried. "He never should have got inside. It could have been a Death Eater. They promised top-notch security."

"Death Eater?" Harry asked, feeling as he'd just been punched in the gut. His heart began beating very fast. "I thought there weren't any left."

Both Ginny and Charlie started and averted their eyes. A wave of uneasiness overcame Harry, and he suddenly felt very nauseous. No one was going to make him go back into that kind of fear.

"Some of the few scattered Death Eaters who managed to escape alive have regrouped," Charlie said reluctantly. He refused to meet Harry's eyes as he spoke. "They're insisting Voldemort will return like he did before. They think you know more than you're telling."

"The Burrow was attacked this morning," Ginny said softly, blinking tears from her eyes.

No! It's over. Harry's mind raced. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. Voldemort was dead - it was over and his life was supposed to really begin now. It was over!

"Take it easy, Harry," Ginny whispered, rubbing his back soothingly. Her hand brushed against his injured arm, causing his fingers to tingle.

He was so caught up in the news that he barely noticed it. "Is everyone okay?" he asked.

"Everyone is fine," Charlie said. "Bill's working on strengthening the wards. Ron and Fred are helping him. Ginny and I brought George in to have his new leg fitted and check on you. It's a good thing we did."

"Do you think the reporter's timing was coincidental?" Harry asked, the full implication of what could have happened finally penetrating his foggy brain.

"I don't know, but we'll find out. I'm going to go Floo Kingsley directly. I'll be back," Charlie said, nodding at Ginny before he left.

"Well, you certainly keep life exciting, don't you?" Ginny asked, grinning as she nudged him with her hip. "Budge over."

Harry's face brightened as he quickly complied. She sat on the bed and leaned back so she was lying alongside him, resting her head on his shoulder. She was on his bad side, so he couldn't wrap his arm around her and settled for kissing the top of her head instead.

"When am I getting out of here?" he murmured, delighting in the warmth of her body pressed against his own.

Ginny sighed, and he felt her stiffen. "I don't know, Harry."

He didn't like the tone in her voice. "What d'you mean? I thought I was getting the all clear some time this week?"

Physically, he felt much better and was beyond anxious to leave the hospital. He'd been up several more times since the original journey with Ron, and could even roam the corridors on his own. The nausea was virtually gone, and the bruises that had covered his entire body had faded to a sickly yellow.

The only thing still left uncertain was his arm. Repairing the nerve damage was a slow and meticulous procedure, and the Healers still wouldn't commit to a prognosis. They were encouraged by the fact that his shoulder felt sore and achy after each healing attempt. Harry suspected that only Healers would think pain was a good thing.

"That was the plan," Ginny said. "Mum is dying to get her hands on you and had your room all ready, but now..."

"Now, no one thinks it's safe enough for me to go to the Burrow," Harry said dully. He knew the routine. He'd been here many times before. Why had he really believed things were going to change?

"Don't you dare start brooding on me now, Harry Potter," Ginny said fiercely, her eyes blazing as she turned to grasp his shoulders. "If not the Burrow, then we'll go somewhere else...together. Do you hear me? It is different now, and you're not going back to the Dursleys alone to recover. Not now - not ever again."

Harry smiled, although his heart wasn't really in it. She somehow always managed to know exactly what was on his mind.

"All right," he said, "but soon. I'm tired of this place."

"Tired of this place, are you?" Ginny asked, raising her eyebrow at the vast splendor of the room. "This luxury isn't good enough for you, dear? Your pillow isn't fluffed just so, and the chocolates aren't to your liking?"

"Oh, ho, very funny," Harry said, pulling a face. "You wouldn't like being cooped up in here any better than I do."

"That's true," Ginny said, ruffling his hair. "Although I'm thrilled to see you with some color back in your face and feeling spunky, I knew it would mean we couldn't keep you tucked away any longer."

"I want to see what's happening - how everything is being put back together," he replied.

"I know. The Ministry is fully up and running. The first Death Eater trials are supposed to start in September," Ginny said. "Dad says everyone is really eager to put all the bad behind them and start rebuilding."

"What are they doing about Azkaban?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Ginny said, shrugging. "Some of the Dementors returned and took up their old posts, but others are still roaming free. I don't think anyone really knows what to do with them."

Harry nodded, silently pondering. "How bad is the Burrow?" he asked.

He knew if there had been any serious injuries they would have told him, but he dreaded hearing about the damage to the Weasleys' newly-renovated home. Mrs. Weasley had proudly told him every minute detail of the work being done each time she'd visited him.

Ginny shrugged. "None of us were hurt, and that's the important thing."

Harry scowled and raised his eyebrows.

"All right, all right. There's a bit of fire and spell damage. Mum's kitchen is a mess, but nothing that can't be fixed," she said hurriedly, trying to calm his building eruption.

Harry swore. "Your mother's kitchen? Damn it, Ginny. She was so proud of that."

"I know it, but she's prouder of all of us. She can rebuild the kitchen again. Trust me, she's much happier knowing you're coming home, that George is getting fitted with a new leg, and that Fleur wasn't in the house at the time 'in her condition,'" Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

Harry smirked, imagining Mrs. Weasley's fussing over Fleur and how it would test Ginny's patience. "Where was Fleur?"

"She and Bill rented a flat here in London. I think Fleur refused to be anywhere near a chicken," Ginny said, crossing her arms.

"I thought you and Fleur were getting along?" Harry asked.

Ginny shrugged, waving her hand in the air. "She's all right, and she does love my brother. It doesn't mean she doesn't get on my nerves sometimes. She's such a princess."

Harry grinned, wisely refraining from commenting. Ginny elbowed him in the ribs, anyway.

"Shut it, you," she said.

"I didn't say anything," Harry said, his voice raised an octave higher than he would have liked.

"You were thinking it," Ginny replied.

"Yeah," Harry said, his mind drifting back to the Burrow.

"Don't worry about it," Ginny said, snuggling closer to him. "Bill will get the wards fixed, and it'll be perfectly safe. Leticia Warbanks and the Order are obviously extra concerned about you since the Death Eaters want to get to you so you'll tell them where Voldemort is."

"He's in hell," Harry spat.

Ginny gently ran her hand along his chest, soothing him.

Despite the turmoil in his mind, his body had become very aware of how closely Ginny was pressed against him. He rolled slightly to his side and ran his hand along the bare flesh on her arm. Ginny moved her head so their gazes locked intensely for a brief moment. Her eyes briefly flickered to Harry's mouth before he leaned over and captured her lips in a searing kiss.

She opened her mouth, deepening the kiss. She tasted warm and sweet and exactly how he remembered. His entire body thrummed with need and longing as he stretched his arm across his body and ran his fingers through her silky hair.

Perhaps it was only because it had been so bloody long since he'd been able to do this, but the kiss was somehow more intense than ever - full of hope, and promise and...possibilities. A thrill of excitement fluttered in his belly as he realized that she was finally, truly his. The Death Eaters might not have given up, but the threat that she would be snatched away from him if he let himself go was past.

Harry thrilled in the knowledge as he wrapped her possessively in his embrace. She was leaning on his bad arm and, through his impassioned haze, he once again felt that tingling sensation all the way down to his fingers. It was the fact that he felt them move that caused him to startle and pull back from the kiss.

"Harry," Ginny moaned, seeking his lips again.

"My fingers moved," he said blankly.

Ginny pulled herself into a seated position. "What?" she asked breathlessly.

Despite his shock and euphoria over his fingers, her swollen lips and the way her hair was wildly tousled pleased him, and his chest swelled with pride. She looked like someone who had been thoroughly, properly kissed - and he had done that.

"My fingers moved," he repeated, glancing at his limp hand. He tried unsuccessfully to move them again. They remained still, but he could definitely feel that tingling sensation throughout his entire arm and hand.

"Are you certain?" she asked, the hope radiating from her eyes. "I mean...that was rather intense."

Color rushed to her cheeks, and Harry grinned cheekily.

"It was, wasn't it?" he asked, beaming. "They definitely moved, and I can feel pins and needles now."

"I'll go get the Healer," Ginny said, standing.

"No," Harry said, grabbing her hand with his good one. "Come back over here. All the Healers will do is poke and prod to get the same results. I like your method better."

"Prat!" Ginny giggled, sitting back on the edge of his bed and leaning over to kiss him again.

They had barely resumed their activities when the sound of a throat clearing in the doorway caused them to spring apart. Harry glanced up warily to see Charlie looking at the floor and scratching his very red neck.

He felt heat rushing to his face, wondering why Charlie hadn't already hauled him out of the bed and pummeled him. Perhaps he looked weaker than he thought, stuck in the hospital bed. He never thought he'd be grateful for anyone thinking him weak, but there you go.

"Nice timing, Charlie," Ginny said, standing up to straighten her clothes. She didn't appear embarrassed or at all concerned about Charlie's temper.

"We're so sorry to interrupt," Leticia Warbanks said, following Charlie into the room. Her dark eyes twinkled with amusement. "It's nice to see you're obviously feeling better, Harry."

This time, Ginny did blush - thoroughly. Harry could feel the heat radiating from her body, and knew his coloring must have matched the Weasley red. They'd just been caught snogging in the Minister's Suite at St. Mungo's by the Minister for Magic herself. No one could ever say his life wasn't interesting.

"Are you two going to greet the Minister?" Charlie asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Leave them alone. They're embarrassed enough," Leticia said, sweeping into the room and taking a seat by Harry's bed. "I'm here to discuss some future arrangements."

Harry looked up sharply, pushing his awkwardness aside. He wasn't about to allow anyone to shunt him away again. It was over. Things were going to change.

"What kind of arrangements?" he asked warily.

"No need to be so tense, Harry," Leticia said, smiling knowingly. "I think you might actually be pleased with these plans."

