

Unbreakable Bonds

A Harry Potter Story



By Felix Felicis

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Story Summary:

Harry's managed to survive to the end of his last year at Hogwarts, but now he has to face his biggest challenges yet: the defeat of hate and the acceptance of love. Hesitant to think about his future, Harry must destroy Lord Voldemort before he can really begin to live his life, and learn to love, and be loved. Lots of H/G, some R/H.

Author's Notes and Disclaimer:

This story was started in February 2005, before the arrival of book six (and ultimately book seven) in the great Harry Potter series. By the time the book came out, my plot line had progressed beyond what could be easily amended to account for the events of that book. I would have liked to stay as true to the canon as possible but I felt that because this *is* fan fiction, I might be forgiven in making my split from the series at the end of book five. I cannot account for character attributes, spells and other small tidbits from the later canon that may show up here and there, without admitting some guilt in using them because they're either necessary, or so enjoyable I couldn't pass them up.

Now of course, this just wouldn't be complete without a thousand thanks to the brilliant J.K. Rowling, who in creating the Harry Potter universe could never have possibly known the joy and inspiration she would create in so many people. She has crafted a world into which we can escape in dreams; that takes us away from reality, if only for a short time, and into something bigger than ourselves. I, like so many others, have borrowed her characters for only a little while and I hope done justice to them. I mean no harm in using them here and would like to note that the entire contents of this work exist purely for the joy of the author and reader, with no intention of any copyright or other infringement.

Story completed June 2008.

An original PDF version of this story is available on the following website:
<http://www.buffenbarger.net/felixfelicitis>

Enjoy!

Felix

Prologue

Going Back

According to older Muggles from around town the house at the end of the peninsula had stood empty for as long as anyone could remember. Dark, overgrown, and shabby, it was never a place where anyone went and if you asked, they would say it had always been that way. No one seemed to know who owned it and no one seemed to care. They might have guessed it to be about 60 years old, judging from the concrete block walls and the old wood-frame windows. It was a low-built house with a flat roof, the outside walls pale gray in color. Most likely it had been white at one time but the weather and the sun made it what it was today.

If any non-Muggles happened by, however, they might say the faded paint suited the house perfectly; it was comfortable in its skin and in remarkably good condition. The gardens were neatly manicured and everywhere green leaves sprouted announcing the new season.

It was a bright, sunny, early summer afternoon and a young man walked up the drive leading to the house, his eyes taking in every detail of the surroundings - from the pines at the edge of the wood to the curve of the beach where it met the lake. He knew this place so well, had spent so many hours walking through the tall sea grass and along the pebbly shore, it was like coming home again. In the distance he could just see the little town across the river, though he couldn't seem to remember its name. The sailboat masts stood up like flags against the blue sky, giving the whole scene a comfortable old-town feel. He didn't recall spending much time in the town but had always heard good things about it. Not that he had ever really needed something to occupy his time here, though.

He paused as he stepped into the lush grass, tilting his head to one side slightly. He ran a hand through his wild black hair and adjusted his glasses on his nose. He wondered if he'd ever really noticed that the grass here was always so green. It was just one of those things, he supposed, the things seen but never really noticed. He shook his head with a half-knowing smile and bent down to unlace his shoes. He may never have given much notice to the color of the grass but he knew how it felt to walk through it bare-foot. It was one of the small pleasures that made this place so comfortable to him, so much like a home. He never wore his shoes when he was here.

It had been several years but it all seemed exactly the same. The lawn was perfectly managed (although he now suspected that it never really needed care) and the flowers were in full bloom. He looked slowly up at the sky and then across to the tall pines swaying in the lake breeze, letting his mind wander back... maybe it wasn't that long ago... he could almost hear the words he had spoken. He let out a long breath and his thoughts became more serious. A painful feeling constricted slowly in his chest and his mind settled on that time he thought of so often. It haunted his dreams many nights remembering the words he had spoken and the reasons why. Not that he'd intended to be hurtful, it just happened sometimes. It was a different time then and he was a different person. It was all part of the life of being Harry Potter.

He closed his eyes and listened to the waves breaking hypnotically on the beach. Then slowly, like the water washing over the sand, he let his memories engulf him.

Chapter One

Saving a Friend

“Harry, I cannot make up your mind for you, nor can I control your actions. All I can do is give you my thoughts from years of experience.”

The Teacher always spoke slowly, his words clear and thoughtful. As Harry had not yet mastered the art of disguising his feelings, especially from the people who mattered to him the most, the anger on his face betrayed his thoughts. Sometimes, to Harry, it was just so irritating, the man in front of him being so calm about everything. It wasn't as if he had anyone to care about, anyone that might be in grave danger at this very moment.

The Teacher often reminded Harry of Albus Dumbledore; in his manner of speaking, his authority and yet his gentleness. Sometimes, if he looked hard enough, he could almost have believed it really was him in disguise. Tonight, however, there were other issues to crowd the mind and they were not pleasant.

“You don't understand!” Harry practically shouted. He hated it when his anger got the better of him, especially toward the Teacher. Sometimes, though, it just did.

“What don't I understand?” Was the wholly calm reply he received.

Harry had to yell, he just couldn't contain himself any more. “You don't understand what it's like to know it's *all your fault!* My friends get hurt, my parents *died* and it's all because of me. Why? There's nothing special about me. I haven't done anything that anybody else couldn't do. Why do people care? Why do they even notice me? It would be better for them if they pretended they didn't even know me!” His shoulders slumped as he finished his speech. He had started out angry but it was leading quickly toward dejection.

No, he thought, *I'm not going to let this happen again.* The Teacher always seemed to be able to see through him to what he was really feeling, and he was getting right tired of it. If he was going to provoke Harry, he was going to get it right back and ten times as much.

He took a shallow breath and spoke in a deadly low voice. “They might be dying right now and you don't think I should go to them?” His face pounded with anger. He almost didn't want to wait for a response. He wanted to storm out of the room and punch something.

“No,” was all the reply he got.

“No?” Harry's voice was now just barely above a whisper. His hands shook with rage and suddenly he was having trouble piecing his thoughts together. “What do...what do you mean by saying no? I would give my life for them and they're depending on me. I... can't leave...I *won't* leave them...alone. Even though you seem bent on keeping me here.”

“Harry, you know I can't keep you here. As I said before, I can't make you do anything. I just want you to think about what you're doing. Look at your past, look at the way Voldemort has handled you before. You may be able to keep them safe now but you still haven't learned complete control over yourself. I won't be comfortable thinking that you can master yourself in his presence if you go now.”

Harry's head seemed to suddenly clear. “I understand. I have to go now.”

He slowly turned, almost expecting to hear the Teacher's voice or a hand on his shoulder pulling him back, but nothing came. It felt like an eternity had passed just to cross the room. As he opened the door, he glanced back over his shoulder. The man he knew and loved as the

Teacher wasn't even looking at him, and he could be mistaken but it looked like a tear shown at the end of his nose.

Harry couldn't go back, though. He wouldn't let himself. His anger seemed gone but his determination was in full force as he shut the door behind him. It was time to go.

As he packed up his things he thought once again of the letter he had received from Hermione. He straightened up and stopped stuffing clothes in his bag. The letter. It was what had started all of this. He had it in his pocket even now. Every time he read it he felt torn, which was nothing new, he had to admit. It seemed that everything in his life always made him feel torn. *Perhaps*, he thought with a wry smile, *that was the difficulty of living the life of Harry Potter.*

He pulled it out once again and read it as he had done so many times. It was only two days old but was already starting to get ragged around the edges. Still, the words were just as clear as ever.

Harry,

Ron's gone. I don't know where he is. Nobody knows where he is. Everyone's looking; the Weasleys, Dumbledore, everyone from the Order. We just don't know what to do. Can you come back? I hate to ask, but can you come back? Please?

I don't know where you are but I hope this reaches you soon.

I wish I did know where you are. I'm so worried and for once it's not about you - look at me trying to be funny at a time like this, somehow it just makes me want to cry even more.

Please? Can you come back? I don't know what to do and even if you don't either, at least I would know where you are. I would have someone to talk to, to be with. I just don't know if I can get through this without anyone, without you.

Please?

Love from,

Hermione

Harry wiped his eyes. Every time he read it his throat got tight and his eyes filled with hot tears. The thought of what could happen to Ron, and of Hermione in so much pain... he just had to go. Why couldn't the Teacher see that? He was the reason Harry had not left immediately after the letter first arrived. What was so important about staying here when his friends were in trouble? What could he do from here? *Nothing*, was the answer he kept giving himself, no matter what that little voice in the back of his mind said.

Had the Teacher ever been wrong, though? Even in all the time Harry had known him, he couldn't think of a single time the Teacher had ever been wrong. But he had to push that thought to the back of his mind, along with so many others. He was going, he had to, and he was leaving right now.

When Harry arrived in the common room of Gryffindor tower, he found it completely empty, not even a book or homework parchment laying about. He did, however, find a scribbled note on the table in the middle of the room.

Harry,

If you get back while I'm not here, go straight to Dumbledore's office. I'm going up there to see him and I think Professor McGonagall will be there as well. The password is "cookie cutter." Don't worry about me writing it down, you're the only one who can open this letter and read the words. For anybody else it just says "Mind your own business!"

Please hurry,

Hermione

Harry turned immediately around and ran back out through the portrait hole, the fat lady making snide comments all the way.

"Didn't you just come in? Making me open and shut all day long for nothing... honestly, students these days..."

Harry shot a hasty "Sorry!" over his shoulder and ran on through the corridors, hoping against hope that maybe they had found Ron and he was okay. He subconsciously promised to keep a closer eye on his friends from now on.

When he got to the Headmaster's wide stone door he practically yelled "Cookie cutter!" and the gargoyles turned away instantly. Harry jumped onto the stone steps as they rose upward, seemingly faster than normal. The thought ran through his head that maybe the stairs knew he was in a hurry. He didn't have long to dwell on it, however. Only a moment had passed before he was standing in front of the door to Dumbledore's office.

He raised his hand to knock on the dark wood and was surprised when it opened in front of him to reveal a girl with loads of long, curly, brown hair. She grabbed him around the neck and pulled him into a tight hug. At first he wasn't sure what to think. Had they found Ron? Harry lifted his eyes to Dumbledore and his heart sank. The older man's look remained grave.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, as quietly and gently as he could.

"Harry—" was all she said, and hugged him even tighter. He could feel her sobs now and it felt like barbed wire twisting around his heart. His stomach tightened and he clenched his jaw to hold back from screaming.

"Hermione, what happened? I've got to know."

She slowly released him and stepped back, though he kept his hands on her shoulders. The dark circles under her eyes contrasted with her pale skin and he wondered just how long she had been crying, cursing himself for not coming back sooner. He couldn't remember ever seeing her this upset before. Taking a ragged breath, she finally spoke, her voice unsteady and quiet.

"Harry, please don't be mad at me," she said, sounding like she could cry again at any moment. Her words came both fast and slow at the same time. "I didn't know what to do and I didn't know where you were. We're all so scared. What if...what if...Ron's..." A choke sounded in her throat and she burst into tears again. Harry stepped quickly to her and pulled her into his arms.

"Hermione, I would do anything for you and Ron and I'm certainly not mad at you." He felt her shake a little with a few heavier sobs and accepted it as a "Thanks, Harry."

He walked her over to a comfy looking sofa and sat her down, rocking her slowly. A tray suddenly appeared in the air and floated down next to them. It had tea and warm biscuits on it that filled the air with sweet smells.

Harry looked up as the tray appeared and saw Dumbledore standing on the other side of Hermione, his hand resting gently on her shoulder. He had yet to speak, and gathering strength from his caring expression, Harry quietly asked, "Professor? What happened?"

"From the little information we have, Harry, it appears that Mr. Weasley – although perhaps I may call him Ron? - has been taken by Death Eaters." He let out a small sigh and sat down opposite them, concern showing in every detail of his expression.

"While enjoying a nice spring day with some of his classmates, Ron apparently decided to go down to visit Hagrid. They were later observed by several students leaving his hut and walking into the Dark Forest. After that point, it is merely conjecture what happened."

Harry knew there must be more to it. His voice was quiet but firm as he met Dumbledore's eyes. "Sir, we all know that your conjectures are usually right. Can you tell me what you think?"

Harry thought he saw the faintest glimpse of a smile but it was gone only a moment later. "I have been privy to information that Hagrid has recently added something particularly... shall we say, *unique*, to the forest population. He was probably taking Ron there to see and share in his newest interest. I believe some of Voldemort's Death Eaters were waiting there and attacked Hagrid and Ron. After leaving Hagrid for dead, they seem to have taken Ron with them."

Harry let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. He continued to hold Hermione close to him – his arms wrapped around her, wishing with all his strength that he could protect her from what she probably already knew.

"I believe that the Death Eaters somehow were aware of what was happening in the Forest and planned this attack ahead of time. This leads me to think that Hagrid was tricked by someone he doesn't know is a Death Eater or that they hired or tricked someone near him to find out about this." Dumbledore sighed, "I'm sorry to say that is all I know, Harry, and nothing has been heard since. I am sure you have many questions, not the least of which is 'why Ron?' My answer will probably not put your fears to rest. I do not believe they were attempting to lead any particular student into their trap. It appears to have been strictly random chance that Ron was the first one Hagrid took to show his new... *friend*. However, I could be wrong, life is very rarely random."

He shook his head heavily and looked them in the eyes. "In this case I believe they were simply looking for a student to take and were probably overjoyed at their luck to end up with your best friend, Harry." Dumbledore paused and looked away. Harry thought he detected a trace of a mist in the man's eye and deciding that was okay, he turned his attention back to Hermione.

"Hey," he said gently, nudging her. "How are you?" His voice was deep and serious, and she seemed surprised by it.