"Oh?" Harry asked, still doubtful.

"Andromeda Tonks owns a holiday home off the mainland in Spain in the Mediterranean Sea. The island is called Formentera, and, although secluded, it is still a Muggle area so use of magic is frowned upon. Andromeda has agreed to take in her nephew whilst he recovers, and she's also offered to open up her home to you and your three friends involved in You-Know-Who's demise until the trials commence.

"There will, of course, be a Hearing, but it's merely a formality whilst we have time to gather up the remaining Death Eaters. It will offer you some privacy whilst you fully recover and allow the proper wards and protections to be placed on your home, Miss Weasley."

Leticia spoke as if someone used to making decisions and having them followed. It was a decent plan, and the idea of a seaside holiday was appealing. He'd never before had a proper holiday, and he and Ginny had certainly enjoyed their beach in the Room of Requirement.

"I believe you were familiar with Andromeda's daughter, and she also said you were close to one of her cousins. If it's all right with you, I'll have the arrangements made, and you can leave within the next few days," Leticia said.

"All right," Harry said, nodding.

"Very well. I'll be speaking with you again soon. Good day," Leticia said, sweeping from the room.

Harry was still mulling over the offer. It was a chance to be alone with Ginny at the beach - only having one brother to avoid rather than five. Where was the down side? Perhaps Ron might even be so distracted by Hermione that he'd give Harry and Ginny some privacy...

Charlie seemed to know exactly where Harry's thoughts were leading. "Don't even think about it, Potter," he said, scowling. "Bill might be too distracted by Fleur and the baby at the moment, but that doesn't mean I can't pop in to check on you - at any undisclosed time."

"Get over yourself, Charlie," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "You're never very good at playing the overprotective role. I know exactly what you got up to when you were our age. Did Mum ever learn the full story about Alfreda Dobbins?"

Charlie blanched. "How do you know about..." he asked, trailing off with widening eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous," Ginny said with a wave of her hand. "You used the treehouse, Charlie! It's full of holes."

"Listen to me, Ginny," Charlie said, his ears as red as Ron's sometimes turned.

"I've never said anything," Ginny replied, smiling sweetly. "You keep my secrets, I keep yours. That's how it works."

"That was a long time ago," Charlie said, his teeth clenched. Harry's head was bobbing back and forth between the two as if watching a tennis match.

"True, but Mum would be mortified to know she stood in front of all those neighbors swearing you didn't even know Alfreda, and it was so far from the truth," Ginny said, her smile growing threatening. "I think you'll do your best to convince Mum that letting Ron and I go along with Harry is a grand idea."

Charlie looked as if he was about to hit her before a slow grin spread across his wide face. "Some Muggle test proved Ritchie Cortland was that baby's father, anyway. Well done," he said. "I don't think even Fred and George have managed to hold their own when I've been really angry."

"That's because your arm is the size of a tree trunk," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "They're far from stupid. Come on, Charlie."

"All right," Charlie said. "I don't think Mum will have a problem with it, anyway. It's not like you'll be unsupervised. Ted and Andromeda Tonks will be there."

If Andromeda Tonks was anything like her daughter or Sirius, Harry didn't think she'd be much of a hindrance.

"Excellent," Ginny said, her eyes twinkling. If the expression on Ginny's face was any indication, she was as eager as he was to get away from the vast number of Weasleys and share some private time with him.

Harry liked that idea very much.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Power He Knows Not

The Portkey deposited the five teenagers inside a grand and sweeping sitting room filled with an eclectic assortment of furniture and lacy curtains that fluttered in a lazy sea breeze. The cottage - more like a manor, Harry thought - was Grimmauld Place-like in size, although the décor couldn't have been more different.

The walls were a light terra-cotta, housing both brightly cushioned wicker furniture, and antique treasures passed down from generation to generation. The lacy, green curtains allowed the afternoon sunshine to filter in, giving the room a warm and inviting feel.

Harry lay sprawled on a rough, colorfully-embroidered rug, and although it was clean, he could feel faint traces of sand. He still hadn't managed landing on his feet after Portkey travel. He could hear Ron's snickering beside him.

"Merlin's beard! Are you all right?" a witch asked, rushing toward him and assisting him to his feet. "Why didn't they put you in an assist-chair, as well?"

She had vibrant blue eyes and dark hair that she wore tightly pulled back. Her appearance was so familiar and yet so different that Harry had to take a step back. He knew without having to be introduced that this was Andromeda Tonks. She looked nothing like either of her sisters, but instead resembled a walking female version of Sirius.

She wore bulky robes covered in a loud, flowery print and a wreath of dried vines adorned her head. Perched on the tip of her nose was a pair of purple-tinted glasses. Uncle Vernon would have despised her on sight, whether witch or Muggle. Harry took to her immediately for the very reason.

"Don't worry. That landing had nothing to do with his being injured. Harry's always been Portkey-challenged," Ron said, smirking and still on his feet. "Maybe an assist-chair is the right idea, though."

Harry straightened his clothing and scowled at Ron. Draco sat beside them, strapped imperiously in a soft, cushioned chair that St. Mungo's used to transport injured patients. Ginny and Hermione stood to the side of the boys, using their hands to cover their snickers.

"Are you certain that you're all right, Harry?" Andromeda asked, and Harry had to turn away from the concern in her eyes.

He'd seen that identical expression on someone else in the past.

"I'm fine," he said. "Thanks for having us."

"It's my pleasure," Andromeda said, although her smile never reached her eyes. "I wanted to do my part. My daughter was very fond of all of you."

"And we were of her," Ginny said, her eyes bright. "She saved our lives, of course, but she also was there with a ready smile when we needed to talk. I miss her very much."

Andromeda smiled wistfully. "Nymphadora always had a knack for mischief, and she liked her fun. She would have wanted you all to be safe, and I'm pleased to offer you accommodations. We've expanded a new wing on the second floor, and there's a room for each of you. Tuggy will show you the way."

A small house-elf wrapped in a tiny beach towel appeared in the doorway, bowing low and beckoning them to follow. Harry was certain the elf was female, although she never said a word.

"You'll notice that the cottage appears no different than any of the others on the island, although it has obviously been magically expanded inside. Still, it is completely outfitted with Muggle electricity and amenities. Tuggy knows how to use everything, so ask if you need assistance. We try very hard to leave most magical conveniences behind when we come to stay here," Andromeda said, her arms fluttering in the air.

"My husband was raised as a Muggle, and he liked to have a place where his own parents were comfortable when they were alive. We've since grown accustomed to it," she added. "It's become a bit of an adventure for us."

"Do you mean to tell me that we're expected to live here like Muggles?" Draco asked incredulously, spitting the last word as if he were swearing.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," Andromeda said, scowling at her nephew and dropping the singsong tone she'd used on Harry. "It's my home and my rules. You'll learn to live with them - it's not your first time here."

"I beg your pardon?" Draco asked warily. He glanced around the room as if he'd just been sentenced to the gallows.

"You were here once before as a baby, before your mother and I lost touch completely," Andromeda said quickly, averting her eyes. "As I recall, your bottom burned quite badly after you'd removed your nappy. You'll want to be certain to apply a full Sunblocking Charm."

Draco colored as Ron howled with glee. Harry could tell that Andromeda had already forever won a spot on Ron's favorite people list.

"Everyone wore nappies at one point," Andromeda said, waving her hand in the air. "I'm off to my basket weaving group. You girls are welcome to join me anytime during your stay here. Tuggy will get you settled."

Ginny and Hermione nodded politely, but Harry could tell the idea of basket weaving didn't appeal to Ginny at all.

"Hello, Tuggy," Hermione said, kneeling in front of the tiny elf. "How are you?"

The elf's eyes widened immensely as if frightened by being directly addressed. She took several steps backward toward Andromeda.

"Tuggy is rather timid, but she'll warm up to you all eventually," Andromeda said. "My husband, Ted, has gone fishing with some of the locals, but he'll be here for dinner this evening. Tuggy, why don't you show them all to their room where they can change and go explore the beach?"

The five teens thanked Andromeda and followed the house-elf up the stairs. Draco scolded them not to jostle him as his chair hovered gracefully above the stairs. Tuggy directed them all toward various rooms in a single hallway. Harry noticed that, although Draco's room was the same size as the others, it was furnished more plainly. After Tuggy left them, Draco shut his own door while the other four congregated in Harry's room.

It was spacious and airy yet masculine. The beautiful mahogany furnishings were covered in navy and gold fabrics with a nautical theme, a heady arrangement of tropical plants resting on the dresser. Ginny plopped down on his bed and leaned back with her arms opened wide.

"I can't believe we're finally here. I didn't think Mum would ever stop saying goodbye," she said, running her hands over the rich fabric.

Although Mrs. Weasley had liked the idea of having the four of them safely tucked away until the Death Eater trials commenced, she'd worried and fretted much as she did each year on the train platform.

"I know," Ron said. "And did you catch the envious looks we were getting from Fred and George? It was killing them that we were getting a holiday while they had to stay behind for the cleanup. Anyway, we're here and on our own now, so let's make the most of it. Who wants to go swimming?"

Harry glanced out the window at the wide expanse of white sandy beach. Deep blue water stretched as far as his eye could see. "I do. It looks amazing," he said.

His arm was still in a sling, although the tingling sensation was now constant, but at least he was able to move his fingers at will. A Healer was scheduled to travel to the house each week to continue his treatments. They suspected he'd have full use of his arm by the end of the summer. They'd given him a list of exercises he was supposed to practice each night to strengthen it, although Harry had told Ginny he preferred her therapy better. Ginny had swatted him on the head.

"It is," Hermione said, ducking her head as she colored brightly.

"Hermione," Ron said, frowning. "You've blushed like that every time someone mentions Formentera. What gives?"