Looking up from his shoulder, where her head had been pressed into his shirt, she shakily answered. "I'm doing a little better now that you're here." Her head sunk back and she didn't look like she was about to pry herself off of him. He knew she'd need more time before she could talk. For a brief moment the thought occurred to him how strange it felt to be the one doing the comforting. Somehow, it seemed like it was always the other way around. He turned again to Dumbledore, who was observing them with kind compassion in his tired eyes.

"What's... Who's out there trying to find him? Who's looking for him?" He suddenly felt his own emotions welling up and Hermione squeezed him knowingly. He had to ask, "Do... do Ron's Mum and Dad know?"

Dumbledore nodded his head, his face still utterly serious. "Mrs. Weasley is at home with her other children, including Charlie and Bill... and Ginny. Mr. Weasley has elected to join the search himself, contrary to concerns lifted by myself and others."

Harry looking at him, the question obvious on his face.

"Harry, I asked Mr. Weasley not go because we do not want to give Voldemort any more leverage than he already has, which is quite substantial. Sometimes emotional involvement can be a *powerful* ally," Dumbledore continued, while Harry thought there must be a double meaning there, "but if one is acting purely on emotion, without control, the results can be dangerous." He looked directly into Harry's eyes. "Do you understand?"

Harry could tell Dumbledore was looking right through him, like he was seeing into his mind. This time though, the piercing gaze didn't make him uncomfortable. On the contrary, he merely nodded his head, fully understanding that Dumbledore didn't want him chasing randomly after Ron. It did appear, however, that he had something in mind for Harry to do. He decided not to ask yet.

Dumbledore spoke again, in the voice of someone who had clearly spent years of his life breaking down, studying, and learning to understand the mind of a Dark Wizard. It was the voice of a wizened man but Harry could detect an undercurrent of power and the controlled confidence that comes with age. Dumbledore leaned back slightly and spoke in a far-away voice, almost as if he were talking to someone unseen in the room.

"Voldemort clearly got more than he was expecting this time. He will probably believe chance was in his favor. He may be right but that doesn't mean we have lost this round. It means our best opportunity to strike back is before he fully realizes the potential of the leverage he now has. We must be organized and have power and efficiency on our side." His eyes flicked back to Harry and Hermione. "And you two are going to help me."

Harry suddenly realized that Hermione had leaned away and was now sitting up very straight with a strangely determined look in her eye.

"What are we going to do?" She asked quietly but firmly.

"For now, I want you to leave it to me. I will notify you when I am ready to explain but trust in me that you will both play a major role in rescuing Ron. Please get some rest tonight. Tomorrow I am going to call on you to exceed perhaps even the most remarkable feats you have already accomplished at this school. Professor McGonagall will summon you in the morning." He smiled at them, "Good evening."

With this clear signal from the Headmaster, Harry and Hermione rose and started toward the door. Before they'd gotten two steps Harry stopped and turned frantically around. "Professor, what happened to Hagrid?"

"Hagrid has been taken to the hospital wing and is recovering under the care of Madam Pomfrey. You may visit him there."

With a brief look exchanged between them, Harry and Hermione ran to the door and down the magical staircase without waiting for it to carry them. Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her down the hall toward the hospital wing.

"Harry, I didn't know!" she cried. "I didn't...I forgot to check on Hagrid after they told me Ron was gone. I'm so terrible. What if he's really hurt? I didn't even ask about him. Harry, what's wrong with me? You must think I'm so terrible!" She was crying again as Harry continued to lead the way, nearly dragging her behind him. He wasn't quite sure how to answer. It was Ron that was gone, after all, but how could she have completely forgotten about Hagrid?

Enough, he told himself, *she's going to feel even worse if you say that*. He stopped for a moment and held her hands together in front of him, looking her in the eye. "Hermione, Ron's our best friend and he's the one that's gone. You knew Hagrid was here and safe, even if he was hurt, and you knew that he'd be taken care of by Madam Pomfrey." Then in a softer voice he continued, "And you *know* that I could never think you're terrible." The corners of his mouth twitched a little and he gave her hands a quick squeeze. "Now, come on."

Madam Pomfrey jumped in her chair at the sudden banging on the Hospital Wing door. She strode quickly over and wasn't at all surprised to see Harry and Hermione standing there looking tired and worried but very determined. She let them in and gave them brief instructions to be careful around Hagrid and not to stay more than five minutes.

"He was very badly hurt and given the number of potions he is taking, he may not even realize you're here." Her demeanor softened a little and she pointed toward two chairs next to his bed. "You should talk to him and encourage him. When they first brought him in, I wasn't sure he was going to make it. Giant's blood has some fascinating magical properties, though. It appears he will live but his recovery may take quite some time."

They walked quietly to the chairs and sat down, Harry still grasping Hermione's hand tightly in his. He struggled to hold back his emotions as he surveyed Hagrid's seemingly endless injuries. The hair on the right side of his head was plastered down, apparently from dried blood that had run underneath his massive bandage. His left arm was covered in white gauze from wrist to shoulder, and his right arm from elbow to shoulder. Harry noted with some discomfort that the furry coat hanging next to his bed was badly torn and missing one sleeve completely. Both his legs were hidden under the enormous blankets on the magically enlarged bed but two heavily bandaged feet were visible protruding out near the bottom.

"Hagrid?" Harry asked tentatively. The heavy breathing continued unaltered.

"It's Harry and Hermione. We just came from Dumbledore and he says we're going to rescue Ron tomorrow. And Madam Pomfrey says you're doing better." Harry started getting choked up again so Hermione took over.

"Hagrid, you've got to keep fighting. Without you we wouldn't have anyone to teach us about... well, blast-ended skrewts and hippogriffs and thestrals. Maybe we could even talk Dumbledore into letting you have a dragon again, now that things are... different." They were surprised by a small grunt like a laugh and realized that it came from Hagrid.

"Ye'll do no such thing. It's gon' take me weeks to get better, maybe e'n months. An' what if I get 'urt again, then who'd take Norbert? You lot 'ave enough on your minds as is. No sir, I won' be givin' ye more to worry 'bout." Hagrid's reference to Norbert made them both remember that he was probably on some powerful potions. He didn't seem to remember that Norbert was living comfortably in a dragon colony in Romania.

They talked for a few more minutes until Madam Pomfrey came to get them and then set off together for Gryffindor tower.

Harry held back for a moment when they reached the steps in the echoing front hall and looked out through the great doors onto the grounds.

"D'you want to go for a walk?" asked Harry. "It's just I don't really feel like talking to everyone right now." He looked down at his feet and kicked his shoe on the gleaming marble floor. A sudden realization hit Hermione and understanding and compassion filled her heart.

"You do this a lot don't you?" His quick glance up and the expression on his face answered her question but contrasted with his words. "No... not really." His voice was muffled, his head was bent down so far into his shirt. He slowly turned to walk away but Hermione caught his arm and his eye and said, "I'm coming with you, neither of us can do this alone." His relief warmed his expression and the two exited the castle into the warm afternoon sunlight.

By the time the sky faded from blue to pink to a deep red, they had covered so many topics that Harry couldn't even remember where they'd begun. They had walked and talked their way around both the lake and the castle but mostly around the thing that was bothering them most. Finally choosing a spot hidden from view by large trees at the edge of the lake, they settled down

on the ground. The embracing smells and soft thickness of the grass seemed to pull them down and Harry found himself lying there staring up at the branches and the fresh green leaves, torn between his surroundings and his feelings. It was a comforting place but the pain they both felt on the inside still burned with an inextinguishable heat.

Harry started a little as he felt Hermione lay her head on his shoulder and slide her arm across his chest. It took him by surprise as the realization dawned on him that he was lying next to the lake under the beautiful trees while a warm summer sunset played across the water, and one of the prettiest girls he'd ever seen was lying next to him, *on him*.

No! He practically shouted inside his head, *she's in as much pain as I am, maybe more, and I am not going to make it worse by being a guy right now. Get a hold of yourself*, he thought, *she's your best friend, well, besides Ron...* Ron. He'd never felt so much clash of emotions before and it brought him back to reality with a forceful snap.

"Hermione?" He croaked, the tears beginning to run down his cheeks as he finally released what had been stuck in his chest all day. He could feel it uncoiling, unraveling inside him, a mix of fear, pain, and exhaustion. They sat close and held each other, each letting loose the pain in salty tears that stained their cheeks as they struggled for some small bit of mutual comfort.

When their tears were exhausted, they laid back on the cool green grass, each lost in his or her own thoughts. Hermione played carelessly with the frayed cuff of Harry's shirt and he picked at the grass. His heart ached but his words seemed to have run out, or he couldn't get them out. What would happen to Hagrid? Would they find Ron in time? Was Ron even still alive? Harry tortured himself slowly with his relentless thoughts. What did Dumbledore have in mind? And how were he and Hermione going to help?

"Harry?"

He opened his eyes and was surprised to find Hermione over him looking right in his face. Her eyes were still red and he could still see the pain in her expression.

"Are you ready to go back?" she asked softly.

"No," he answered quietly and truthfully, "but I suppose we have to. When did it get so dark?" Had they really been out here that long?

"Harry, we *have* been out here that long." She looked at him patiently but clearly she didn't want to go back either. It would mean seeing all those people, so unconnected with them, and answering still more of their unending questions.

Harry was staring at her.

"What?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed. "Are you reading my mind or something?"

"No, why?"

"It's just...well, that was...I was wondering how long we'd been out here, and then you answered my question, Hermione! Almost word for word."

"But you asked me!"

"No, I didn't! I was just thinking to myself."

Hermione's eyes widened. "But I swear I heard you say it."

"But I didn't, I didn't say it. How... can you *hear* my thoughts?"

"I don't know what that was, maybe we just happened to be thinking the same thing at the same time. Well, how else would you explain it then?"

"I don't know," he hesitated, "let's see if you can do it again."

She seemed to think about it for a moment and then slowly nodded her head. "We both need to concentrate on this really hard but I really don't think anything is going to happen."

Harry watched her close her eyes. Her brow furrowed in concentration and her hands clasped into fists. *Wow*, he thought, *she's really pretty like that. No, you git! Stop it, what if she can hear you right now!*

“Harry?” She opened her eyes and looked up. “Were you doing it?”

“You mean, you couldn’t hear me?” His face was glowing red and he was glad it was getting dark. “You didn’t feel anything?”

“No, nothing. Are you okay? What were you thinking?”

“Er, nothing, just about the lake and the quiet and the grass.”

Her look told him she didn’t believe him but she let it go and picked herself up off the ground, brushing off some stray leaves and twigs.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Right.”

They walked slowly back up to the castle, lost again in their own thoughts. Harry had so many things running through his mind that he wasn’t sure where one thought ended and another began.

When they reached the castle, the doors were closed and sealed. Harry knew that they closed by themselves before dinner each day as yet another protection against attack. There were so many things that had changed since Harry had started his first year. He remembered all too well the time in his second year when the school had almost been shut down because of the Basilisk. He remembered how Ginny was possessed by Tom Riddle and forced to let out the snake and how Riddle had almost killed her in the end. During that time the teachers had instituted rules for curfews and no students were allowed to walk the corridors without supervision. He supposed it had always been for the best, even if he had never particularly obeyed the rules. The memory flashed across his mind and he briefly wondered where Ginny was and what she was doing. He hoped she was giving some well needed comfort to her family. That would be just like her – strong in a time of trial, forsaking her own needs for those of others.

The doors opened to his touch, having been taught to recognize certain students and obey their commands. He held the door open wide for Hermione and then stepped in behind her. He stopped for a moment and watched the door close again behind him. He knew there were only a handful of students the doors recognized and he recalled the day he had been told about this added protection for the school. There had been little ceremony when he, the Head boy and girl, and the prefects had been led into the entrance hall by professor McGonagall. There, Dumbledore had been waiting for them and performed the spells necessary for the doors to recognize each one of them and obey their commands. They had all taken turns making sure the spell worked for them individually.

Harry remembered being surprised that the doors seemed to know what he wanted without his having to ask. They seemed to obey his thoughts rather than his actions. At the time it had seemed fascinating and he wondered if it would ever really be useful. Still, he felt it was good to know Dumbledore trusted him so much. Of course, he knew exactly why it was being done. If any of them were likely to need in or out in an emergency, it would almost surely be him.

Stumbling back into the present, Harry noticed the grateful smile Hermione sent him and he shot her a questioning look which she seemed to understand.

“Thanks for holding the door for me. If I had gone out there by myself – not that I would, Harry, I see that look on your face – but if I *had* gone out there by myself, I would have had to wait for someone to come and open the door for me and it could have taken so long and then no one would know where I was and people might start worrying. So anyway, thanks.” She looked at him a little awkwardly. “And besides, it’s very gentlemanly of you to hold the door for a lady.”

They walked hand in hand into the great hall and found it nearly deserted but with plenty of food still on the tables. They ate together almost silently, each too uncomfortable and exhausted to do anything but scoop up small spoonfuls of peas and mashed potatoes. Then they trod the well known path back to Gryffindor tower, finding it too, almost empty. Harry still had trouble believing that so many students either weren’t allowed back to school or didn’t want to

come back. After the ministry had finally acknowledged the return of Voldemort, most students had still returned for the next school year. Given the sharp increase in Death Eater attacks the previous summer, there were many who did not come back in Harry's seventh year.

As the portrait hole swung shut behind them, Harry wondered once again what they were going to do the next day. Dumbledore had only said they were going to save Ron and that he and Hermione were going to do their part, but what exactly was that part going to *be*? Harry was learning to trust Dumbledore almost as much as he trusted Ron and Hermione, but he couldn't shake the gut-wrenching fear that they would be too late, or that they would be captured themselves and only make matters worse. Even after witnessing the incredibly powerful magic of Dumbledore, he still knew that Voldemort would stop at nothing to get to him.

He was shaken out of his reverie by a sudden tight hug from Hermione. He knew she was just as upset as he was, if not more, and he returned the squeeze. That familiar pain came to his throat and his eyes began to water. His mind reeled. *Can't control yourself at all, can you?* he questioned himself. *She's going to think your losing it. Of course she might be right....*

"Harry?" She pulled back and looked at him with what looked like understanding on her face. "It's okay to let it out sometimes. You've been through so much, no one's going to think anything of it if you let it out once in a while."