If possible, Hermione blushed an even deeper shade of red. "Well...it's just...I've been here before while traveling with my parents. Some of the beaches are...interesting."

"Interesting how?" Ron asked, cocking his head to the side.

Harry and Ginny stared at Hermione with puzzled expressions. She was obviously struggling with something, and they leaned forward, waiting for her explanation.

"A lot of the Muggle beaches here are clothing optional," she said very quickly, needlessly straightening some of the items on the desk.

"You mean they go sun bathing starkers?" Ron asked, horrified.

Ginny threw her head back and laughed uproariously while Ron fidgeted, and Hermione continued to blush. Harry shifted uncomfortably - certain body parts just weren't meant to be sunburned.

"Well, yes," Hermione said, clearing her throat. "Some of the Muggles enjoy that."

Ginny, who was still flopped on her back, rose on her elbows and smiled mischievously. Harry worried that she was considering going to that beach. He wouldn't put it past her, but he wasn't certain he was that brave.

"Exactly how do you know about these beaches, Hermione?" Ginny asked, raising her eyebrow.

Harry's eyes fly open wide, staring incredulously at Hermione. Ginny was right! How did Hermione know?

"I told you, I've been here before," Hermione said, her hands fluttering nervously as she pointed toward the window. "They're wearing swimming costumes on that beach, so why don't we change so we can get out there? The Healers said Harry needed some rest and relaxation."

She left the room without a backward glance. Ron stared after her with an odd mixture of horror and intrigue while Harry smirked. He'd actually asked one of the Healers to recommend rest and relaxation in front of Hermione so that she wouldn't pester him about doing any seventh-year revising while they were on holiday.

Ginny giggled and bounced out the door after her. "Last one ready has to carry the beach stuff," she called merrily.

Ron stared for a moment before muttering, "Bloody hell," and following her from the room.

Harry stood and moved to find his own trunks. He paused a moment before closing his door, staring at Draco's closed room. He twisted his lips to the side, debating. The Slytherin would most likely sneer and close the door in his face, but he supposed it was up to him to make the first move. Squaring his shoulders, he strode purposefully across the hall and rapped on the door.

He heard the rustle of parchment before the door swung open wide. Draco paused, swallowing his snarl but narrowing his eyes.

"What do you want?" he asked, watching Harry closely.

"Er...we're going to go down and take a look at the beach," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"And exactly how does this concern me?" Draco asked, raising an eyebrow.

Harry shrugged. "It doesn't, but if you want to come with us, that's where we'll be," he said, moving back toward his own room.

Draco's eyes widened in surprise. He silently watched as Harry returned to his room. "I might be down later," he said, grimacing as if it pained him to say the words. "I have some correspondence with my solicitors I need to sift through first."

Harry nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. "They're trying to sort out your family affairs?" he asked.

"What's left of them," Draco replied, scowling. "I have a letter here from your cousin, too."

"Dudley?" Harry asked, stunned.

"Yeah. He might come and stay with me for awhile when I'm able to return to Malfoy Manor," Draco replied.

Harry shook his head, at a loss for words. "Er...that's great," he said, running his hand through his hair. His mind had been gradually dealing with the end of Voldemort, but he still found the idea of a magical Dudley Dursley as unfathomable. Never mind a magical Dudley Dursley who corresponded with Draco Malfoy.

"See you on the beach," Draco said, shutting the door before Harry could respond.

"Right," Harry said, shaking his head. Perhaps hell had frozen over.

Harry awoke with a start, drenched in sweat, and his heart thudding painfully. Scattered, terrifying images of a dream swirled in his head as he clutched the sheet, gulping for air. It took him a moment to recognize the room where he slept.

He and his friends had been at the beach for a fortnight, and Harry had often been plagued by nightmares. He'd used a Dreamless Sleep Potion each night while in hospital, but he had to leave it behind when he'd been released. The Healers didn't recommend using it without the supervision of medical professionals, and Harry had been so desperate to leave he hadn't cared. He'd survived nightmares before, he'd get through these, as well.

"All right, Harry?" Ginny asked softly, and he felt her soft, warm presence curled up by his side. He'd often found her beside him when he woke from a dream, and although he enjoyed finding her with him, he didn't like the thought that he'd been loud enough to wake her in her own room.

If they'd heard him, as well, Ron and Hermione had been kind enough not to mention it, and although Draco had grumbled a bit about being unable to get a decent night's rest, even he hadn't been obnoxious about it.

Their days at the beach house had been filled with swimming, sunning, and fun on the beach. The Tonkses owned a pair of jet skis that were nearly as fun as flying, and they'd all taken turns on them. They'd played games and gone body surfing, as well as built castles in the sand while their skin turned brown (although Ron and Ginny just freckled) under the blazing sun. They took long walks on the beach and saw a variety of sea life. Harry was thoroughly enjoying his stay.

Draco's presence among them had been awkward at first. It wasn't as if they had ever been friends, but after everything that had happened at the Department of Mysteries, it wasn't as if they could be enemies anymore, either. After sharing something as big as the downfall of a Dark lord, they were somehow forever bonded. Harry also knew how it felt to be alone and the outsider, and he didn't want to make anyone else feel that way - not even Draco Malfoy.

As the long, lazy days passed, everything had worked itself out, anyway. Draco kept himself busy planning and plotting his takeover of his family estate, so he tended to avoid the hot afternoon sun. This gave the two couples plenty of time to be on their own. Like Ron and Harry, Draco also enjoyed the jet skis and would join the others in the evenings for meals and an occasional game of chess. He and Ron were actually much better matched than Harry and Ron had ever been, although Harry knew Ron enjoyed playing Harry more.

Andromeda prepared lavish meals each night, and they would all gather to share tales of their days. Ted Tonks was a friendly, talkative bloke with a fascination for the sea. According to him, there was no better place to be, and he insisted it would always be his mistress. Andromeda wasn't bothered by this in the least, and continued merrily on her way. They were like two separate ships passing occasionally, but their fondness for one another was blatantly apparent.

Andromeda had said that Ted took their daughter's death very hard, and he hadn't quite been the same since. This was readily apparent by Ted's refusal to address Draco. He wasn't rude or unpleasant, simply indifferent - as if Draco wasn't there at all.

Other than the group dinners, Harry's time was his own for the first time he could ever remember. He and Ginny took long, romantic strolls along the beach, and he enjoyed waking up each morning knowing that she would there. They'd formed the habit of meeting for breakfast so they could plan their day together. Harry couldn't ever remember being so carefree. Even his occasional stays at the Burrow had been marred with the threat of war or depressing thoughts about the Dursleys.

To Harry, this time at the beach was the first time he'd ever truly been free - and freedom was something he could definitely get used to having.

One of Ted Tonks' favorite leisure time activities was fishing. The village where they stayed was an active fishing community, and Ted

usually partook when he visited. Both Ron and Draco had taken to the sport, as well. They'd all gone out on several occasions, but Harry found he didn't have the patience for it. He hated having to sit still for so long and instead preferred to dive off the side of the boat and take a swim. Those fishing, of course, frowned on such behavior since it scared the fish away.

Although Ginny had more patience for it, she didn't really enjoy it, either, and Hermione felt horrible for the live bait. She kept trying to convince the other fishers to switch to non-live bait to no avail. Finally giving up, she spent her time sunning on the deck while reading a book.

The odd relationship that had developed between Ron and Draco as a result of the fishing was amusing to watch. Neither was what could be considered as friendly, but they both enjoyed competing over who could catch the larger fish. Their barbs and jabs at one another were harsh and caused several passersby to stare as if expecting a fight, but the usual venom behind the words was missing. It was just old habits dying hard. Harry had seen the flask of Firewhisky that Draco kept stashed in his pocket and knew that on some days, the only thing Ron and Draco were catching was a good buzz.

Since they bypassed these outings, Harry and Ginny spent the days together on the beach. Harry was secretly glad he didn't like fishing because it gave him the opportunity to be alone with Ginny.

This was just such a day, and although he'd been awoken by the nightmare fairly early in the morning, he knew the fishing boat would have already left for the day.

"Was it a bad one?" Ginny asked, wiping the sweat from his brow with a damp cloth.

Harry shook his head, the terrifying visions rapidly dissolving. "Just scattered memories," he said. "What are we doing today?"

"I thought we could pack a picnic lunch and take it to that spot down the beach where the waves are stronger. Do you think your arm feels up for that?" Ginny asked.

He stretched it out a few times. "I think I might need a little more therapy," he said, grinning.

"Do you, now?" Ginny asked, raising her eyebrow. "Shall I go fetch a few potions or Floo a Healer?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head and trying to keep a straight face. He waggled his eyebrows and leered at her. "I think your brand of therapy will do the trick."

Ginny giggled and kissed him quickly on the lips. "No. We're actually going to get out of here at a decent hour today," she said, placing her hands on her hips. "Go have your shower, and I'll meet you in the kitchen."

Harry scowled, pulling himself out of the bed. "I think I might need help reaching my back," he said, pouting.

"You'll manage. Besides, I didn't say we couldn't do our snogging down on the beach," she said before sprinting from the room, her laughter brightening the hallway.

After a quick shower and change, Harry met Ginny in the kitchen where they took the lunch Tuggy had prepared for them and brought it outside. The section of beach where they wanted to go was further down the road than their usual spot. Harry tied the picnic basket on the back of a worn old bicycle that was kept at the house. Ginny perched precariously on the handlebars while Harry pedaled down the lane. His arm really wasn't strong enough to support them, but he quietly cast both a Balancing Charm and a Motion Spell that allowed him to ride with very little effort.