She smiled just a little and Harry noticed the tears on her own face. He wiped one away with the tip of his thumb and looked into her eyes, trying to find his voice.

"We're going to get Ron back. We're going to do it tomorrow. We're all going to be fine, including Ron, and then we're going to spend some time together, just us or maybe with his family. It's going to be *fine*."

Harry knew he was saying the words for himself *and* for her. He needed to hear it as much as she needed to believe it. He had escaped so many tight spots with Voldemort that he knew, one day, it wouldn't work out so well. He just hoped that day wasn't tomorrow.

As he lay in bed that night, his mind wandered carelessly over the day, pausing when it replayed the scene by the lake. What had come over him? Harry had never had a closer friend than Hermione, except Ron, and he certainly never had those type of thoughts about her before. Well, not really. He *had* had dreams about her before, where they were doing things that friends wouldn't normally do. But the more he thought about that, the more he realized that in his dreams it had always just been a girl, sometimes with bushy brown hair, sometimes straight, sometimes blonde, and even sometimes red.

He pushed those thoughts out of his mind and went back to the lake again. Had Hermione felt the same way? They'd never touched like that before. And then there was that connection. She had actually heard and answered a question that only existed in his mind, but how was that possible? Today she seemed so vulnerable and Harry couldn't help but feel protective of her – from holding her while she cried to never letting her out of his sight. What was going on with them? Almost as if on cue, a small voice in his mind said she was still just his friend and that today had been perhaps one of the most difficult days of her life. It had been important for Harry just to *be* there.

Suddenly he realized that he loved her, the love of a friend whom he would never let down. He had always known which he would give his life for Hermione and now he knew why. This was the love of family, a love which he had always longed to know and only now realized he had. With just one lingering question, he slipped quietly out of bed and trod down to the common room with a parchment pad and quill. As he wrote, he realized how loud the scratching of the quill was but decided he had to continue anyway, this was too important.

A little while later and back in his comfortable four-poster bed, he closed his eyes and fell asleep almost immediately, feeling strangely content.

When Harry woke in the morning, the day past seemed like a dream. It was still hazy and he had to struggle to remember the extraordinary feelings that had carried him through so many ups and downs. The one thing that burned bright and hot in his mind though, was that today was the day. They were going to rescue Ron.

After cleaning up and a quick breakfast in the common room – courtesy of Dobby – Harry sat quietly and tried to clear his mind by looking at the grounds out the window. It almost didn't seem true. How could they have taken Ron? Harry would gladly have taken his place but he knew that wouldn't help today. The thought crossed his mind again, wondering if they were too late. He shook his head and forced himself to think clearly. Voldemort had gotten lucky this time, there was no question, but he had only had Ron a few days and perhaps that hadn't been enough time for him to come up with a clever plan. Ultimately, Voldemort wanted Harry, so he would surely have to keep Ron alive to convince Harry to show up. But what kind of trap would it be?

Then an idea came to him. It was so simple, and finally a good use for his training.

Settling in by the window, Harry closed his eyes and began slowly to relax his body, just as the Teacher had instructed. First his feet, then his legs, next his chest, his hands, and finally his neck and face. He forcefully swept all thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on Ron, and *only* Ron. The room around him slowly faded. He could feel his heartbeat slowing and his breathing coming in long, consistent breaths. He continued to focus his mind on Ron and after a few minutes of silence, something happened, like a magnifying glass sliding into place. Ron's face was clearly visible.

Slightly surprised by his success, he forced himself to stay calm. He could see that Ron looked terrible. His eyes were closed, his hair disheveled, and what was clearly a large bruise on his left temple stood out, a painful purple color.

Continuing to focus all his energy on Ron, his field of vision began to expand outward. Soon he could see the chair Ron was chained to, then the room around him came into focus. It felt like he was stepping into the space. The walls surrounded him and he began to look freely around. The floor was solid rock, as were the walls and ceiling. It really almost appeared that this room had been carved out of solid rock, but clearly not by any ordinary tools. All the surfaces were perfectly flat and even. There wasn't a single tool mark or gouge or chip to be seen. It was, all-in-all, rather amazing. He saw a single stone door and noted that it was directly across from the chair and its captive.

Moving back to Ron, Harry realized that the only furniture in the room was the chair that Ron was chained to and about a dozen candles burning in sconces evenly hung around the room. Leaning toward Ron, Harry cast every atom of his being into what he was about to do – he opened his mouth and out came a strangled whisper... “Ron, we're coming to get you.”

Harry could feel his body beginning to ache and his mind drawing back to the present. As he fell away, he saw Ron lift his head slightly and open one eye. A single tear ran down his nose and he screwed up his strength just enough to say “Harry... hurry.” His head fell forward again just as he and the room disappeared from sight.

Harry felt his arm being shaken and blearily opened his eyes. Hermione's face swam into view looking tired and worried. Her thoughts were evident in her expression. Would they get to Ron in time?

“Harry, it's time. Professor McGonagall is here.”

“Hmm?”

“Mr. Potter.” At the sound of *that* voice, Harry sat up straight, very much awake.

“The Headmaster has asked me to retrieve you and Miss Granger. He would like to see the both of you in his office as soon as you are ready.” She paused and her look softened just a

fraction. "Although perhaps you need a few minutes more? It seems Miss Granger has been letting you sleep for the last two hours in this chair."

"We're ready," they replied, glancing at each other.

"Very well, if you will come with me." They followed her out through the portrait hole and down the long hallway. Harry turned to Hermione. "You let me sleep for *two hours*? I'd been sleeping for *two hours*?" His voice was quiet and from the look on his face she could tell there was more to what had just happened than she knew.

"Well, you looked dog tired, Harry." The question of *why* was clearly written in her expression.

Seeming to understand what she wasn't asking, he just replied without looking at her. "I didn't sleep well last night, and this morning..." He looked down at the floor. "I don't think we should talk about it right now." In a mumble to himself, he added, "I'm sure you'll hear soon enough."

"Harry, we're going to be okay, aren't we?" Her voice shook with fear.

"Yeah, we're going to be all right... and Ron knows we're coming."

She looked at him with unaffected surprise. "What... How?"

Professor McGonagall slowed down incrementally and cast a brief look at Harry, her expression calculating but otherwise inscrutable.

Harry whispered cryptically back to Hermione, his eyes focused on the door they were approaching at the hall's end, "You'll know in a few minutes. Maybe you'll understand it better than I do." His last words spoken mostly to himself, he tried to keep his mind on the present and away from Hermione's penetrating stare.

At last they reached the great stone gargoyles and stepped inside. Before Harry knew what had happened, they stood before Dumbledore's desk and Professor McGonagall had left the room with a curt nod to the Headmaster and a worried glance at both of them.

"Please, sit down." Dumbledore motioned to the chairs in front of his desk, his eyes surveying their faces, and, Harry thought, probably their minds as well. "I hope you have had a good night's rest." He peered at them, apparently expecting a response.

Harry spoke softly that he actually *had* slept the whole night, much to his surprise. He gave a nervous little laugh. Hermione merely gave a small nod and looked curiously at Harry. He just said easily, "I'll tell you about it later." After a few moments of silence they turned back to Dumbledore, who was studying them intently.

Then, apparently finished with his observation, Dumbledore cleared his throat and began. "I have spoken with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley regarding what is about to take place. They have granted their permission for me, for *us* rather, to continue with my plan, contingent upon the safety of both of you. I have given my word to them and now I give it to you as well. No harm will befall you during this undertaking."

Having given his word, Dumbledore sat back in his chair and smiled pleasantly at them. Harry and Hermione glanced at each other, then expressed their lack of understanding with a chorused "What?"

Dumbledore leaned all the way forward and held Harry with a penetrating and suddenly serious gaze. "Harry, was this morning the first time you have successfully applied your training?" Harry looked a bit embarrassed and only replied with a small "Yes."

"And what did you see?" The question was so simple, yet so complex, that Harry didn't know where to begin. He had never told Hermione or Ron, or *anybody* about studying with the Teacher. They only knew that he was gone for one, two, or sometimes even three days at a time and would always come back looking completely knackered. It usually took a day or two for him to recover and he had never said a word to them about where he went or what he did while he was gone.

Of course Ron and Hermione had speculated about his absence, sometimes thinking he was out fighting with the Order, but then he was just as frustrated as they were about not being allowed to join until they were out of school. Other times they thought he was getting special instruction, or helping do research, or volunteering for magical testing. Harry had never said a word to them. When they brought it up, he would cleverly change the subject, or ignore their questions outright. Sometimes he just gave them a look that said not to ask. It hurt Harry to not tell the truth, especially to *them*, but he knew it was necessary to keep his secret. This secret could mean the difference between life and death, for others, as well as himself.

Now here, sitting in front of Dumbledore, Harry finally had the opportunity to reveal some of what he had learned. He felt a brief moment of relief, cast immediately away by the memory of Ron, alone and in pain. Forcing himself to push it aside, as he was now used to doing, he began to explain everything he had seen in the room, from the stone walls to the door, the candles to the chair, and finally to Ron. As he described the bruises and cuts and the pain Ron had so clearly been in, Hermione finally broke down, her small sobs wrenching at his heart. He wanted to reach out to her, to comfort her, but he forced himself to continue. Dumbledore *had* to know everything.

Harry's voice seemed to catch in his throat as he got to the part about the words he had spoken and what Ron had managed to say in return. He tried to control his anger at the anguish and helplessness he had felt, and he repeated several times that he was ready to do anything to find Ron. When his tale was finished, he pried his hands off the arms of the chair, not realizing he had been so focused on explaining that his knuckles had started to hurt. The morning was almost like a dream to him now, it seemed so long past. But the urgency of the situation was still at hand, in his mind and in the minds of Hermione and Dumbledore as well. Rubbing his knuckles gingerly, he stared at the floor, too overcome to even look up. He was therefore surprised when he felt his strength increase at the touch of Hermione's hand on his arm. He lifted his eyes to Dumbledore, who nodded slowly at him. Harry knew it was time, and steeling his voice, he asked the question that was burning in his mind.

"What are we going to do?"

Hermione looked up determinedly and slipped her hand into his. He grasped it tightly, lacing his fingers into hers, and was surprised once again to feel his energy notch slightly higher.

"Harry, the reason I can assure you of your safety, as well as Miss Granger's – or perhaps I may call you Hermione –" he nodded at Hermione, "is because neither of you will be leaving this office."

Harry expression hardened. "We're not leaving this office? What... what are you on about? What are you going to have us do, wish him back?" Harry knew the sarcasm wasn't going to help anything but he had to strike out at someone. Instantly he was sorry he hadn't controlled himself, and he looked down at his feet again. "I'm sorry."

"That's quite all right. You see, Harry, I need your help, *here*. Your closeness with your friends will make all the difference in the world." He paused and clasped his hands together on his desk as if about to give a highly interesting lecture.

"As we have discussed many times, you have some *very* special gifts, some of which you have been developing with the Teacher for some time now. Others you may only now begin to notice. And, as you do not have any living wizard relatives, I do not believe it would be out of place for me to say that you have accepted and embraced the entire Weasley family, as well as this young woman next to you, as a loving, surrogate family. I believe the reverse to be true as well." At this, Hermione blushed a little but held Harry's questioning gaze and nodded a little as if to acknowledge this truth.

"Furthermore, as you have proven this morning, you have developed bonds with them that are clearly very special and allow you to use rare types of magic with them. I have observed you

more closely than you know and I can assure you that the bonds you share with your friends are unique. Your love and friendship and passion are rooted in the deepest magic and are nearly unbreakable. You have been very lucky to find two, or I may even say three, such people in your life. In all of my years, I have never witnessed such a connection. You will likely find this becoming more and more important as you continue your studies with the Teacher. Alas, this is a subject we must defer for another time.” Harry wondered for a moment what he had meant about a third person but was interrupted when Dumbledore continued.

“Now, are either of you familiar with the type of magic called *Mens Mentis Expositus*?”

Harry searched the deepest corners of his mind but no bells rang and he shook his head. Even Hermione did not seem to recognize it. She looked at Dumbledore with the same open curiosity as Harry.

“It is not taught at Hogwarts for the simple reason that it is rarely used anymore. Once upon a time, before Apparation was discovered and fireplaces enabled travel by Floo Powder, wizards needed ways to communicate with each other. Now, mind you, this magic was not easy, and was used mostly by witches and wizards to communicate with each other when researching and testing new magic, when travel was inconvenient. It is a way of connecting minds and senses together and sharing them. The way it works is this: an individual can open his or her mind to another and allow that person to see, hear, and feel everything they feel. To you it may sound similar to Legilimency, and while quite different from the magic used for Legilimency, it is similar in its opening of the mind. It is, however, more controlled in its execution. The main difference between the two is the selected opening of the mind versus the forced opening of the mind in Legilimency. Do you understand so far?”

Harry pondered what had been said, not sure he was grasping it but not wanting to lose the train of thought. He simply nodded in acknowledgement.

“Good, and it appears that Hermione has the grasp of it as well.” Hermione had a wide smile on her face like the dawning of comprehension. Harry suspected that, as usual, she was a good few steps ahead of him in her application of this new idea.

Dumbledore continued, “Harry, my plan is to have you use the same magic you used this morning to find Ron and then allow Hermione and myself access to it by allowing us into your mind. I know how difficult and extraordinary the effort required will be, both for your finding Ron and for allowing another person into your mind, therefore I am proposing that first you accommodate Hermione, and then Hermione will receive me. This has some added benefits as well; for example, you will not have to bear the burden of hosting two minds at once. Also, because of the powerful magical bonds between yourself and Hermione, she will be able to give you her strength to keep the connection open to Ron. If all goes well, I will, with the assistance of Fawkes, remove Ron from his captors and bring him safely back here.”