Harry had been very wary about using any magic when he'd first arrived. He liked both Ted and Andromeda very much and wanted to stick to their rules. After the first few days, Andromeda had pulled him aside and basically told him not to be an idiot. She said not to do anything blatant in front of Muggles but to definitely use any spell to ease his comfort during his recovery. 'What's the use in having magic if you don't use it when you need it?' she'd asked. Harry thought it was rather rich coming from her since she was the one who'd told him not to use it the first place.

After the spells were cast, he and Ginny began their trek to the beach. He enjoyed their ride and could have spent the entire day just pedaling around - and that had nothing to do with the magic eliminating the work. He liked the way the sun warmed his skin, the carefree laughter he and Ginny shared, and the complete lack of aim or purpose. They'd get there when they got there, and it didn't really matter when. Harry thrilled at that newfound freedom.

It was later in the day while they were eating the elaborate meal that Tuggy had packed for them that a stray memory worked its way into his thoughts. He and Ginny had spread a blanket on the sand, and Ginny was digging through the basket as if she'd found a pirate's treasure. As Harry was well aware, all Weasleys liked to eat.

Ginny was wearing a very small - very sexy - black bikini that he knew wasn't on Mrs. Weasley's list of approved beachwear. His mouth had hung open, and he'd stood there gaping like a fish when she'd first removed the shorts and t-shirt she'd worn for their ride. The supremely satisfied smile on Ginny's face told him she appreciated his reaction.

He was exceedingly happy that Ginny was sneaky enough to keep the tiny bikini well hidden from both her mother and Ron, because Harry was enjoying watching her wear it immensely. When she pulled some chilled Pumpkin juice out of the basket and proceeded to pour it into gold-plated mugs, a shiver ran down Harry's spine. He shifted uncomfortably as stray thoughts and images flashed in his mind, making him feel dizzy as he tried to piece them together.

"All right, Harry?" Ginny asked, dropping one of the mugs so its contents spilled everywhere. Ignoring the spill, she moved to sit next

to him, watching him closely. "What's wrong? You've lost all your color."

"Those mugs," he said, still staring at the gold while trying to make sense of his memories. Images flitted rapidly through his mind, making his head spin.

"What about them?" Ginny asked, staring intently at the mugs as if trying to decipher the problem. "They look like the ones at Hogwarts. What's wrong?"

"I...I remember," he said, feeling dazed. The air seemed to still around him and the crashing of the waves sounded distant and out of place.

Ginny frowned. "Remember?" she asked, holding her palms up in question. "What do you remember? You've lost me."

Harry swallowed, searching her eyes - for what he wasn't certain - but he knew that he needed to tell her. In the past, she'd always helped him to feel better and set things to rights. Ginny would never laugh at him, or call him mad, or tell him it was impossible.

"After I kil-" he paused, "After it was over, at the Ministry, I went into that locked room."

"What locked room?" she asked, clearly confused. "What are you on about? You didn't go anywhere, Harry. I was right with you, and you didn't leave that room until we brought you to St. Mungo's."

Harry shook his head. "No. I remember seeing you on the floor with me, and I saw Hermione and Ron, too. It was like I was floating and watching you all," Harry said, struggling to get the words out.

Ginny's eyes flew open wide, her irises expanding so much that the brown was barely visible. "You were in the in-between?"

"The in-between?" Harry asked warily.

"It's the place in-between life and death. Bill says that many people have hovered there after a life-threatening experience. Those who weren't killed instantly and managed to recover from their injuries have told about it," Ginny said, awestruck.

"I suppose," Harry said, not wanting to accept any more oddities in his life. "Anyway, there's this secret locked room in the Department of Mysteries. Professor Dumbledore told me about it before he died. I went in that room that night - and he was there, too," Harry said, tensing as he awaited her reaction.

Ginny swallowed. "Who was there?"

"Professor Dumbledore. He was waiting for me, and he said the only way to get inside the locked room is within your mind," Harry said, reaching out and grabbing Ginny's hand. She turned her palm upward and clutched fiercely.

"That makes sense. The Unspeakables study all sorts of unanswered things there," she said with a tremor.

"He said that we were inside my mind, and I'd called him because he was the one who usually explained stuff to me that I didn't understand," Harry said, not wanting to delve into the fact that his mind had been so barren at the time.

"Did he help you?" Ginny asked quietly. Her eyes were so wide - so caring - that he thought he could fall into their depths. It strengthened him, somehow.

"I couldn't understand how I'd managed to do it," Harry said, his throat raw and scratchy. "He said the voices behind the Veil helped me. He said some of them were people who'd loved me."

Ginny rested her other hand on Harry's knee, squeezing it gently and waiting for him to gather his voice to continue.

It took him a few moments before he could. "He wasn't the only one I saw," he said, a small tic working in his jaw.

"Oh?" Ginny asked, keeping the solid pressure on his knee.

Harry blinked rapidly. "Sirius arrived first. He missed the whole final battle because he was chatting up some witch," he said, chuckling a little as he swiped at his nose.

Ginny smiled softly. "That really doesn't surprise me.

"It...- it was good to see him again. I mean, it was good to see him that way. It made it easier somehow," Harry said, clearing his throat.

"Who else did you see?" Ginny asked.

"Remus and Tonks," Harry said, swallowing again. "Remus looked better - healthier than I've ever seen him. Strange since he's dead, huh?" Harry asked.

Ginny blinked hard. "No, not strange at all," she whispered, her voice strained. "Did you get to see your mum and dad, Harry?"

Harry paused again, running his fingers through the sand. Ginny kept a firm grip on his hand while she leaned over to kiss the corner of his eye. He was surprised to feel the moisture there.

"It took me awhile to call them. I know that's strange since it's what I'd always wanted. I don't know what was wrong with me," he said gruffly.

"What was it like?" Ginny whispered, sniffing.

"Amazing," Harry breathed. "It - it was amazing. They like you. My mum said to treat you well."

"I like your mum," Ginny said, laughing and wiping the tears from her eyes.

"I got to talk about Quidditch with my dad. He was going to build a pitch in our garden, like at the Burrow. I really would have liked that," Harry said, excited over the mere thought of it.

"We'll have to have our own pitch one day," Ginny said before her eyes flew open wide and bright color suffused her face. She looked as if she wanted a hole to open up and swallow her right there. She began playing with the sand, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Yeah?" Harry asked, swallowing heavily. "I'd like that. Sort of a Weasley-Potter tradition, you know?" He looked back at the sand, feeling very exposed. He risked a glance up through his fringe and noticed she was still blushing, but also wearing a very self-satisfied smirk.

"They all said they wanted me to return to school for my last year," he said. "They wanted me to have one carefree year."

"Then you should do it," Ginny said, squeezing his fingers. She raised her eyes to meet his. "You deserve that chance. It's what I want, too. Is it what you want?"

"Yeah," he said, the answer suddenly very clear. "I do want to go back. It'll give me time to get my head on straight, and we'll get to be together for our last year with Ron and Hermione."

He knew he still wanted to be an Auror - that ambition hadn't changed since he'd first heard about it as a fourth-year, but they would still need Aurors in another year. Waiting a year for all the furor over Voldemort's demise to die down a bit might be a good thing. If he completed his NEWTs, at least he could assure himself that he got into the program on his own merit. Ron kept saying that they'd have to take him; he'd already proved himself. To him, however, this would feel like walking in on his own terms.

"I'd like that," Ginny said, obviously delighted. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly. "This is going to be the best year ever."

They enjoyed the rest of their lunch and spent their day splashing in the waves. Harry's thoughts would occasionally drift back to some of the conversations he'd had with his lost loved ones. It all seemed so very real - much more solid than a dream. Every once in a while, he'd catch Ginny wearing a glazed expression and knew she was pondering, as well.

The sun had lost its heavy mid-afternoon heat, and they decided it was time to return so they could shower before dinner. As they were packing to leave, Harry asked, "D'you think I dreamed it?"

Ginny paused for a moment, pursing her lips. When she answered him, he wasn't surprised to find that she knew exactly what he'd meant without needing him to clarify. "No. If anyone deserved that chance, it was you. After all you've lost, and all you've given, it seems right that you'd be allowed the chance to make peace before you really started to live," she said slowly, as if carefully choosing each word.

Harry blinked and pulled her into an embrace. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she said.

The soft, husky quality in her voice sent shivers down his spine. He wrapped his arms around her more tightly and lowered his head. Their kisses were soft and tentative at first, but they gradually grew stronger and more impassioned. He could taste the faint hint of chocolate as he kissed her.

Despite the fact they were still standing on the beach and not nearly as secluded as he would have preferred, he allowed his hands to roam where they'd wanted to go all day. The skimpy lines of her bathing suit were driving him mad. She melded into him, pressing herself so close that he knew she could feel his desire.

He'd always tried to pull back from her when this happened, to maintain that level of control, but now, his body hummed as her hands traced feather-light caresses along his chest, and his need seemed overwhelming. He didn't want to wait anymore. Voldemort was gone, and there was no longer any need to allow him to affect Harry's choices.

He knew Ron had been entering Hermione's room each night on the pretext of saying goodnight, and that he would always stay to say good morning, too, but Harry and Ginny had yet to take that step. He looked into her deep, brown eyes and saw only love and acceptance there, surrounded by the heat of desire.

"Ginny," he said, moving her hair back and tracing his fingers along her scar. She was driving him mad, and he could barely think straight here on the beach, never mind back at the house. He wanted to be certain she felt as ready as he did.

"Why don't you come in and say goodnight to me when we retire tonight, Harry?" she whispered, her voice low and throaty.

Harry thought his knees might buckle. "I can do that," he replied, his voice cracking like it hadn't done since he was thirteen.

He ran his hands through her hair, over her shoulders and down her back as he leaned over to kiss her once again. Her hands continued to explore as she opened her mouth to deepen the kiss.

The fabric of her bikini was soft, but her skin felt softer and the simple fact there was so much of it exposed aroused him further.