Harry leaned back in his chair trying to grasp the situation. Was this really possible? If he could even get to Ron again, how was Dumbledore going to get him out? Could they really chain their minds together? Could it be done safely? In Harry’s experience, there always seemed to be some element of danger and he wasn’t sure how to handle this. Sitting in Dumbledore’s comfortable office, using his mind and borrowing Hermione’s magic just seemed a little far-fetched. Harry grasped at the sides of his head, trying to keep it from coming apart. Then he chanced a look at Hermione and was surprised to see her sitting bolt upright in her chair, a far-away look in her eyes.

While he was watching, she suddenly shook herself back to the present and cautiously asked “But sir, how are you going to get him? I mean, he could be anywhere, and you’re going to just waltz in, collect Ron, and leave, with no one caring a bit? It just doesn’t seem possible.” She gave a disbelieving laugh and looked over at Harry as if he ought to be thinking the same thing.

Before Harry could say anything, Dumbledore spoke again. The smile on his face and the glint in his eye said just as much as his words.

"I do not think it will be as difficult as you believe. I am well aware of the capabilities of the Death Eaters and Fawkes has proven himself quite useful in situations like this - I owe my life to him on more than one occasion." Dumbledore seemed far off for a moment, but then, glancing at the two of them, he asked his final question. "Are you ready?"

Harry wondered briefly what it would feel like to have Hermione in his head and felt a tinge of heat in his neck at some of the thoughts he'd had lately. He sighed internally and stood up. "I'm ready." Hermione followed suit and Dumbledore led them to one of his more comfortable sofas. Several thick pillows twirled out of mid-air and landed gently on the last seat.

"Harry, I will ask you to sit here, facing these pillows. You may use them for support if you need." When he continued, an innocent smile spread across his face, making Harry suspicious of what was coming next. He was answered soon enough.

"Hermione, I will ask you to sit directly behind Harry. If today you were only going to be a guest in his mind then no physical contact would be necessary. However, as he will be depending on every ounce of your magic as well as his own, I will ask you to hold tight around him with your whole body, as if your life depended on it." Seeing Dumbledore's face fall, Harry could tell that he had not meant to say it quite that way and had clearly realized that Ron's life did, in fact, depend on it.

Dumbledore spoke in a soft, serious tone now. "This may be asking more of you both than you can handle, but you must try, you *must*." The fire came back to his eyes and he directed himself toward Hermione.

"Hermione, I am confident that you will be able to perform the spell to enter Harry's mind, not only because you are one of the most talented witches at this school but because of the special bond between the two of you – the same bond that should allow Harry to locate Ron again. The incantation you will use is *Memoria Acies* and I suggest you attempt it before we go any further. If you manage to be successful on the first try, along with being very impressed, I will likely follow momentarily behind and enter your own mind. You will both need to concentrate on the person who is your mind's guest for them to be allowed in."

Hermione smiled apologetically at Harry, who gave a tentative smile back and nodded for her to continue. He relaxed his mind and body and after a few moments a soft voice behind him said '*Memoria Acies*'. He felt her presence slowly engaging in his mind. He could almost feel her softness and he had never known how gentle she could truly be until now. It was as if she were removing her shoes before entering and it was one of the sweetest sensations he'd ever felt.

"Hermione," he thought, "*are you there? I don't know if I can talk to you like this.*"

"Hi, Harry," came her soft voice inside his head. "*Are you okay?*"

"Yes, I'm fine. *It's actually quite cozy with you in here.*" He felt his cheeks turn red hot and decided he'd better qualify that comment a bit. "*I mean... it's nice, it's not nearly as hard as I thought it would be. Er... how are things on your end?*" He couldn't see her but he could almost feel her blushing. He mentally kicked himself for being so open.

"*It's okay. I can feel my own body and mind but also yours. It's weird. I'm seeing what you're looking at and what you're touching but in a sort of indirect way. It's not painful and it doesn't seem hard at all.*" She giggled a little bit in his mind and said, "*I think Dumbledore is waiting for us to get these things all worked out before he enters my mind. There's the potential for a lot of embarrassment here, so keep your mind clean, Harry!*"

"Oh all right," he laughed, "*I guess I'm ready, you can let him in now.*"

After a few moments of silence, Harry felt as if another door had been opened somewhere far away. It felt like a light breeze blowing through his mind. Dumbledore's calm voice told them

they were doing very well and then asked if they were ready to proceed. After a few deep breaths, Harry gave his assent, and then Hermione gave hers.

"Hermione," Dumbledore's voice was gentle but firm, *"you will need to touch Harry now because he's going to need your strength. I will come back in a few moments as I need to go collect Fawkes."* The invisible door closed quietly and it was just Harry and Hermione again in his head.

"Harry, are you ready?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"All right, just let me get my legs up here." There was a pause as she very un-gracefully tried to climb up on the sofa. Harry felt her legs slide by him and then her arms around his chest and her head laid upon his shoulder. He handed her one of the pillows off the top of the stack to support her back and hoped that his neck wasn't getting too red. There was a dull thudding in his head and heat was spreading rapidly into his cheeks. He wasn't used to being touched, much less held, and it made his insides shift around.

"Okay, I'm done. Tell me if I squeeze too hard. I don't want to hurt you."

"It's fine. You know, I can already feel your strength. It's very different from mine, but... helpful, in a way. Trying to find Ron this morning was absolutely exhausting but with your help, it might not be as bad. Don't expect to come out of this easily though. If it takes very long for Dumbledore to collect Ron, we might run out of energy. That's what happened this morning, I was already losing my grip by the time... by the time Ron... talked."

"Harry that was a very brave thing you did, and I'm sure it made him feel better. He knows we're coming for him."

Suddenly Harry sensed that Dumbledore was back but there was someone else, too.

"Fawkes is with me. You will probably sense his presence as soothing and comforting. I will most likely stay with you the entire time but Fawkes may come and go as he assists me. Are you ready, Harry?"

Harry's voice was strong and clear in his mind. *"I'm ready."* He felt Hermione give him a quick squeeze and he began to slowly prepare his mind as he had practiced so many times with the Teacher. Dumbledore and Hermione were silent and Harry could only feel her rhythmic breathing against his back. It was really quite comforting.

He began as he had only a few hours before, relaxing his body slowly from foot to head, consciously releasing the tension in each muscle as he went. When he felt his body perfectly under control, he focused his energy to clear his mind and center it completely on Ron. The silence in the room slowly began to fade and there was only himself and Hermione. Their very lives seemed as one and Harry felt strength like he had never felt before. It hardly seemed like any time had passed before his vision slowly began to lighten into a mild orange color. Harry forced himself to focus even harder and suddenly, just as in the morning, Ron's face appeared under the red hair. Harry felt a shudder run up his spine as Hermione moved her head slightly on his shoulder and the room came into full view. It was just as Harry remembered it from earlier but when he saw Ron, his breath caught and he forced himself to control his emotion. Ron looked different somehow. His face was more drawn, his skin paler; he seemed to be draining before their very eyes.

A quiet voice spoke far back in Harry's mind. *"Hermione, I will not leave you but my presence may seem far away. Be sure to keep your mind open to me."* Harry felt the air pressure change slightly and knew that Dumbledore had gone from his office. He felt him continue to speak, a little closer this time.

"Harry, keep your mind completely focused on Ron. I will follow your vision to find him. Use Hermione's strength to compliment your own and it will be easier for you. I will tell you when I have reached him. Now, I would like you to go to the door and open it. It may take some effort but you should be able to open it. Locks do not mean anything to this type of magic. I will wait for you to open it. Be patient and use Hermione's energy to help you."

Another voice spoke softly, both in his mind and behind his back. *"Harry, I'm here. Go ahead and do it."*

Harry felt himself move to the door and his hand was upon it. He pressed but nothing happened. He stepped back and drew his eyes around the frame, seeing himself reach out and turn the handle.

Suddenly he was in the hall. His heart was racing and his breathing erratic, he was getting tired. It was suddenly becoming too much to continue on his own and he needed to ask for help.

"Hermione, help!" He knew his voice was desperate but he also knew he *couldn't* break the connection with Ron. As if a weight had been lifted from his chest, he felt Hermione scoot right up against him. He could feel her heartbeat racing and her fast breathing and suddenly he knew he could do it. The hall was lit only by torches about every thirty paces but he could see clearly, as if he were carrying the light himself. He moved rapidly down it, not seeming to walk but just to travel. He paused by a door on his left but passed it by, somehow knowing it led nowhere.

Finally reaching the end of the hall, he reached out to touch the door and it sprang open. He stepped carefully through it into a large, very well appointed room. It felt like hitting a brick wall. Massive, heavy tapestries draped the walls and windows. The furniture was dark and obviously antique. The room felt as if it had a presence of its own, an ominous pressure that forebade any to enter. A large fire burned in an enormous fireplace at the end of the room, casting dancing shadows everywhere and only increasing the eerie feeling in Harry's gut. It seemed somehow familiar but he knew he'd never been there before. It almost felt like... Malfoy! The name stung in his thoughts. He felt a shiver of cold run down his body and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Panic started to spread through him but a calm voice broke through it all.

Dumbledore. He felt two arms grip his chest, holding him tight. Hermione.

Dumbledore's voice was strong and powerful, *"Harry, you don't need to go any farther. Turn back and stay with Ron, I will be there shortly."* Harry wanted to protest. Dumbledore could get hurt, he thought, there was almost no place as dangerous as Malfoy Manor. But he also knew that the Death Eaters, even Voldemort, would not dare stand up to Dumbledore yet. He turned and started back down the long hall. It seemed like no time at all before he reached the door back to Ron's cell.

His energy was draining, and with a tremendous effort he opened the door and stepped back into the room. The sight completely arrested his mind and body - Ron looked almost dead. His head rested down on his chest and his skin glowed a pale white in the candlelight.

"Ron?" Harry's voice croaked. "Ron?" He was starting to feel the panic come back and his body began to shake. "C'mon Ron, stay with us. I've got Hermione with me and Dumbledore is on his way right now."

Harry reached out and slowly touched the skin on Ron's face. It was ice cold. He could feel the tears welling up inside him and, strangely, in his mind as well, almost as if... Hermione were crying, too. He tried to listen for breath and he wanted to shake Ron and yell at him to wake up but he knew it wouldn't work. He just knew Ron was dead.

He felt himself slowly put his real hands on Hermione's hands and the next words out of his mouth shocked him more than anything he'd ever said.

"Ron, you can't leave us. We love you."

It seemed to resonate off the walls of the room and reflect in his very mind. He wasn't sure if he'd said it to Hermione or Ron, or both of them. It felt like time could have shattered at that moment.

He wrapped his arms around Ron, knowing that not even Dumbledore would try and remove him. But the moment his hands touched Ron, he felt himself being drawn away, descending back into his own mind. Blackness filled him completely. He felt a few tears on his cheeks but then knew no more.

Chapter Two

Extended Family

Harry woke with a start, his last memory washing over him. Flashes of darkness and indistinct blurs filled his mind's eye. Jerking around, he realized he couldn't see because his glasses were gone. His voice choked as he yelled "Ron! We've got to save Ron!" But his chest was so tight he couldn't breathe and he found he couldn't speak anymore. His throat ached like something huge was trying to get out. He felt himself sliding back into unconsciousness in grief. But then... a hand came to rest lightly on his arm and he heard a tentative voice say, "Harry?"

It was a voice he recognized but it was so far away. His heart beat hard against his chest. *No*, he thought, *that's not possible, Ron's dead.*

But it came again, this time a bit closer, "Harry? C'mon, Harry, wake up!"

Harry's voice failed. He tried to squeeze out "Ron!" but nothing seemed to happen. He grasped at the hand and whispered, "glasses." A pair of smooth hands brushed his hair up off his eyes and he felt his glasses slide into place. Did he dare open his eyes? He knew he would only be disappointed if Ron wasn't there.

He dared, and found a face he knew staring right back at him. The freckles and red hair couldn't belong to anyone else. Ron was there, sitting next to him, alive and real. It couldn't be possible, could it?

"Ron?" The head nodded back silently and seriously. Harry surprised both of them as he jumped up and pulled Ron into a bone-breaking hug. That giant thing trying to escape his throat choked off all his words. After what seemed like a very long time, Harry felt two other pairs of eyes watching him. He slowly let go of Ron and turned to look at Hermione. He fell into her gaze and saw worry, anxiety, and relief all at once. She rushed toward him, tears falling down her face and he pulled her into the same powerful hug as he had Ron, lifting her feet clear off the floor. She laughed a little and he put her back down, looking over her shoulder at Dumbledore. He looked very tired but a small gleam came into his eyes as he looked at Harry. A single nod told Harry they had done it, they had actually taken Ron back from the clutches of the Death Eaters and the bowels of the Malfoy house. *They* had done it.

Harry made himself turn back to Ron, expecting to see the worst. He was a little surprised but very relieved as he surveyed the damage. Ron's skin was still very pale and the large bruise on his face shown even more painfully in the warm light of Dumbledore's office, but he was smiling. Harry knew then that he was all right. Wishing he could say something to his best mate, he merely reached out his hand, shook Ron's, and said, "It's good to have you back." Ron only choked out in return, "It's good to *be* back."

Harry sat back down on the sofa, running his hand through his hair and letting out a long breath. It just didn't seem possible, he swore he'd seen Ron dead. Somehow, though, it had ended up all right. Had Dumbledore done something? What about Hermione, was she okay? Was she hurt?

With what seemed like extreme effort, Harry lifted his head up and smiled weakly at them all. He started to speak but his words failed him and his mouth just opened and closed a few times in disbelief. He watched as Dumbledore moved out from behind his large desk to join them in the room below.

He began speaking even before he had reached them. "Harry, you are probably not the only one here who is wondering what exactly happened at the Malfoy house. If you recall, Hermione was with you and Ron either felt or saw you." He paused and glanced over his spectacles at Ron.

"I..." Ron paused for a moment and tried to figure out just what he *had* felt, or seen. His face screwed up into a question mark and one eyebrow raised just slightly. He was silent for several moments.