Panting, he finally had to pull back, knowing it would take a while before he was able to ride the bike home.

"Ginny..." he said.

"Tonight," she whispered, lightly kissing his nose.

Getting through dinner that evening was nearly unbearable.

Harry awoke slowly, leisurely, feeling the gentle ocean breeze drifting in from the open window. A wispy tickle beneath his nose caused him to raise his hand to rub it. His hand encountered silky soft tendrils of hair beneath his nose and continuing downward so they were splayed across his chest.

His eyes flew open wide to find a sleeping Ginny nestled snugly beneath his shoulder. Her bare arm was draped casually across his hips, and the warmth of her skin eagerly awoke other parts of his anatomy. Memories of the previous evening filled his heart and mind, and a lazy smile drifted across his face. He lay there for a moment, taking the time to fully awaken while he twined a piece of her hair between his fingers.

Last night had been the most amazing night of his life. Despite the fact he hadn't known the first thing about what he was doing, it had turned out bloody brilliantly. Well...for him, anyway. He wasn't certain it had been the highlight of Ginny's life, but he delighted in the knowledge that he now had all the time in the world to practice until he got it right for her. In fact, his diligence would make Hermione's dedication to her studies pale in comparison.

Grinning daftly, he extricated himself from Ginny's embrace and searched the floor for his jeans. He dressed quickly, although he had some difficulty due to certain uncooperative parts of his body. Giving a cursory glance around Ginny's room to ensure that he hadn't left anything incriminating behind, he realized for the first time how Ginny had made this room her own. Although far from frilly, it was definitely bright and, well...girlish.

The candles she had lit were still burning on her dresser, giving off a sweet, flowery scent that reminded him very much of Ginny. Gardenia, she had called it, although he'd barely been listening at the time.

Snot sat on the other end of the dresser with his back facing the room. Harry distinctly remembered turning him around the previous evening. Somehow, he just couldn't have his way with Ginny with that stupid bear that she'd had since she was a little girl watching him. Ginny had giggled, finding his discomfort extremely amusing.

Shaking his head to clear the memory, he gently kissed Ginny's forehead before slipping from the room. Although he had no regrets about the previous evening, he didn't want to face an irate Ron first thing after discovering the wonder he and Ginny had shared.

He knew Ron would most likely still be asleep in Hermione's room, but Harry opened Ron's door very cautiously anyway. Finding it empty, he slipped inside and opened the bottom drawer of Ron's dresser, knowing exactly where Ron would have hidden the item Harry sought. He found the book hidden inside the only neatly folded pair of jeans in the drawer. Sitting on the floor, he haphazardly flipped through the pages of *What Every Wizard Needs to Know About Pleasing His Witch*.

Fred had given the book to Harry as a joke back in fifth year after Harry's failed date with Cho Chang. It had embarrassed Harry enormously, which of course had been Fred's intent. Harry and Ron had

eventually shared a few laughs over it. In truth, it was really the only formal education that Harry had ever received on the matter - other than Ron's awkward repetition of what his dad had told him.

Harry hadn't seen the book again until he'd caught Ron reading it after Ron had started dating Lavender. Other than a few good-natured barbs at his mate, Harry had again let it slip his mind. Now, he found it extremely ironic that the ultimate joke was on Fred since Harry would use the knowledge he gained from the book on Fred's own sister. Life was funny sometimes.

He carried the book back to his own room and snuggled down inside his bedcovers. He read for quite awhile until his eyes grew too heavy to keep them open anymore. He really hadn't got much sleep the previous evening. He hid the book under his mattress and rolled over for a kip.

The mid-morning sun was blazing high in the sky when a pounding on his door startled Harry awake. He sat up straight, clutching the sheet to his chest and fumbling for his glasses as Ron burst into the room.

"What's wrong with you?" Ron asked. "Are you going to sleep the day away?"

Unless there was a fishing expedition planned for the day, it was rare for Ron to be awake before Harry.

"Wha-" Harry asked groggily, wiping his face.

Hermione and Ginny followed Ron into the room, both giggling at Harry's dazed expression. Ginny colored brightly when he caught her eye, and she looked down at the floor. Harry felt that mad grin returning to his face despite his nervousness. He was tongue-tied and didn't have the faintest idea what he should say.

He really wished Ron and Hermione weren't there. Was there some way they could tell what happened? Would they know? Ron would pound him, and he couldn't bear to see that knowing twinkle in Hermione's eye. He really wanted to talk with Ginny alone rather than just sit here smiling at her...

"You missed breakfast, and it's nearly lunch. What did you two end up doing yesterday that's got you so knackered?" Ron asked, breaking into Harry's rambling thoughts.

"Er," Harry said, faltering and feeling thoroughly trapped.

Ginny's eyes flew open wide, panicked. She imperceptibly shook her head - as if he'd needed her warning not to tell Ron what they'd really been doing.

"Er," he repeated, his voice cracking humiliatingly.

"We went to the beach. You know - down to that part where the waves are really big," Ginny said, speaking very fast. "We rode the bike there. Harry used some Charms so he didn't hurt his arm. It's doing much

better. We brought a picnic lunch. Tuggy packed chicken and some lovely bread, and she gave us this wonderful chocolate tart for pudding."

Hermione's eyes sharpened as she glanced back and forth between Harry and Ginny. That knowing twinkle that Harry had feared lit her face, and she stared pointedly at Ginny's impersonation of Colin Creevey. Harry flushed and had to look away.

Fortunately, Ginny's talking about food had distracted Ron from her rambling.

"I'm hungry," Ron said. "Let's ask Tuggy to prepare a basket for us, and we can eat it before we go out on the jet skis. I'm not going fishing today, so I'd like to have a go."

"Why don't we all go and put our swimming costumes on?" Hermione said sweetly, tugging on Ginny's arm.

"Right. Meet you in the kitchen," Ron said, hurrying for his room.

"Ginny, can I have a word?" Harry asked, clearing his throat. He still refused to meet Hermione's eyes and could feel the heat radiating from his skin.

"You'd best let me do your Sunblock Charm today, Harry," Hermione said, smirking. "You must've done a poor job yesterday; you're horribly red."

If possible, Harry knew he flushed even deeper. Hermione giggled as she pranced down the hallway to her own room.

"Hey," Ginny said after Hermione had shut her door. Her cheeks were bright, and she repeatedly scuffed her toe on the floor.

"Hey," Harry said, not understanding why he felt so wrong-footed. Why was it suddenly so hard to talk with her? It was as if they'd both been transported back to his first summer at the Burrow.

"You said you needed to have a word?" Ginny asked, and there was a distinct clipped tone to her voice.

Harry glanced up quickly to find her arms folded across her chest and a faint frown on her face. He knew her well enough to know she was upset about something, and his stomach dropped, realizing that she must have decided last night was a mistake.

"Er," he said, feeling lost. What could he say? It wasn't as if it could be undone? How was he supposed to fix this?

"You're very eloquent this morning, Harry," she said drolly, never dropping her rigid posture. "Look, if there's something you want to say, just say it."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, feeling things slipping further from his control. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Yeah, I picked up on that," Ginny said tartly.

Harry blinked, completely nettled. "I love you," he said, blurting the first thing that came to his mind. He did love her, and he hoped that she enjoyed hearing him say it as much as he enjoyed hearing it from her.

Ginny stared at him, and for the first time, he noticed the thin sheen to her eyes. "I'm glad," she whispered, resting her back against the wall. "I was surprised to wake up alone."

Harry's eyes widened in comprehension. She thought he'd run away! He jumped from the bed and quickly crossed the room towards her.

"No! I left because I didn't want Ron to find me there. I didn't want to start off with a row," he said quickly, brushing a single tear from the corner of her eye.

"You're not sorry then?" she asked, barely breathing.

"Never. I'll never be sorry about what we did. I love what we did. I want to do it again," Harry said fervently.

A tremulous smile crossed Ginny's face. "Good," she whispered, blushing furiously.

"Last night was amazing, Ginny. I've never been so happy in my entire life. I know it wasn't as perfect for you, but I'll get better, I swear," Harry said, speaking very fast.

"You were fine," Ginny said, giggling and covering his mouth with her fingers.

"No, really. I've learned a few things," Harry said earnestly. "It'll get better, I promise."

"Learned a few things? In the past few hours? How?" Ginny asked, frowning her brow.

"Trust me, okay?" Harry asked, feeling so hot he thought he'd explode. He really didn't want to have to admit anything about the book to her just then. This intimacy between them was new, and it would take him awhile to get used to it.

"Okay," Ginny said, giggling, "but you're really being too hard on yourself. I was nervous, too. We're both new at this, so we'll learn together."

"We just need practice," Harry said, wagging his eyebrows.

"Yeah," Ginny said, chuckling. "It's going to be a nightmare on the beach with Ron and Hermione. I don't think I'll be able to stop giggling."

"And I just want to touch you," Harry said honestly. "It'll be hard to control myself around Ron. Hermione knows."

"Yeah. I caught that," Ginny said. "Don't worry, I'll tell her to leave you alone. I'm certain she's waiting for me back in my room."

"What are you going to say?" Harry asked warily.

"Everything," Ginny replied brightly.

"Everything?" he asked, swallowing hard.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "The one thing you blokes never seem to understand about girls is the easiest thing of all. We talk. You know when blokes get to that sticky, emotional part of a conversation where they slap each other on the back and pretend it didn't happen? That's where girls start a conversation. We like details, and we talk. How do you suppose it is that I knew all about Hermione and Viktor while you and Ron didn't?"

"I suppose," Harry said, scratching his neck. He still felt uncomfortable wondering what Ginny would say to Hermione.

"Just don't think about it," Ginny said, laughing. "How do you think I feel knowing that if you're going to share anything it'll be with my brother?"

Harry snorted. "That's just the thing, I can't even tell Ron!"

"It'll get easier as we all get used to it," Ginny said sagely. "You'll see."

Harry nodded, hoping she was right. Ginny returned to her own room, and he put on some trunks to go to the beach.

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The rest of the summer passed in a haze of sunny days on the beach, moonlit strolls, and nights filled with wonder and discovery. Both Harry and Ginny's birthdays passed and before they knew it, it was time to return to the real world.

Harry had sent notes with Hedwig to Professor McGonagall and Mrs. Weasley, informing them of his plans to return to school. The four friends had arranged to go back to the Burrow three days before the start of term in order to give them time to collect their books, and for Ginny to visit the Ministry to take the test to get her License to Apparate.

After long and heartfelt goodbyes to Andromeda and Ted, the four teens flooded back to the Burrow. Draco had been waiting by the fireplace to see them off and told them that he'd see them at Hogwarts. Although still moving very slowly, he was recovering as well, and had also decided to complete his last year of schooling.

It would make for a year full of surprises.

At the Burrow, Harry was the last to emerge from the fireplace, stepping into the newly-renovated Weasley kitchen. It was both familiar and not so familiar with all the changes and bright, new additions. The long wooden table was still in the center of the room, but the wood was

new, shiny, and unmarred. The kitchen still smelled fantastic, and the aroma of all of Harry's favorite foods assaulted his senses first thing.

"Harry! You landed on your feet," Ron said, amazed. The blue of his eyes shone clearly. Ron might never admit it, but he was happy to be home.

Harry blinked, staring back at the fireplace for a moment. "So I did," he said, grinning. "Maybe I've finally grown up."

"How are you, Harry?" Fred asked, slapping him on the back.

Harry shook his hand, grinning. "I'm good. The beach was fantastic."

"Just look at how tanned and healthy you all look," Mrs. Weasley said tearfully. She let go of Hermione to give Harry one of her bone-crushing hugs. "Welcome home."

Harry hugged her back tightly, delighting in the embrace. "It's good to be home," he said, meaning it.

"Ginny, look at all those new freckles! Did you remember to wear your hat?" Mrs. Weasley fussed, reaching out to touch Ginny's face.

"I always have freckles, Mum," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

"What's for dinner? I'm starving," Ron asked.

"How was Andromeda?" Bill asked. "I've met her several times through Gringotts, but I haven't seen her since we lost Tonks."

"She's doing well," Harry replied. "A bit eccentric, but I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything else."

"Ze 'oliday agreed with you, 'Arry," Fleur said, leaning over to kiss both cheeks. "You look very good."

"Thanks," Harry replied, blushing. He looked down and noticed the slight bulge on Fleur's belly. "How are you feeling?"

"I am as well as I can be. I do not like zees morning sickness zat lasts all day," she said, frowning.

"Right," Harry replied, running a hand through his hair.

As Bill moved away to talk to Ron, Fleur leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear, "I think it is ze medicine of love zat has healed you better zan ze sea, no?" Her eyes twinkled merrily as she shot a pointed glance toward Ginny.

Ginny stood chatting with her father, but she smiled when she noticed Harry's gaze and gave him a wink. Harry smiled back, and Fleur nodded, pleased.

"Harry!" George said, slapping him on the back. He'd walked over without the slightest hint of a limp. "How are you, mate?"

"Hi, Harry," Shannon said.

"Hi!" Harry replied. "How are you?"

"Good as new," George replied, beaming. "Business is booming. Fred, Shannon and I have barely managed to get a day off. We closed early today so we could all be here for dinner."

Shannon and George's hands were clasped together, and they appeared very comfortable with one another. Harry could see Iris in the far end of the room helping Mrs. Weasley place the food on the table.

Charlie was also home and had brought his Romanian girlfriend, Ekaterina. Harry remembered her from Bill's wedding. They were both sitting at the table and chatting with Hermione.

A warm, pleasant feeling washed over Harry. It felt good to be home and surrounded by his favorite people. The Weasley kitchen was as hectic and full of activity as it always been, and it was dizzying to try and keep up with the scattered conversations.

They were all putting their lives back together and building a future, but they still took the time to regroup and simply enjoy one another's company. Harry was no longer that little boy stuffed, unwanted, inside a cupboard; instead he was an integral part of a warm and loving family. Through all the hell and destruction Voldemort had wrought in his life, in the end Harry had ended up with exactly what he'd always wanted.

As Mrs. Weasley placed the food on the table and the feeding frenzy began, Ginny took the chair beside his, clasping his hand beneath the table. Her eyes sparkled happily, filling his belly with warmth.

He sat back before filling his own plate, quietly observing the others. Ron and Hermione sat across from him, Ron filling his plate to overflowing and slopping more onto Hermione's plate, as well. The scar on Mr. Weasley's wrist peeked from the sleeve of his robe as he reached for some potatoes. He could see Fleur's scar as she pushed her hair behind her ear and knew Ginny's was visible beneath her hairline.

Each and every one of them had been marred by the war in one way or another. Perhaps the reason he truly felt so at home here was that he knew the mark on his own forehead was truly just another scar.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Epilogue

The September sun shone brightly over the rolling meadow that lay behind the Burrow. Harry leisurely walked across a well-used path, inhaling the crisp autumn scents and pointing out the changing colors of the leaves to the infant he carried in his arms. It had been a little over four years since Voldemort's defeat, and Harry still hadn't got over the wonder of being able to go outside alone, unhindered and without fear of constant attack.

Ginny often teased him about his continued habit of keeping his wand in his back pocket or within easy reach at all times. Even four years later, she still had to be careful not to startle him when entering a room. All in all, though, he was finally becoming comfortable in his own skin. He could even tolerate the reporters who, after four years, still asked for his opinion on current events.

He'd gone back to school that first autumn after Voldemort's demise. He, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had had their carefree year - well, carefree for all save Hermione, who fretted continuously over the upcoming NEWTs. Harry had done well on his exams despite Hermione's predictions of doom and gloom as a result of his deplorable revising habits. He acknowledged that he could have been a better student, but at the time, he was having too much fun to worry about it. He'd already had a lifetime of worry.

When they'd finished school, he and Ron had immediately joined the Ministry and began their Auror training. After everything they'd done during the war, they were able to complete their education in two years rather than three, and they'd begun work straightaway.

At first, they'd been assigned separate partners. Their Academy instructor had insisted that rookies needed to be paired with older, more experienced veterans. That had lasted for about three months before their transfer papers arrived, signed by none other than Kingsley Shacklebolt. Kingsley had insisted that strict adherence to the Ministry's old policies was what had got them all into trouble in the first place. If something worked - don't fix it. Ron and Harry had been partnered ever since.

Hermione had gone into training to become a Healer. She'd only recently finished her schooling and was apprenticing under a fully-qualified Healer at St. Mungo's. Ginny had gone to work at the Ministry for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad. Her training had only taken a year, so she was actually the first of the four to get out and work, earning her own wages.

After the war had ended, there had been a mad rush of weddings and babies. Mrs. Weasley said it had happened after the first war, too. People just wanted to celebrate the good things in life. The first of Harry's friends to get married had been Neville Longbottom, of all people. He and Susan Bones had both worked in the Apothecary in Diagon Alley after Hogwarts had closed, and romance blossomed soon after.

Seamus Finnegan and Demelza Robbins were next, followed by Lavender Brown and Oliver Wood. Oddly enough, it was this spate of weddings and all of their friends marrying young that turned Hermione off the idea. Although Ron would have married her right out of school, Hermione wanted to wait until the furor over the end of the war had died down. She didn't want to be accused of having it influence her decision.

Harry'd had no such qualms. He had asked Ginny to marry him on the Hogwarts grounds during their last day at the castle. She'd accepted, and they were married only a few months later on the first of September. That day had always been one that Harry had counted down to reach, so he wanted something to always mark the significance. He was

proud to say that September the first had dramatically changed his life for the better on two separate occasions.

He'd thought he and Ginny would have a small wedding right at the Burrow surrounded by the Weasley family and a few close friends. Mrs. Weasley and the Wizarding world had other ideas. They'd ended up getting married at Hogwarts in a morning ceremony before the students had arrived.

Harry had gritted his teeth and borne the fussing and fawning because he knew he was the one who won in the end. He got to be married to Ginny, and he'd never regretted that decision. Using the money Sirius had left him, they'd bought a very private, secluded bit of land not too far from Ottery St. Catchpole - but not too close, either. They'd built their own house - one with plenty of land for a Quidditch pitch, decorated and furnished the house together, and four months ago, their son, James Harry Potter had been born.

Harry chuckled, remembering how desperately Ginny had wanted a son. Weasleys always had sons, but her brothers liked to tease her that since she was the girl, she'd have girls. Of course, that only made Ginny determined to prove them wrong. Harry had watched her stick her nose in the air, and her eyes narrowed with that 'I-can-do-anything-you-can-do' attitude that he loved so much about her. He knew that technically the sex of the baby was determined by him, but he'd never doubt Ginny's will. He was certain that their next child would be a girl simply so Ginny could prove to her brothers that she could also do what they couldn't.

Harry didn't care. He was just happy to see his family growing rather than shrinking for a change. He'd told Ginny he didn't care if they had two children or twenty, he just wanted James to have a sibling so he'd never be alone. Ginny had stroked his cheek fondly while insisting it wouldn't be twenty.

Although Ginny had bought the very best pram - according to Mothering Witches - Harry still preferred carrying his son when they went for a stroll. They had plenty of money to live comfortably, but Ginny was still a rather frugal girl. Frugal about everything - except when it came to her son, that is. For him, nothing but the best would do - and Ginny was convinced he needed everything they advertised. Every time she read one of those endless Wizarding parenting magazines, she'd fret that she was somehow doing something wrong because James didn't have some new-fangled contraption.