"Well, Harry was there, you see, but he wasn't... I, I knew he was there and I felt him touch me, only... I couldn't really see him, but I almost could. He was real, but..." Suddenly an idea came to him and his face lit up. "It was like he was under his invisibility cloak. I could hear him and feel him. I couldn't see his face but I could feel his presence." Satisfied that he had explained it to the best of his ability, he took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the soft cushions, clearly relieved.

Then another thought crossed his mind and he bolted upright. "Hold on, you said Hermione was there, too?" The concern was evident on his face that he hadn't noticed another person in the room. Harry tried to explain.

"Hermione was there to help me. See, this morning... Wait, do you remember this morning?"

Ron's ears flushed a little as he reached down to examine his shoes for some imaginary dirt. "Yes, you told me you were coming to get me." His voice was grateful and deadly serious. "I thought I was imagining things in my head. You know, er... voices and stuff." His voice trailed off and a small shudder ran down his back. "I don't think I could have made it without that hope, Harry. I thought I was going nutters but a little part of me thought that maybe you *had* been there, somehow." He glanced nervously up at Harry. "You really did talk to me this morning?"

"Yeah, mate. I did."

Ron smiled a little, and then remembered what they had been talking about, "But, Hermione..."

Dumbledore held up a hand to Harry and Hermione indicating that he would explain. In truth, Harry was grateful because even he didn't really understand it yet. Hermione just gave a weak smile and held on to Harry's arm for support, looking very tired. Ron looked at her, concerned, until Dumbledore finally spoke.

"It seems that Harry has only this morning awakened a powerful new magic within himself. Until he learns to manage it fully, it is a very physically and emotionally draining experience for him. I requested that Hermione be here to provide support for him in his search for you." He nodded his head once at Ron, then continued. "I do not believe that either of them fully appreciated what this exercise would do to them but I do know they were willing to do anything to assure your safety." He smiled widely down at Ron.

"As I explained to them this morning, the bond that has formed between you is extremely complex and deeply magical. It's extent cannot be described by words and it is impenetrable to all but the most powerful of spells – even I don't fully understand it. For some time, Harry has been learning some very advanced magic outside of this school, about which he has been barred from telling you. This morning, for the first time, he was led to use this magic to search you out. Unless I am mistaken, I believe the exertion required was extreme and led to a very long rest by the fireplace under the watchful care of Hermione." He gave Hermione an appreciative glance.

"And again this afternoon," Dumbledore gestured toward Harry, "Harry used this new strength to locate you but this time with the aide of Hermione. Her strength combined with his lasted long enough to locate you and to identify where you were being held. I, then, was able to follow Harry's thoughts, through a connection established by Hermione to his mind. Even if we had not recognized the house you were in, he would have led me directly to you anyway. It is an

extremely powerful bond the three, or perhaps four of you share together.” Harry thought he saw a small gleam in the Headmaster’s eyes and briefly wondered what, or who, he was talking about.

Ron, however, was inspecting his hands thoughtfully. His voice was tentative when he finally spoke. “But what happened? I don’t remember being rescued and Harry was so surprised when I was here, he must have thought I was dead.”

Dumbledore looked gravely serious and older than ever. “Harry did in fact believe that, and it took more from him and from Hermione than I had anticipated. It appears that you *were* very close to death. The combined efforts of your friends, in what they were willing to give up for you emotionally and magically, may have indeed been what saved you. I could say this many times, the bond between you is *very* special. So special, in fact, that I have never encountered such a connection in my life. I believe that Professor Trelawney studies planetary alignments around special periods in one’s life: birth, death, and many other life changing experiences. It appears that some very unusual arrangements were in place, not at your births, but on the day of your arrival at this school almost seven years ago and then a year later. Why it has only affected a few of you I do not know. This much, however, is certain: your lives are joined together by unbreakable bonds. You will discover special magic that only exists between you and cannot be performed with anyone else. I believe as you continue to grow closer together in your life’s journey you will find magnificent uses for this magic, which even I cannot anticipate. You may have, in fact, demonstrated one of these uses today.”

“But why am I still alive?” Ron’s voice split between fascination and concern.

Dumbledore’s penetrating gaze fell directly on him and he spoke in the calmest of voices. “Do you not see it? They gave themselves for you. They gave of their own magic and spirit to keep you here and alive. They gave a part of themselves to you, for you, to heal your wounds. That is something that some wizards underestimate, like those who captured you. They do not understand the bonds of love and true friendship. Ultimately it will mean their end.”

Dumbledore looked quite satisfied at this thought and gazed around as if to ask if there were any more questions. Harry sat, struggling to wrap his mind around everything that had happened and all that he had heard. Ron had a quizzical look on his face, while Hermione looked as if she could fall asleep at any moment.

Suddenly, Ron’s hand shot up into the air and immediately came back down after realizing he wasn’t in class anymore. Looking a little sheepish, he glanced at Dumbledore.

“Yes, Ron, do you have a question?”

“Well, yeah. You said ‘perhaps four of you’ about sharing this bond thing. But who’s the fourth?”

Dumbledore looked extremely pleased with Ron’s attentiveness, and tenting his fingertips in front of him, he looked over his spectacles at them all. “I’m afraid I can’t say. I’ll leave it to you to discover.” His smile didn’t escape any of them; they were all equally perplexed and their looks toward each other showed it. Harry recovered quickly but was still lost on one thing.

“Just the one last question then, Harry? I believe you should all get some rest soon.”

“Yes, sir. Only there *is* something I was wondering about. You see yesterday, when I, er... when Hermione and I... when we were down by the lake,” Harry’s face grew more and more red, “I was wondering to myself where the afternoon had gone, I mean thinking it in my head, and she answered me. She actually *answered* me. I mean, answered my thought. But maybe we were just thinking the same thing at the same time. I don’t know, it was like... like she could hear what I was thinking. Does that make any sense?” Harry thought he saw Hermione blush a little but the next moment it was gone and he doubted his eyes in the first place. Turning back, he saw Dumbledore looking down, obviously in very deep thought.

The silence began to press in on them and still Dumbledore hadn’t spoken. They all knew better than to break the silence so they sat quietly waiting for the answer they knew would come.

Harry felt his eyes drop closed more than once and he struggled to fight back his exhaustion. Hermione apparently couldn't and was now resting peacefully with her head tipped just to the side against the sofa cushion and her breaths coming in smooth even sighs.

She looked so much at peace that Harry felt himself closing his eyes, only to be suddenly jolted back to reality by Dumbledore clearing his throat. Ron prodded Hermione gently awake and for a moment she looked slightly upset until she realized the forthcoming explanation would probably help her understand as well. Forcing herself to sit upright, she rubbed her eyes for a moment and then fixed them firmly on Dumbledore.

"Harry, from what you have done today, both this morning and this afternoon and from the apparently *effortless* connection of Hermione to your mind – which was fascinating in and of itself – I believe that your own powerful gifts, your willingness to reach out to your friends, and their bonds to you, have allowed you to communicate with them without words. I would imagine that for now this will only happen when you are most open and vulnerable, perhaps while in a very extreme emotional state, like yesterday and today.

"As you learn to understand it more, you will probably be able to control it and use it at your will; a most powerful ally in your fight against Voldemort and certainly one of the reasons you were able to find Ron so quickly. As I said before, although your bonds are not blood-related, they are just as strong as family and will allow you to use very special magic amongst yourselves. You may only be scratching the surface of the things you can accomplish. I am also certain that you will find creative ways to put your new skills to use. Just please don't get into too much trouble." He smiled covertly at them and his eyes twinkled.

"Now, I think it's best that you all get yourselves to the Burrow. The other Weasleys have been in suspense long enough. I contacted them only to say that Ron was brought back with us, but little more, and I am sure they are worried about you all. I also know you will have more questions as you explore deeper into your new magic, and as I have learned my lesson about the truth as concerns you three, please feel free to ask me anything, at any time."

Grateful for Dumbledore's direction and his part in the rescue of Ron, Harry went to him and extended his hand, his eyes shining. All he could get out was a mumbled "thanks" before he turned and headed for the door, unsure of his ability to control his emotions just yet. Ron and Hermione followed, each pausing with Dumbledore a moment to express their gratitude in whatever way they could manage, though knowing it could never be enough.

Before Harry knew what had happened, he found himself standing in the kitchen at the Burrow, his bags in a pile on the floor and his breath being choked out of him by Mrs. Weasley, who, the moment he had stuck his head out of the fireplace, had pulled him into a violent hug and told him she could never be more grateful or proud of him. He was surprised at how good it felt to hear it, even though he always knew she included him in the family.

A whoosh of fire told him that Hermione had arrived and Mrs. Weasley busied herself with hugging and thanking her while Mr. Weasley took Harry by the shoulder and thanked him.

Finally, a third burst in the fireplace announced the arrival of Ron, who, without a chance to even take a breath, was wrapped in his family's arms. It seemed to Harry that they had materialized from nowhere. Weasleys came from every direction to form a mob and get a chance to touch Ron. Harry could have sworn there was a very large fire burning in the kitchen with the sight of so much flaming red hair.

He was distracted for a moment, hearing Hermione laugh at the twins and their unusually sober greeting of their brother. He knew deep down they really loved Ron but once in a while it was good to see it. He knew Ron would appreciate it. While he was observing them, he didn't

noticed one of the group break away to come stand by him. He jerked sideways as a hand touched his arm but instantly relaxed when he saw the thankful smile shining behind the tears of Ginny.

She grabbed him in a hug and cried for what seemed to Harry like several minutes. Not knowing quite what to do and unnerved by the innocent grin on Hermione's face, he held her loosely and patted her back a few times.

When she let go, she laughed a little and stepped back. "Harry, you've never been very good at that. You're not going to hurt us by hugging back, you know!"

Harry grinned shyly and muttered something that sounded like "sorry." The whole family spent several minutes hugging and talking, while Harry, feeling a little tired and out of place, slipped unnoticed into the lounge and dropped onto one of the comfortable, worn sofas. He listened to the excited voices from the other room and breathed out a long breath, thinking about just how long the day had been. His whole body seemed exhausted, his arms felt like lead weights and his back was one big, dull ache.

"I hope it gets easier than this," he breathed.

"Yes, because you're such an *old* man!" a voice chided him.

Harry nearly jumped off the sofa at Hermione's voice and shot an exasperated look toward the doorway. "Shut it, you," he snapped at her, smiling a bit. Apparently he wasn't as alone as he thought.

"They asked me to come in here and see if you'd fallen asleep on the sofa." She laughed a little. "Actually, I'm surprised you haven't. I'm *so* exhausted." She flopped down at the other end of the sofa and pulled her legs up next to her.

Harry couldn't help himself, the opportunity was too good to pass up. He quickly reached over and attacked her feet, tickling them mercilessly. She jerked them back and swatted at him, laughing out loud. Harry laughed, too, and realized how good it felt, if even for a moment. It didn't happen very often anymore. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the peace. He thought about how he always felt so at-home here. The Weasleys were so kind to him. Mrs. Weasley had, over the years, seemingly accepted him as of one of her own children and bossed him around as much as any of the others, though always with a smile. Mr. Weasley found Harry fascinating and seemed to respect him. He also enjoyed quizzing Harry about muggles and their strange ways of doing things without magic. Harry didn't mind though, he'd long ago gotten used to the questions.

As his mind drifted about, he thought of the letter in his pocket for Hermione. He blushed a little and opened his eyes to look at her. Her eyes were closed and her breathing smooth and peaceful. Harry was so happy that she was finally relaxed and content that he almost didn't want to wake her... almost.

He nudged her gently and said her name. She groaned, stirring sleepily and opening one eye toward him, trying to figure out who was bothering her. He held out the letter and tried to find his voice.

"Hermione? This is for you. I wrote it last night. I kind of put a lot into it. That's why I guess I slept all right last night. It helped to get it all out."

She blinked at him and took the letter. When she began to open it, he reached out quickly and touched her hand. "Not now, just... later, when you're by yourself."

She nodded and then tucked it in her pocket. Just in time as it turned out, because several Weasleys, including Ron, came bustling loudly through the door. Ron looked tired but happy and Harry couldn't help but smile when he realized that they were all back together again. He thought about Dumbledore's words, about friends and family – *Harry's family*, and glanced sideways at Hermione. She smiled curiously back at him.

I hope you'll all be my family, he thought.

She looked startled, and her smile widened just slightly as her mouth dropped open a little. She glanced around the room and then turned back to Harry. "Your family?" she said faintly.

This time it was Harry's turn to be startled. It felt like the heat had just gone up in the room. His blood pounded in his ears. He looked at her in disbelief and then as understanding slowly dawned on him, he nodded, not trusting his voice. They had done it *again*. Harry briefly wondered if he could ever really get used to it but decided he didn't care. This was wonderful, this was fantastic, this was... *brilliant*.

Trying not to give anything away, he reached over and grabbed Hermione's hand, making sure he was unnoticed. He gave her a small wink and she nodded back with instant understanding. Harry stilled his body and focused entirely on Ron, he felt Hermione enter his mind and he felt her strength flowing through him and beyond him. It was smooth, strong and comforting. Again he reached out with his mind and again he found Ron almost immediately. Burying all of his other thoughts deep below his conscious mind, he screwed up his strength and spoke quietly to Ron.

"You're a lot of trouble you know, first making us come and rescue you and then keeping us up until all hours of the night partying with your family. I'm beginning to wonder if you're worth it." Harry almost laughed out loud at the look on Ron's face across the room but he clenched his mouth shut and shook with silent laughter.

Then he heard Hermione's voice, *"Yes, I quite agree, Harry. No respect, that's what it is. You'd think after all these years we've been friends with him, he'd at least come and sit with us. I'm quite put out."* She tried to frown toward him but the corners of her mouth turned up. Soon she was shaking with laughter, too.

Ron looked completely bewildered as he stood up, walked across the room and stopped in front of them. Harry released the connection, feeling honestly a bit relieved – this magic definitely needed practice – and looked innocently up at Ron.

Clearly not knowing what to do, Ron opened and shut his mouth a few times. When he finally found his voice, it squeaked a little. "Harry? What was that? Were you... doing it again?" His eyebrows furrowed up his forehead as he looked back and forth between them.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Harry burst out laughing and Hermione quickly followed. Ron's face turned red but he smiled and sat down between them. He quickly lashed out both arms and grabbed them around the necks, pulling them into his shoulders. He practically yelled, "And these are my friends! They just saved my life an hour ago and already they're expecting payback!" The conversations in the room stopped and everyone turned to watch Ron. Harry tried to catch his breath as he slid out from under Ron's hold. Hermione only looked down at her hands, still giggling, and very red in the face.

Ron suddenly realized how close he was holding her and immediately let her fall back into her seat. She looked up at him with hair falling down across her face.

"Ron, honestly, that was funny. The look on your face..." She opened her mouth and crossed her eyes. He whacked her on the arm, smiling a little, but then turned more seriously to Harry.

"So, did you really... do it? You know, talk to me?"

Harry nodded slowly back. "Yeah, it's tough though. I had to have Hermione's help, the same way... the same way as today." Harry looked down at his hands, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. He knew everyone was staring at him but he didn't know what to say. He loved them and knew he would do anything for Ron, but the Weasleys were sometimes a little intimidating. They were loud and rambunctious, always teasing each other, and Harry was just... not.

Hermione seemed to sense his feelings and took charge of the situation, which she was always very good at doing. She moved to sit between Ron and Harry and took each of their hands in hers, much to the raised eyebrows of everyone.

"Okay," she started with a small sigh, "we'll try to answer your questions but remember we're really tired and we're still trying to work out some these things even for ourselves."

She looked tired but determined and they all sat in silence waiting for her to start. Harry couldn't help but feel strengthened by her touch but he worried a little when he noticed the dark circles under her eyes. Maybe he hadn't given her enough credit for her part in the rescue.

"This morning Harry worked out some new magic between us," she began slowly, glancing at both of them. "Dumbledore believes it's related to the planetary alignments the day we started Hogwarts – I don't know. Anyway, he says we share a very special bond that's unbreakable. He says..." She was about to tell them how it could help destroy Voldemort but decided it would be best not to share that yet.

"Well, he says that we may discover strange and interesting magic between us. Like sometimes we can hear each others thoughts," her face reddened a little, "and we can seek each other out across distances, like Harry did today. Twice today, actually." They all turned back to Harry, and Hermione gave him a little smile. He knew he was supposed to take it from there, and he took a deep breath and gathered up his strength.

"Well... this morning I... I was sitting by the window in the common room and I just felt like I should go looking for Ron. Dumbledore had told us that we weren't to actually go out and search for him, so I thought about, er, some things I'd learned, and it seemed so clear all of the sudden. The magic was exhausting but I managed to find him. I... I told him we were coming to get him but that was as far as I could get. I guess this kind of magic is just... hard."

Ron looked hard at Harry, the tears brimming in his eyes again. When he spoke though, it was with a firm voice. "Harry did it. I felt him by me and I heard his voice. I was in pretty bad shape by then but it gave me something to hold on to..." His voice trailed off and Hermione put both her hands on his. He sniffed a little and leaned his head against hers.

Harry picked it up again, trying not to be too distracted by them. "It was tough. I heard that I took a two hour nap by the window after that. But Dumbledore seemed to understand it better than I did. I don't know how, I guess he figured that Hermione would be able to help me do it all over again this afternoon. We went to his office and he explained what we were going to do. He showed us a charm for joining our minds together."

They were clearly bewildered, so Harry tried to explain. "It's a branch of magic called *Mens Mentis Expositus*. One person opens their mind to another, so that person can come into it and feel their emotions and see what they're seeing. Hermione used it on me and Dumbledore used it on her so it'd be easier on me. I don't know how he knew, but because of Hermione, I could do it again and it was easier. It was like our combined strength was more than the sum of our individual strengths."

He paused a moment to marvel at the depth of the thought, then shook himself back to reality. "It was still tiring but together we managed to find Ron, and... where they were keeping him."

Harry looked down and bit his lip, wishing he hadn't said it. Ron looked white, Hermione looked sick, and the rest were twisted somewhere between rage and curiosity. He knew they were going to ask.

When it was Ginny who finally spoke up, Harry found he didn't mind so much *her* asking the question. But the answer still made his insides churn.

"He was at the Malfoy's," he said quietly, not lifting his gaze to them.

The room erupted in shouts and oaths. Harry, Hermione and Ron sat huddled together on the sofa, holding each other with all their might. It felt as if at any moment one of them might be stolen away again. The Weasleys suddenly seemed like a small army preparing for battle.

The only one who didn't join in the fray was Ginny. She quietly stole from her seat across the room, to the sofa, nudging her way in to squeeze Ron so tightly he couldn't breathe.

Finally, after several minutes, Mr. Weasley stood up and patiently requested silence. Quieting their voices, but with anger still seething through them, they simmered down. Eventually,

there was only a quiet sniffing from Ginny, who still had not released Ron. Once again everyone turned to Ron, their expressions unclear, mixed between anger and guilt.

Mr. Weasley spoke again. "I think, given what these three have been through, we ought to let them get some rest. I'm sure that anger is not what they need right now and we're not helping anyone by yelling about it." Harry looked gratefully at him, his own face deep with tired lines. He stood and with Hermione on Ron's other side, they lifted him off the sofa and helped him awkwardly upstairs.

When they got to Ron's room, they deposited him on his bed and Harry pulled his shoes off, making a foul face as he did so.

"Ron, don't you ever wash your feet?" Harry laughed briefly and felt his back relax just a little – laughing always seemed to help him. Hermione smiled a little and headed for the door. Harry looked at her for a moment, watching her hair fall down around her shoulders, then went silently after her. When he reached the hallway, she turned, apparently expecting him behind her. She looked at him questioningly for a moment before burying her face in his shoulder, a place she was apparently becoming comfortable with. She cried hard, but quietly, and her tears only lasted a few moments, having exhausted themselves from earlier.

Harry gripped her tightly and reminded her to read the letter. She nodded her head and turned toward Ginny's room, only stopping to give him one last tired look before closing the door.

Hermione rested her head against the back of Ginny's closed door and shut her eyes, the days' events pressing in on her until she thought she would collapse. The cool wood was soothing against her forehead and it gave her enough strength to turn towards her bed, made up on the floor beside Ginny's.

She jumped a little when she noticed Ginny watching her from her own bed, already dressed in her pajamas with her hair plaited loosely down the back of her neck.

Ginny looked as tired as any of them. Her mouth hung open slightly as if she were searching for words but couldn't remember what she was going to say. She finally spoke and her voice was quiet and ragged, "Hermione, I'm so sorry. I wish I could've helped. It must've been really hard for you and Harry, by yourselves." Hermione tried not to look too closely at her, not wanting to betray that she could tell what Ginny was really thinking. She pulled back the covers of her bed and made to sit down but found she couldn't. Instead, she stood back up with a sigh, and sat down on Ginny's bed.

"How are *you* doing?"

Ginny was tired but her cheeks flushed a little anyway. "Well, I can't believe I'm thinking about *him* right now, when my brother was just... at the Malfoy's." The word was bitter in her mouth and she looked sick again. Hermione touched her hand.

"Ginny, it's okay. And honestly, I think Harry would have been too distracted by you to do much good anyway, so it's a *good* thing you weren't there." Ginny smiled appreciatively at her and closed her eyes. She really *was* tired.

"Maybe I'll just go to sleep and try not to think about it at all."

"Okay, but do you mind if I keep the light on for a few minutes. I've a letter to read." Hermione could feel herself getting warm and looked away. She sat down on her bed, pulling the letter from her pocket, and realized she hadn't changed yet. She dropped the letter on her pillow and quickly changed into her pajamas.

A forlorn voice spoke from the bed as she laid down again.

"Who's it from?"

"Um... it's from Harry."

Hermione could almost feel the jealousy radiating from the bed but all Ginny said was “Oh. Well, that’s nice.”

Hermione felt a stab of pain for her friend but didn’t quite know what to say. She opened the letter as quietly as she could, knowing Ginny was only pretending to be asleep. It was quite long, which amazed her coming from Harry, and she fought back her tears one more time.

Dear Hermione,

Without knowing what tomorrow will bring, there are some things that need to be said today, about us, because I’m having some feelings for you that I’ve never had before. I had a great day with you today, exceptionally so given the circumstances really. You’re such a special person to me, so much more than a friend. To be honest with you, I didn’t really know what that meant until today. We’ve known each other for so long and been through so much together. We know each other so well; we can sit in the same room together and not say a word for hours but still understand each other. It’s quite amazing. I’ve never had that with anyone before.

I think I’ve felt more different emotions today than I have ever felt in a day, or even a week, maybe ever. It was confusing, made more so by the fact that Ron wasn’t here with us to share it.

There are so many things to say. Embarrassing? Some, maybe. I hope you don’t mind. This is so hard to write but I want to be completely honest with you. I felt things today that were different, not uncomfortable, but nice in a way. Okay, here it goes, when we were lying by the lake under the trees, all I could think about was you. You’re really beautiful you know and any guy would be out of his mind not to think of you anytime you’re within 10 yards - the curse of being a guy, I guess. There was something so peaceful and warm about your presence. I’m not going to deny that spending the whole day with you, and talking so much, and even, well... holding your hand was wonderful. You are a strong person and the tears I saw today tore at my heart, because I would do anything to stop them. That’s right, anything. Actually, I’ve known that since we first met but I don’t think I’ve ever told you before. You deserve it. I’ll always be there for you.

So what do you think about the connection we had today? I swear you heard what I was thinking, because I know I didn’t say it out loud. Maybe it’s one of the gifts of our friendship. I’ve been thinking about it and that’s what I’ve decided it must be. Just like how I can feel it when you enter the room, did you know that? Have you ever wondered why you can’t sneak up on me? There it is.

So by now you’re probably wondering why, if I feel the way I’ve said I do, we aren’t snogging in the common room right now. Well, it’s deeper and more complex than that. It took me a long time staring at the ceiling over my bed to figure that out. I have something to say to you, that I’ve never said before today.

I love you.

Wow, I actually wrote that. Really though, it’s how I feel. But it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. You are my sister and best friend all wrapped up in one. Any guy would be honored to be your boyfriend but I want you to be something else - my family. Will you, only I hope it’s not too much to ask, will you let me call you my family, my sister?

Love,

Harry

Hermione put the letter down and closed her eyes. The rush of so many different emotions threatened to shred what little control she had left from the day. Her mind raced in so many directions. Harry was just down the hall. Ron was *here*, with them. Ginny was not asleep. The Malfoy's had held Ron. They had all rescued him. Dumbledore had *known*. Harry had called her *beautiful*.

She only shed a single tear, even though her chest was bursting with emotion. And suddenly she knew Harry was right. As much as she enjoyed flirting with him, holding *his* hand, crying on his shoulder, fighting for him and with him, she knew that he was not for her. He was Harry, he really was like a brother to her and he was truly her best friend. She smiled at the thought, and then another one popped into her head. Maybe it would have been fun to kiss him just once to see what it was like. Maybe sometime just for fun....

She dried her eyes and laughed quietly at herself. So Harry wanted her as his family.... That was a good thing, a wonderful thing, a beautiful thing. He'd never said as much before but somehow she knew it was already true. Though he would never say it, she could tell that he longed for times like she spent with her parents, and Ron had with his family. Harry had always been a part of the Weasley family and Mrs. Weasley clearly loved him as her own son, but it was never said out loud. It was never acknowledged by them, only assumed. Hermione couldn't even imagine what it must have been like for him growing up without his parents, never even being allowed to hear about them or ask questions about them. Hermione had often thought about it, over the years. She always had a home to go back to, family that missed her and cared about her and parents who loved her no matter who or what she was.

Harry didn't have a family like that anymore.

Her heart went out to him again and she solemnly promised herself that no matter what happened in her life she would always be there for him. He deserved at least that much.

A little cough from the bed told her that Ginny was still awake and probably waiting to hear what Harry had written that took so long to read.

"Ginny," she whispered, "are you still awake?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Do you want to read it?"

"Yes!" Ginny answered a little too quickly. Then composing herself, "I mean, if you don't mind."

"No, go ahead." She passed the parchment up to Ginny's outstretched hand.

"Thanks."

Hermione lay back and shut her eyes, still too full of emotion to think straight. A warm breeze blew through the open window and across her. She willed it to take her thoughts and pains away with it. Her mind was so full that it almost seemed blank – how nice a pensive would be right now, she thought. A smile played across her face and she thought of her friends. She thought of how they were all back together again. She breathed a sigh of relief and slowly began to relax.

Sleep always comes out of the blue, catching up and taking hold at the most unexpected moment. Hermione finally drifted off to her dreams and was at peace the rest of the night.

And Ginny cried herself to sleep.

When Harry woke up the next morning, the first thing he tried to figure out was why he wasn't at Hogwarts. It was a school day, he knew that much, but he still couldn't figure out why it was so quiet, why the sun was shining on him from the wrong side and why his bed didn't feel

quite right. As his brain slowly engaged, he lifted his head and looked across the room at Ron, just to make sure he wasn't still dreaming. But it was true, Ron was still alive and in his bed, his tangled sheets moving almost imperceptibly with his breathing.

Harry relaxed and laid his head back on his pillow, still trying to remember what had happened yesterday. The chair, the room, Ron, the Malfoys, Dumbledore, Hermione, the Weasleys, grief, joy, exhaustion, everything came back all jumbled together. Harry tried to sort it out, tried to make some sense of it, but just couldn't. It seemed that his brain had put a block on it for the time being, and he felt... warm and comfortable.

He pulled his legs up to his chest and then straightened them back out, stretching every muscle as he went. It felt good and he felt relaxed, more relaxed than he had in a long time... like the stress of the world, of his life, had diminished just for a moment so that he could have some peace.