Harry really didn't care what she bought, or whether they ever used it, as long as it made Ginny happy. She'd given him the best gift in the world, and each day he was surprised to learn something new about his little miracle. He might have missed doing all those father and son things as a child, but he'd be damned certain he got to do them as a father. He'd dressed the little tyke in gray track suit pants with a red hooded sweatshirt and brought him outside for a bit of fresh air. The Burrow felt rather stuffy with all the chattering ladies inside.

The reason for all the chattering ladies was the long-awaited, approaching nuptials of Ron and Hermione. They were due to marry the

following day in a Muggle church near Hermione's family home. Harry and Ginny were standing up as witnesses, and it was their job to get the bride and groom to the church on time.

Harry thought he had the easy end of that deal. Ron had been ready for this moment for ages - it was Hermione who was the nervous wreck. Poor Ginny really had her hands full there. Hermione had been throwing wobbles over inane little details for weeks. She'd always been a bit mental, and Harry thought weddings made all women go mad.

"See, that's the shed where your grandmother keeps all your uncles' old brooms. Your mum used to nick them when they weren't looking," he told James as they walked past the shed behind the Burrow.

The baby was far more interested in chewing on the collar of Harry's shirt, but Harry really didn't mind. His son had the same bright green eyes as he did, but his untidy mop of hair was rust-colored rather than either red or black. Harry liked to say he was the perfect mixture of both parents.

He ran the pad of his thumb over his son's soft cheek, marveling at how someone so small could have him so completely wrapped around such a tiny little finger. It had been that way from the moment James had arrived in the world.

"Harry!" Bill called, trotting to catch up to him. Bill carried his giggling, now three-year-old son, Claude, on his shoulders. Fleur was due to give birth to their second child any day.

Hermione swore it would be just like Fleur to deliver on Hermione's wedding day, but Fleur was still the picture of calm serenity. Harry fondly remembered Ginny's pregnancy and how the two of them had been so overwhelmed by each new development, however small. Perhaps having a second one was easier since you had experience behind you?

"Mum said you were out here with James. The tension in that kitchen is unreal," Bill said, slowing his pace to walk with Harry.

"Hey, Bill. Hey, Claude," Harry said, reaching up to ruffle his nephew's hair.

His nephew.

He had a nephew - two of them, actually. The fact he was part of a big and loving family still amazed him sometimes.

"Bonjour, Unca Harry," Claude said, beaming.

"It's still rough in there, huh?" Harry asked, jerking his head toward the house.

"Hermione is having a meltdown because George told her he forgot to arrange coverage for the shop tomorrow, so he has to work. Of course, everyone knows he's just taking the mickey out of her, but Hermione had the screaming abdabs, anyway," Bill said, shaking his head.

"She's just nervous," Harry replied.

"Yeah. You'd know something about that, eh, mate?" Bill asked, gently knocking Harry's shoulder with his own.

Harry grinned sheepishly. He'd been a basket case before his own wedding. He'd been convinced right up until the moment he spoke his vows that something would happen to snatch it all away.

"Hermione doesn't like when she can't control everything. Despite knowing exactly what's going to happen tomorrow, it's never happened to her, so she's nervous. She'll pull it together, she always does," Harry said fondly.

"How's Ron?" Bill asked. "I haven't seen him."

"Fred and Charlie took him out to get a pint, hence the reason there are so many witches in there," Harry replied.

"And George," said Bill. "He's the sole male presence in the kitchen, and even he is looking rather overwhelmed."

"George is in charge of Loki, and I've got James, so we couldn't go to the pub. Charlie said it was only bachelor blokes allowed, anyway," Harry said, chuckling. It took a lot to overwhelm either George or Fred, so Harry was just as happy to be outside with James.

George and Shannon had been married right around the same time as Harry and Ginny, and their son, Loki was just over a year old. Fred and Iris were still together, but it was a constant on-again, off-again kind of relationship. Charlie usually arrived for family functions with a beautiful witch on his arm - but it was generally a different witch each time. It drove Mrs. Weasley spare.

"Merlin, I hope they don't get Ron pissed. That's all he needs to completely send Hermione over the edge," Bill said, shaking his head. His expression belied his words, however. Harry suspected that he really did hope Fred and Charlie got Ron pissed.

Harry snorted. "Hopefully they've practiced their Sobriety Charms."

"If not, I'm certain Mum will sort them all out - she certainly had to take care of you after your stag night," Bill said, laughing fondly.

Harry scowled at the memory. "You lot left me outside wearing nothing but my pants!"

"It's your fault for getting so pissed. The Savior of the Wizarding World and all - you should be able to handle your Firewhisky better than that," Bill said.

"Everyone has their flaws," Harry said, disgruntled. "It's not as if it's Ron's real stag night, anyway. We took care of that last weekend. Fred and Charlie just needed to get away from all those hens."

He scowled at the 'Savior of the Wizarding World' comment. He still hated the vast number of titles that were used when referring to him. The anniversary of the date when Voldemort had fallen had been

proclaimed as Potter's Day and was celebrated the way Muggles celebrated Bonfire Night. Harry usually tried to escape the festivities by taking a seaside holiday during that time each year.

This past Potter's Day, Fred and George had invented t-shirts depicting Voldemort's downfall. They'd been unable to sell it, however, because Harry's image refused to remain in the shot.

"Heh, Charlie's always run when the witches start to cluster, but I think Fred is closer to wanting George's lifestyle than he's ready to admit," Bill said sagely.

James shifted his attention from Harry's collar then reached out and grabbed his glasses, making cooing noises all the while. It took Harry a moment to pry them out of the baby's little fingers and readjust them on his face. When he did, the world was distorted through a hodgepodge of smeared fingerprints. Harry quickly cast a spell to clean them.

"Papa, you promised to fly! Take me! Take me!" Claude said, tugging on Bill's hair to regain his attention.

"Ah, a promise is a promise," Bill said, smiling and disengaging his ponytail from his son's tight grasp. "Care to join us?"

Harry shook his head ruefully. "I promised Ginny not until his first birthday," he said, regretting that vow more and more. "We're going to continue our stroll."

Harry hoisted James more securely on his shoulder and walked along the fence surrounding the Burrow's property. The crisp October wind caused James to shiver and cuddle closer to his dad. His little eyes widened when the wind gusted in his face, and Harry laughed out loud at the shocked expression.

James's first Halloween was approaching, and Harry wanted to make it special. He knew the baby was really too little to appreciate it, but Harry was enjoying experiencing all the childhood things he'd missed through his son.

He'd been so terrified when he'd first learned that he was going to be a father. What did he know about raising babies? He'd certainly had no experience to base anything on. If he'd thought Ginny would be a great source of information, he was sadly mistaken. Ginny was the baby of her family, and she was nearly as clueless as he was about what to do.

After several long and calming conversations with both Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, they had relaxed - a little. Harry still worried about how he'd handle it when it came time to discipline his son. He certainly didn't want to do anything to follow Uncle Vernon's example. He'd begun paying much more attention to how Mr. Weasley interacted with his sons, and closely watching Bill and George and how they related to theirs.

Between Ginny and him, they'd figure it all out together. They always did. Perhaps, if Ron and Hermione were quicker to start their own family than they had been about getting married, they could all conquer the battle of parenthood together, as well.

Lost as he was in his own thoughts, he was surprised to stumble across Hermione outside in the chilly air. She was leaning on the fence far from the house, her face turned toward the wind so it whipped her hair about wildly.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, taking several tentative steps toward her.

One never knew how Hermione would take an interruption these days. She was the epitome of a frantic bride. He was surprised, therefore, when she turned toward him with a tear-streaked face.

"Hermione! What's wrong?" he asked.

James must have sensed his distress for he shifted in Harry's arms and began to fuss.

"Oh, Harry! Everything's changing," Hermione said, sniffing.

"What's changing, Hermione?" Harry asked, grinning while bouncing James slightly on his shoulder to settle him.

"It'll all be so different, and things are so nice the way they are. I don't want that to be ruined," she said, sniffing.

Harry blinked, baffled. He knew it was mostly nerves - combined with Hermione's utter dislike of feeling out of control, but he was afraid that whatever he said would be wrong. He also knew he had to try.

"Hermione, it's going to be all right," Harry said, wrapping his free arm around her and hugging her close.

"Oh! That's easy for you to say!" Hermione said, crossing her arms across her chest.

"It is easy for me to say," Harry replied, chuckling, "because I've been where you are. And who was the one who talked me down? Who was the only one who calmed me on my wedding day?"

"I was," Hermione said, a tiny smile playing on her lips. "Well, Ginny did, too, once the ceremony started."

"Right - as Ron will for you once you're standing with each other. Before that, though, I was panic-stricken. You were the one who made me see that I was getting exactly what I'd always wanted. And you were right. Now, today, it's your turn. You and Ron have waited a long time for this day, Hermione," Harry said smiling.

Hermione sniffled again and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. James began cooing again while sucking on his fist.

"My mum and I used to talk about my wedding when I was a little girl. The reason I agreed to do this the Muggle way was to make some of her dreams come true, as well. We've drifted so far since I went away to Hogwarts," Hermione said.

"Hagrid told me after seven years at Hogwarts, I wouldn't recognize myself," Harry said. "That was certainly true."

"Oh, Harry! For me, too. I sometimes feel like a complete stranger when I do normal, Muggle things with my parents. I belong to this world, now," Hermione said.

"You belong to both, because your upbringing there helped to shape you into the person you are today. It's all connected - it took me a long time to figure that out. If things didn't happen the way they did, I might never have befriended or even met all of you. Everything happens for a reason, and change can be good," Harry said, shrugging.

"When did you get so wise?" Hermione asked, giggling as she gently nudged his shoulder with her own.