He wondered what Hermione was doing, whether she was still asleep, and whether Ginny was still asleep. His mind drifted a little. Ginny had really been great yesterday. She had been the only calm one when he told them that Ron was at the Malfoy's. She had cried a lot, but then again, she'd probably been the only sane one in the house for the last few days and she deserved a break; plus, he realized, she was sort of pretty when her face was red.

Ron's great, loud yawn broke his train of thought and he sat up slowly. Sleep had done well by Ron, his face wasn't quite so drawn and had most of its color back. The bruise had changed color to a light yellow, and Harry laughed a bit when he realized what Mrs. Weasley would say about it when she saw it this morning.

"You should see yourself, mate. Go find a mirror."

Ron looked sleepily back at him and blinked a few times. "That bad, eh? Well, those slimy gits didn't exactly give me a warm welcome now, did they?"

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to—"

"No, it's okay. I wasn't... I didn't mean it that way." He touched the bruise with his fingertips and flinched a little. "That's going to take some time to heal."

"Don't worry, I'm sure Madam Pomfrey can fix it up in no time – she's helped me loads of times."

"Yeah, I know. Remember when Dobby's bludger broke your arm, and Lockhart tried to fix it. She made you drink that horrible stuff to re-grow your bones." Ron laughed a little.

Harry winced, not sure which one bothered him more – Lockhart, or re-growing bones. He decided to hate them both equally, and then laughed along with Ron.

As they made their way sleepily down the stairs for breakfast, Harry briefly wondered about his exams. The events of the past several days had driven school far from his mind and he suddenly realized that in only a few days time, he would be taking the last exams of his life: his N.E.W.T.'s. Feeling a bit guilty that he hadn't been studying very much, he stopped mid-way down the stairs and contemplated the next step for a moment.

"D'you realize that Hermione hasn't studied at all the last two days?"

Ron turned abruptly, the surprise clearly visible on his face. "She hasn't?"

"No, we were together all day Tuesday," Harry still got a little red thinking about that, "and yesterday we spent the whole day trying to find you. I bet she's never gone this long in her life without studying." He broke into a smile.

"Yeah," said Ron, looking concerned, "I bet she's really mad at me."

Behind them, in the shadows, two pairs of slippered feet had stepped into the hallway. "Oh, Ron, I'm not mad at you." Hermione came running over and hugged him around the middle. "I mean, you really are more important than exams." She paused. "I would have done anything to get you back." She blushed a little and bit her lip.

Another voice came up behind Harry, speaking gently. "Yeah, and next time, let some other people help as well. You don't need to do everything by yourself, Harry." Ginny touched his arm lightly, and then spoke a little softer. "You take too much on yourself, you know." She held his gaze for a moment and then turned away with a slightly pained look, before heading downstairs with Hermione and Ron.

Harry stood there for a moment, wondering what had just happened. His heart beat fast in his chest and his breathing was uneven. The spot on his arm that she had just touched was still warm and he closed his eyes for a moment and smiled, not even sure why. But then he recollected himself, wondering why she had suddenly looked so hurt. *Surely* he hadn't done anything, he thought. As he met them all in the kitchen, he tried to remember the night before but was soon too occupied with sausage, eggs and rolls to think of anything.

He was surprised when Ginny sat down next to him, after her behavior only moments earlier. She offered him a piece of buttered toast, her own clamped tightly in her mouth as she set her plate down.

"Tsht, Hrry?"

"Thanks." He laughed. She smiled back and set hers down on her plate.

"Sorry," she laughed, "at least I didn't give you this one – " she picked up her own, waved it at him, and then spread strawberry jam all over it.

"Can I have some of that?" he asked.

"Sure." She took his piece out of his hand and pulled her spoon back out of the jar, smothering the bread in sweet red jam. She handed it back to him.

"Thanks. How did you know I like lots?" He looked curiously at her.

Her ears started to turn pink. "I don't know. I guess I've just seen you eat it that way for so long..." She turned back to her own food, clearly embarrassed.

Harry only smiled and said "thanks" again. Maybe she wasn't really mad at him, he thought, and her pink cheeks were rather endearing.

They spent most of the day relaxing in the sun and dipping their feet in the water of the small stream running through the woods behind the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley kept them all well fed and insisted that Ron have a fourth helping of her chicken salad at lunch, which he wasn't exactly reluctant to accept. Harry couldn't remember very many times when the four of them had had so much fun together just doing nothing. They talked and laughed about school, teachers, exams, Muggles, Percy, and Mrs. Weasley, and steered clear of anything too serious.

Harry watched his friends with happiness all day, pushing far back into his head the fact that they all had to leave again the next morning to go back to school. Even Hermione seemed relaxed, and held herself to only mentioning studying for exams thirty or forty times that afternoon.

When it came time for dinner, the tables were set up as they so often were, in the garden behind the house, picnic style. Everyone gathered in high spirits and Harry found himself sitting down to eat, joined on either side by Fred and Ginny. Ginny smiled happily at him, her deep brown eyes sparkling in a way he'd never seen, or perhaps just never noticed before. The sunset danced on her hair in golden shades of red and bronze and her sweet laughter filled the air. Harry was so mesmerized that he didn't even realize he'd been staring until Fred tried to pass him a large bowl of mashed potatoes and he said "No thanks, I've already got some salad." Harry laughed heartily along with the rest and was glad that they hadn't been paying enough attention to notice *why* he was so preoccupied.

Mrs. Weasley managed to whip up a fantastic assortment of dishes, even though she had spent most of her day just being with her children, telling stories and laughing with them. Harry never quite knew how she managed to make everything taste so good but he wasn't about to wonder out loud. He was perfectly content just enjoying the food and the company to worry about much else. Even though the food at Hogwarts was always delicious, Harry never lost his appreciation for good meals, remembering the times he had gotten little or nothing to eat while at the Dursley's. He was even too content to realize the wonderful fact that he would never have to live there again.

After dinner, Fred and George entertained them all for some time with an assortment of new product demonstrations from their joke shop. Harry's favorite was the edible parchment (You could say your dog ate your homework and it would really be true!). They ended with a presentation to Ron of a gift of twenty galleons worth of merchandise from their shop, as long as he promised to use it to wreak havoc on the school during their last week at Hogwarts. Ron turned red and muttered 'thanks' but the twins wouldn't let him get away with it that easily, so they wrestled him to the ground and briefly turned him into a very red-haired chicken. He was finding feathers in his clothes the rest of the night.

When it got too dark to carry on conversations down the table, they cleaned up and moved inside. Charlie and Bill hugged their mother and father and gave Ron a handshake and a chuck on the shoulder before they left to go home, while Percy exclaimed loudly that he had lots of important work to do and would see them all after their exams. Of course, no one listened to him except Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, who finally bid him goodbye in the cool night air. Fred and George stayed a little longer just to watch Ron and Harry start a game of wizard chess, then they, too, went on their way back to their flat over the joke shop.

Hermione and Ginny sat and talked and watched them play off and on, really more talking than pretending to be interested in Ron's complex strategy, which he was altogether too happy to explain whenever they would listen.

After Harry had won one game (only because Ron had let him) and Ron three, they yawned and decided to call it quits for the night. The four of them said goodnight to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and trudged up the stairs.

When they got to the door to Ginny's room, they all paused and looked uncomfortably at the floor for a moment, then Ginny and Hermione both rushed at Ron and gave him one big hug, saying how happy they were that he was back. To Harry's amazement, Ginny then came over to him and gave him the same hug, pulling him very close and telling him quietly how proud she was of what he had done for Ron. Once again he didn't know quite what to do, so he squeezed her quickly and patted her back once or twice. She laughed out loud and walked to her door, turning just as she got to it.

"Harry, one of these days you're going to learn how to give a proper hug."

The others laughed and Ron soon disappeared up the stairs to his own room, while Hermione turned to Harry and buried her head in his shoulder. He held her tightly and whispered quiet, comforting words to her.

She knew she was still holding back some feelings from the day before and he always had a way of making her feel better. Maybe that was part of their shared magic, she thought.

Suddenly she raised her head, "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"I read your letter last night."

He paused for a moment and then in as quiet a voice as he could muster, "Well, I still can't believe I gave that to you. There was some stuff in it that... well, you read it, and I just –"

"Harry," she interrupted him, "it's okay. I understand you. I know you, remember?" She poked him in the chest with her finger. "And I feel the same way."

She stepped back and took both of his hands in hers. "Harry, you've been my family since I met you but let me say it to you right now. You're practically my best friend and I've always thought of you as a brother. I also *know* that Ron and Ginny feel the same way - we've talked about it before. Harry, look at me." He lifted his gaze from the floor. "We love you, and we're never going anywhere, ever," she said simply. "Okay?"

He felt his face get a little red but he knew he was okay.

"Yeah, thanks. I really needed to hear that. So... thanks."

She gave him another quick hug which he returned tightly, and then they turned toward their rooms. Harry caught a quick glimpse of what looked like Ginny watching from across her room with a strange look on her face, but then the door closed and he remembered how tired he still was. He climbed the rest of the way up to Ron's room. The bed had been made sometime during the day so he put his pajamas on quickly and slipped under the warm covers, feeling the night breeze through the window take him away to his dreams.

In the other room, Hermione was startled by the mean look on Ginny's face when she closed the door behind her.

"WHY?" Ginny screamed loudly. Hermione just opened her mouth but didn't know how to respond. She'd never seen Ginny like this before.

"Ginny, I don't - "

Ginny held up her hand to stop her. The look of hurt and pain on her face was only eclipsed by the intense anger in her eyes. She jumped down off her bed and advanced on Hermione, gesturing wildly with her arms.

"Why can't he hold *me* like that? Why can't he write *me* love letters like yours? I mean, he can hug you just fine. Is there something wrong with me? Does he hate me for some reason and *love* you. Damn it, Hermione! I've been in love with him since before I even started Hogwarts, and he doesn't even know me. He has to go and fall in love with you. He said it in his letter to *you*, and I've... and I... don't have him." Her voice was starting to shake and tears shown in her eyes where the sparkle had been only a few hours before.

"I *love* him but somehow it's you three that get the *special* magical bond, and I'm just... on the outside. I know I'll never stop loving him, even if I can't have him. I'm just having a hard time accepting that." She looked down at her feet and crossed back to the bed, wiping a tear from her face.

"Ginny, it's not - "

"Don't!" The fierce tone in Ginny's voice stopped Hermione in her tracks. "Look, maybe we can talk about this tomorrow. Right now, I just don't want to hear what you have to say."

She got in her bed and pulled the covers up to her neck, rolling towards the wall. Hermione could hear her crying softly but didn't want to provoke another outburst. She changed quietly into her pajamas and slipped silently into her bed. Her own tears poured out for her friend. Many minutes passed before she could stop crying and hours passed before she could go to sleep, trying in vain to come up with the right words to say to Ginny.

When Harry woke the next morning, there was only a faint pink tinge to the dim light coming in through the window. He yawned widely and rolled over, throwing his arm over his eyes to shield them from the light. Dumbledore had asked them to return to the school by noon, and knowing that it was still very early, he decided to sleep a little longer and enjoy this precious time without homework or classes.

It was precisely that which kept him from going back to sleep again. The sudden realization that these were the last two weeks of his life at Hogwarts unsettled his mind and made

him too restless to sleep. Thoughts of his classmates, both good and bad, meandered through his mind and he wondered how many of them he would see again after they finished school. Of course, he realized, there were *some* he'd never *want* to see again.

Pushing Malfoy aside in his mind, he tried to envision where some of his friends would end up. Perhaps some would join the Ministry. Others might be like Fred and George and open their own shops. Then there would be some like Harry that would join the Order full time, devoting, and perhaps giving their lives for the battle against Dark Magic.

Whatever his friends might do, he knew he would still be with Ron and Hermione, which was a comforting thought. It saved him from something like fear, the fear of going out into the world alone. Hermione and Ron would always have their families but Harry would have no parents to wonder where he was, no brothers to punch in the arm, no sisters to protect. He thought about what Hermione had said yesterday, about how they would never leave him. He wondered, though, how that was going to work when they had families of their own? But then, perhaps Ron and Hermione would marry each other and he wouldn't have to worry about it.

He smiled into his pillow, stifling a small laugh. His two best friends had shown interest in each other a few years ago, mostly evident through their constant bickering, but it had never worked out. In the end, nothing had happened. Harry forced himself not to think about what would happen if his friends met other people and moved away. He supposed he would still see them but it wouldn't be the same. No more living together. No more doing homework until the wee hours of the morning, laughing at their teachers and worrying about what Voldemort was doing.

No, he wasn't going to think about that. Harry never thought about that, just like he never thought about what *he* was going to do in the future. It always stopped at Voldemort – wondering when they would finally meet for their last battle and who would come out of it alive, if either of them. By detaching from his feelings, he had nearly reconciled himself to what could happen. By never making plans for the future, he couldn't be disappointed if they didn't come to pass.

In his mind, he had envisioned the last battle many times but could never get beyond it. As a self defense mechanism, he would never allow himself. It would bring up too many questions. Would he live? Would his friends live? Would Dumbledore, Hagrid and the other teachers survive? What would he do as an adult wizard with no enemy to fight? By never imagining life after Voldemort, he could protect himself from the terror of not knowing.

Now, in Ron's bedroom at the Burrow, with the sun beginning to brighten through the window, Harry was no different than ever. He never allowed thoughts of life after Voldemort into his mind, and now was no time to start. It unnerved him how cold he could be, even to his friends sometimes, when they started talking about their futures. He had grown so used to hiding his feelings over the years, and felt protected in his ability to do so. But right now, there were too many things to occupy his mind in the present. The fact that he was about to take his N.E.W.T.s was unsettling, to say the least. He, Ron, and Hermione had studied many, many weeks for these tests, but as they were now only three days away, he suddenly felt the first pangs of nervousness.