"I had a friend who was a great influence on me when I was younger," Harry replied, nudging her back. "Big, bushy hair, kind of a know-it-all. You might have known her."

"Oh, ho. Very funny," Hermione said, swatting him gently and gaining James' attention.

"She grew into quite a beauty," Harry said, smiling.

Hermione's eyes flew open wide and for a moment Harry feared she was going to start crying again, but James saved him by reaching out and grabbing a fistful of Hermione's hair. He tugged, trying to bring it into his mouth.

"Uh, oh," Harry said, "hang on. He does this to Ginny all the time."

"Ouch!" Hermione said, although she was laughing.

"Little bugger has a knack for tangling his fingers in there," Harry said, desperately trying to free Hermione from his son's tight grasp. The baby squealed with pleasure.

"Harry!" Hermione chided. "You can't use that kind of language in front of your son! What's the matter with you?"

"He can't talk yet, Hermione," Harry said, laughing. "He knew the tone of my voice was friendly."

"Oh? And what will you tell Ginny when she has to write in his baby book that his first word was 'bugger?'" Hermione asked.

Harry chuckled. "I'll tell her it was Ron's fault."

Hermione shook her head, laughing. "You two will never change."

"See! That's a good thing. When I came out here you didn't like change," Harry said, beaming.

"I love you, Harry," she said, throwing her arms around him and hugging both him and James.

James squawked in protest, causing Hermione to release them.

"I love you, too, James," she said.

"There you all are," Ginny said, smiling as she strode across the meadow to greet them. The fading sunlight shone off her hair, making it glow with an ethereal beauty. Harry had never got over his fascination with her hair - and he didn't think he ever would.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," she said, wrapping a hand-knit baby blanket around James and taking him from Harry's arms.

Harry frowned slightly. The one thing that always disappointed him about visiting the Burrow was that there was always a pair of hands eager to take the baby away.

"Fleur and Shannon are talking with Mum about Auntie Muriel's tiara, Hermione. You'd best get up there if you don't want to find it incorporated into that pretty veil of yours," Ginny said, one corner of her mouth quirking wryly.

"Oh, no. I'd better hurry back in there. Thanks, Harry," Hermione said, hurrying back toward the house.

"Hello, gorgeous," Harry said, leaning over and kissing his wife on the cheek.

Ginny frowned slightly looking down at her faded jeans and bulky jumper. "I might not be gorgeous today, but I will be tomorrow," she said. "I can't believe that dress finally fits me. I was so worried I wouldn't be able to get into it in time."

"You look gorgeous now. You always look gorgeous," Harry said, leaning over and kissing her again. He knew from experience that he was talking to deaf ears, but as far as he was concerned, she was the most gorgeous creature on her earth - along with their son, of course.

"Where have you been?" Ginny asked holding James in the air. She giggled when he grabbed for her nose. "You've been gone for ages."

"I showed James the Quidditch pitch," Harry said.

"You didn't take him up on a broom, did you, Harry?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I didn't! You can ask Bill. We took a long walk around the woods and examined all the colors. James threw my glasses on the ground three times," Harry said, listing their adventures.

"Why don't you just Charm them to stay on?" Ginny asked, laughing.

"That would ruin his game," Harry said, shocked she would suggest such a thing.

Ginny smiled fondly, leaning over to kiss him properly. James again voiced his disapproval of being caught in the middle.

"We should head inside. Mum is just about to serve dinner, and it's getting chilly out here. Mum's arranged for the three kids to stay in the nursery tonight, so they'll all be here in the morning for Gabrielle."

Mrs. Weasley had converted Percy's old room into a nursery for her visiting grandchildren. She'd said it was a way to remind herself that life went on.

"Gabrielle is really going to be okay watching all three of them?" Harry asked, feeling slightly panicked. Fleur's sister had offered to mind the Weasley grandchildren while they attended the wedding, but it would be the first time Harry and Ginny had left James with anyone besides family.

"She won't be alone," Ginny said bracingly. "She's bringing a friend, and the two of them will be fine."

"Is Ron back yet?" Harry asked.

"Oh, no. I don't expect to see him for hours. Hermione is spending the night at her parents' house, and Fleur looked ready to go to bed when I was inside. Hermione will kill her if she goes into labor tonight," Ginny said, laughing.

"So, a quiet evening at home, then?" Harry asked, wagging his eyebrows.

"Hmm," Ginny replied, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "I'm certain we'll come up with something to do."

Harry grinned, wrapping his arm around his wife. "Come on, Mrs. Potter. I'm suddenly exhausted. I think we'll have to retire early."

"Right! As if my parents won't see right through that, Harry. They'll know you want to have your wicked way with me," Ginny said, scoffing.

"Er, Ginny. I think they've figured that out already. After all, you're holding the evidence in your arms," Harry said, tickling James under his chin. The baby squealed with delight before beginning to fuss at Ginny's sweater.

"Sorry, love, but it looks like your son wants to have his way with me first," Ginny said, laughing. "Let me feed him, then we'll have our own dinner before putting him down for the night."

"All right," Harry said, pouting.

Ginny laughed, nudging him gently. "Then we can go home and engage in those other activities."

The monster in Harry's chest perked up its head and roared.

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The morning of the wedding dawned cloudy and gray with a very light sheen of moisture in the air. Although it was typical English weather,

Luna had informed Hermione that it meant the Fertility Goddess was smiling upon her. Added to the stress Hermione was already feeling, plus the fact she was marrying a Weasley, and Hermione was in a right panic.

Ginny had Apparated over to the Grangers' in order to calm Hermione, while Harry went to the Burrow to make certain Ron was straightened out. He'd found the groom hunched over a toilet with a full-blown hangover. Fred and Charlie had succeeded in their mission.

Harry begged a clucking Mrs. Weasley for a remedy - she never could resist when he used his 'puppy-dog eyes,' as Ginny called them. After Ron had showered, dressed and eaten a massive breakfast, the two Apparated to the secure location that Hermione had arranged for magical guests. They still had plenty of time, so they took a stroll along the street, peering in various Muggle windows as they did.

"So, are you feeling better?" Harry asked, smirking. Ron had lost the green tinge to his skin, but now, only an hour before the ceremony, he was finally beginning to look nervous. Leave it to Ron to wait until the last minute.

"What if she decides not to do this, Harry?" he asked.

"She won't," Harry replied, smiling.

"How do you know?" Ron asked, sounding both irritated and hopeful at the same time.

"How long have you known Hermione, Ron? You - of all people - should know how hard it is to change her mind once she has it set on something," Harry replied easily.

Ron snorted. "Too right." After a few minutes walking in amiable silence, he added, "We're really going to do this."

"It's been a long time coming," Harry said.

"Hey! After Hermione marries me, we'll all be family - for real," Ron said, appearing startled by the thought.

"You're just now working that out?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Shut it," Ron said, elbowing Harry in the gut. "Who would have ever thought when we all met on the Hogwarts Express all those years ago that we'd one day end up as One Big Happy Weasley Family?"

"Not me," Harry said, grinning. "I was just happy to find someone who would sit with me."

Ron snorted. "It'll be good to see everyone - even Malfoy said he was coming."

After school, Draco had finally managed to get his family funds restored to him. Although they never Owled each other to arrange a get together, when they ran into one another at a pub, they'd always share a pint. Draco had gone abroad the previous year after becoming

frustrated with the amount of distrust the Malfoy name still instilled in Wizarding Britain.

"You invited him then?" Harry asked, raising his eyebrow.

"Well, it was Hermione's idea," Ron grumbled.

Harry grinned. They'd formed a grudging respect, but Ron would never call Draco a mate. Harry supposed he wouldn't, either.

"I heard he's been going out with Daphne Greengrass," Harry said.

"Yeah. He's bringing her as his date," Ron replied. "She was never as bad as some of the others, but I never trusted her."

"What Slytherin did you trust?" Harry asked.

"Same could be asked of you! I sent Snape a wedding invitation, too," Ron said, barely controlling his grin. "He didn't respond."

Harry chuckled. Ron had spent the past four years cheerfully sending any news related to Harry or their lives to their old Potions' master in Azkaban. He even made annual visits on Potter's Day to ensure the surly man would get all the details of the celebratory events.

Snape had been sentenced to life in Azkaban, though Ron said his disposition was really no different than it had been at Hogwarts. The only thing that did seem to crack Snape's surly indifference was news of Harry's success. Ron'd said he'd nearly had kittens when he'd learned Harry had been awarded the Order of Merlin.

"Maybe you should stop and pay him a visit before you leave on your honeymoon," Harry said, grinning. "Ask him for a Potency-Increasing Potion or something. You and Hermione have some catching up to do."

Ron shoved Harry's shoulder, causing him to stumble. Harry turned and sucker punched Ron in the gut as the two friends laughed, continuously strolling down the street. Perhaps it was grayness of the day causing them to hurry or just the excitement of the pending nuptials, but they passed a Muggle newsstand without casting a second glance at the headline...

Mysterious Deaths in Surry

Late last evening on a quiet street in Surry, a gruesome discovery was made. Vernon and Petunia Dursley were found dead in their home. Both victims were found seated at their kitchen table, but a source close to the investigation tells us no cause of death is readily apparent. Both victims had been in relatively good health, although Mr. Dursley suffered from high blood pressure and a dangerous cholesterol level. Still, this wouldn't explain how both victims died at the same time with no obvious sign of foul play.

The doors to their house on Privet Drive remained locked, and there was no sign of forced entry. The Dursleys are survived by one son, Dudley, who was unavailable for comment, although one neighbor claimed to have

seen him in the area on the day of his parents' mysterious deaths. The source tells this reporter that the strangest thing about the case is the expression of terror on both victims' faces. The source claimed it was as if they'd been frightened to death...

THE END