The thump of footsteps on the stairs broke his reverie and he stretched his arms and legs out, enjoying a final moment of warmth in the bed. Grabbing his glasses off the table, he tipped himself out of bed and padded quietly to the door. Ron was still very much asleep and Harry had no desire to wake him yet. Seven years of living with him had taught him that Ron was not usually a morning person.

Closing the door silently behind him, he wound his way down the stairs and into the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was busying herself with cooking a mountain of eggs and sausage in a large iron frying pan. With her wand and a deft flick of the wrist, the sausages all turned over and a spatula tipped itself into the pan and started stirring the eggs. Only then did she notice Harry.

"Oh, Harry my dear, have a seat – this won't be ready for a few minutes."

Harry managed a yawn and a smile and sat down at the end of the table. Mrs. Weasley went back to her cooking, humming a little to herself.

Suddenly Harry remembered something, "Mrs. Weasley, I thought I heard footsteps on the stairs. That's why I came down."

"Oh yes, Ginny's outside. She likes to have a cup of cocoa on cool mornings and watch the sun rise."

"Oh... Do you think she'd mind if I went out?" He could feel his ears getting red for no reason at all.

"Oh no, dear. I sit out there with her all the time. I think she'd like the company."

Harry poured himself some cocoa and went to the door. He could just see her red hair through the window. He took a deep breath and then stepped outside.

Ginny turned to see who had come out and smiled at Harry as he sat down on the swing beside her. He put his mug on the small table in front of them and looked out over the fields toward the rising sun. A few clouds on the horizon were lit up with silver edges as the sunlight streamed from behind them and the morning mist had not yet risen, giving the scene a very picturesque touch. He was surprised at how beautiful it was and realized how seldom he saw the sun rise.

A chill in his feet reminded him it was still early and he pulled them up onto the swing, conscious that his pajamas wouldn't keep him warm for long. He looked over at Ginny and saw that she had pulled a thick blanket around herself and held her mug in her hands to keep them warm.

She smiled a little and asked if he'd like to share the blanket.

"Sure... yeah," he stammered. She threw it over him and he caught a glimpse of deep purple silk as she re-covered herself and moved a little closer. He felt his face grow hot and sipped from his mug, determined not to let her notice.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Yeah, I did, even with Ron's snoring. Bit annoying, that."

"I know," she giggled. "He's always been like that."

They sat a few minutes in silence, broken only by the occasional sip of cocoa from a hot mug (Magically heated, to keep your coffee hot all day long!). Harry was surprised at how comfortable he was now with Ginny. Of course, they had been friends at school for many years now but the feelings and emotions of the last few days, along with the extended periods of time spent together, had brought them closer than ever. Harry wasn't surprised then when Ginny brought up the magical relationship that he seemed to share with Ron and Hermione.

He sipped slowly from his mug, his mind running over all the different paths this conversation could lead down and finding that none of them seemed to end well. He turned and looked into her deep brown eyes. They seemed to be pleading with him, but for what, he couldn't tell. He only knew that he suddenly felt a twinge of pain in his heart for her.

"Harry? I didn't mean to pry, I just... I wondered what it was like to share something like that with someone. I mean, can you do it at will, like any time? And is it really hard? The other day you had to have Hermione's help to... to find Ron. But couldn't you do it yourself? Or was there something special about having *her* help you?"

Harry continued to hold her gaze. It felt like his insides were changing temperatures and being quickly rearranged.

"Well..." he started, "I don't know." He breathed out a long breath and leaned back, looking out over the sunshine now flooding the fields and burning off the morning mist.

"I only found out I could do it two days ago," he continued heavily. "I've been working with the Teacher on this type of thing for a long time now but never really thought I'd be able to do it."

He saw her light up with questions about the Teacher and the things he was learning from him but she somehow managed not to ask. He smiled weakly at her.

"I don't know how this all came about. Dumbledore seems to think it's related to the planetary positions when we all came to school but he doesn't know why it affected only us." He raised his eyebrows, "He actually said there were four but he wouldn't tell us who the fourth was." He looked away, the disappointment clear in his face.

"Anyway, it *is* really exhausting, trying to use it. The first night here, Hermione helped me do it again. That was when Ron came over and sat with us... that was when we told everyone about what happened." He was silent for a moment.

"I don't know if there's something special about her," he continued, "or if anyone could do it. I suppose... well, there might be a way to find out. Fancy waking Ron up now?"

She appeared surprised by the mischievous grin on his face and the way he was looking at her.

"But what does he have to do with—" Then dawning comprehension spread across her face and her ears began to go pink. "You mean, you want me to help you? To see if we can reach him... together?"

He nodded, still smiling.

"Okay," she said slowly, "what do I have to do?"

"All you have to do is take my hand and hold it tight."

A deep blush spread across her face but Harry pretended he didn't notice. She reached across under the blanket and took his hand tightly in hers. Harry felt like his insides were melting when she touched him. Immediately he felt her magic moving through him. It was quite different than Hermione's. It was slow and beautiful... and *powerful*. Harry was surprised how powerful. He opened his eyes to look at her, taking in the way wisps of her golden-red hair blew in the breeze and brushed her cheek. Her eyes were closed and she had a very peaceful look on her face. He felt a strange desire to sit with her forever but then remembered what he was supposed to be doing and closed his eyes again.

"Harry, are you doing it?" she asked softly.

"Shhh, yes, it takes me a minute to slow myself down and find him." He relaxed and brought his mind around to Ron but then remembered something.

"Ginny, I forgot a step. You're going to have to get into my mind if you want be a part of it."

She opened her eyes and stared at him, looking concerned.

"How do I do that?"

"There's a spell. It's called *Memoria Acies*. You can use it to enter my mind. It works if I'm willing to let you in. It lets you feel and see everything that I do. Then, if we do this properly, you can talk to Ron, too. It really takes a lot of concentration, although Hermione managed to get it on the first try. She seems to do that a lot." Harry gazed off into space with a mildly impressed look on his face. Ginny scowled at the floor for a moment but then turned back to him with a fiercely determined look on her face.

"Right," he said, "are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Okay, give me a moment to clear my mind then, before you try it."

Harry let a few images of brown eyes and stunning red hair pass through his mind. He forced them beyond where she could see, feeling a little uncomfortable with them in the first place. Before long he heard the words again, a whisper of *Memoria Acies*, and she entered his mind.

On a conscious level, Harry knew he had to be careful where he directed his thoughts with Ginny inside. The last few days had forced him to be with her quite a lot and he had caught himself thinking about her more than he desired. He had promised himself some time ago that he

would be careful about who his friends were and how he felt about them. Ron and Hermione were like his family and he knew they would do anything for him, including the worst possible sacrifice. That alone was enough to nearly drive him distracted on many an occasion. He *couldn't* allow anyone else to get that close to him, though Ginny was fast becoming a good friend. She seemed to care for him in ways that he had never known before and *he* was beginning to get too comfortable around her.

But he still couldn't let her see those thoughts. As long as he had control over his own thoughts, he could master them. If anything slipped out, it could all come crashing down – his hopes, and his fears. They would no longer belong only to him. So yet again, he pushed his thoughts and feelings deep down, where they were unreachable to anyone, even himself.

Her presence in his mind was like a warm blanket on a cool morning. It was soothing and relaxing and seemed to wrap itself around him, almost as if it were trying to protect him. He smiled a little as he took a few deep breaths and then pictured Ron's face in his mind.

Perhaps it was that Ron was so close by, or perhaps it was that Harry was more relaxed and rested than he had been before but he found getting to Ron remarkably easy this time. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat as another possibility occurred to him, that it was because of Ginny's help.

"Okay, Ginny, I've got him. Do you want the honor of waking him up?"

"With pleasure... RON!" She yelled inside Harry's head.

Keeping his concentration after seeing Ron's reaction, and through his own laughter, was very difficult. He could feel Ginny laughing to herself next to him and it took all of his self-control not to open his eyes and look at her.

In his mind, he saw Ron's eyes open quickly, looking around in fear until he recognized Ginny's voice. Ron searched the room, frantically trying to find her but then suddenly stopped. A lopsided grin appeared and he spoke out loud to the room.

"Harry? Very funny, Harry, you just wait 'til I figure out how to do that and see how you feel being woken up this early in the morning."

Harry knew he was caught and decided it best to admit his guilt.

"Yeah, okay. Now you mention it, maybe we should work on this together after school is done. But I think I just heard your mum say breakfast is ready, so see you in a minute."

Harry let go - to his great relief - and opened his eyes. His first sight was Ginny looking up into his face. The sparkle had returned to her eyes and she laughed and said thanks. Indeed, Harry had no idea how thankful she really was.

They got all the way to the door before Harry realized he was still holding her hand. He felt his neck get hot and let go quickly before reaching for the handle. Holding the door open for her, he cast one last long glance out over the fields, wondering when, and if, he would ever get to watch the sun rise with her again.

Chapter Three

N.E.W.T.s

Breakfast was a subdued affair that morning. The thought of going back to school and back to reality didn't help their spirits. Their only reality now was exams. Harry, Ron and Hermione had trouble eating, though Harry did manage to eat the buttered toast with jam that Ginny made for him. Ginny was dreading her sixth year exams so much that she even forgot to pick on Ron, as was her usual morning ritual.

They finally decided it was time to start packing when Hermione got so fidgety that Ron couldn't sit by her anymore, which was really saying something. Mrs. Weasley trudged upstairs with them in tow and nagged about their packing and the state of their clothes until finally the clock struck eleven.

Dragging their bags to the fireplace, they stopped for one last hug from Mrs. Weasley and to think of the fun they'd had the last two days.

"Now dears," she said tearfully, "do be careful. I don't want you going anywhere near the forest and I want you to listen to Dumbledore. He's going to keep an even *closer* eye on you now and you mustn't get into any trouble. Now Harry, you go first, then you Ginny, then Hermione, then Ron."

Harry stepped up to the dark fireplace and took a pinch of powder from the small pot on the mantle. Floo powder wasn't his favorite way to travel but until they passed their Apparation exams, there just weren't any better options.

He tossed the powder into the fireplace and stepped into the bright green flames. "Dumbledore's office," he sputtered, speaking only as clearly as the soot and flame would allow him. The Burrow disappeared in a shower of color and dust and right away he began to ready himself for his landing at Hogwarts. The moment he saw Dumbledore's office coming into view, he threw his arms out and only managed not to fall by grabbing hold of the nearest object at hand. It happened to be the Headmaster himself, who held Harry up with surprising strength. He then returned to his large desk to observe Harry over his spectacles with a smile.

"Right on time, Harry. Very punctual, indeed."

Turning back to the fireplace with a grin, Harry waited for Ginny to appear. And appear she did, taking him by great surprise when she flew out very fast and grabbed him around the neck for support. She smiled sweetly and wiped some soot off his cheek with her thumb before turning to pick up her bags. Harry was only too glad he was covered in soot so she couldn't see the burning heat in his cheek where she had touched it. He was amazed at how her hair could shine even with the dirt and mess that accompanied traveling through the fireplace.

Tearing his eyes away from her, he was just in time to perform the same service for Hermione, who looked much more ruffled and distressed from the journey than Ginny had. She, however, stepped quickly away from him and performed a neat little cleaning charm on herself and her bags, though her hair was even bushier than normal when she finished.

The last to arrive was Ron and to his apparent surprise, *several* arms reached out to catch him as he fell into the room. Ginny, Harry, and Hermione had all been waiting nervously for him, being not quite used to his absence yet and still feeling the leftover worry from his kidnapping.

Dumbledore stepped up to them, his eyes twinkling.

“I trust you had a restful break and are now quite ready to sit your exams. Your fellow classmates are on their way to lunch now. I recommend you join them before you go off to finish filling your heads with facts.”

They all laughed as he ushered them to the door and waved them down the rotating steps. At the bottom they breathed a communal sigh of relief. The school, no matter what the situation, always felt like home to them. Harry felt happier than he had in quite some time. He loved the way the old stone walls reverberated with the echoes of hundreds of feet thudding their way to the Great Hall.

The foursome followed the sound, making their own way to the great hall, laughing and talking all the way. Harry was glad to see that Ron was doing so well – his captivity being still so recent – and smiled at how Ginny laughed and talked right along with them. He watched her covertly but never saw any of the pain or hurt he thought he had seen two days before. All in all, they were in very good spirits. They chose, for the moment, to forget their exams and enjoy their last bit of free time together.

Lunch, as always, tasted very good and was quite filling. Harry remembered once again the summers he had spent at Privet Drive and was thankful for the food.

After they ate, however, the need to study took them back to Gryffindor tower where they sat with the biggest piles of books and parchment any of them had ever seen. Harry observed the rest of his Gryffindor classmates and was pleased to note that many of them appeared to be in no better condition than he and his friends were.

Neville, who had been studying in the library until he knocked over a large stack of books, now sat by himself on a lone wooden chair near the portrait hole. The nervousness etched across his face became more pronounced every time his notes blew into a mess on the floor from someone going in or out of the hole. Harry felt sorry for him but could hardly help because his own nerves were ratcheting higher and higher with each note-covered parchment he read. How he was ever going to remember so many things, he didn't know. Potions class had been horrendous the past year, culminating with Snape expecting them to know the names of every single ingredient they had ever used, in *any* potion.

Harry remembered the day Snape had informed the class of this fact because it was the only time he had ever heard anyone laugh at something Snape had said. It was a nervous hysterical laugh, mixed with lots of mutterings and under-the-breath curses. Snape, of course, had silenced the class instantly with one fierce look and informed them icily that the N.E.W.T.'s would cover a wide variety of potions. Thus, their only hope of passing would be to memorize every potion and ingredient they had ever used. Harry, in spite of himself, couldn't help but wonder vaguely whether Snape even knew all the ingredients to every one of his potions.

But now, sitting in the common room, Harry knew he had to cram as many potion recipes into his head as he possibly could. Around him, the younger Gryffindors were talking and laughing and playing loud games of Exploding Snap. He was at least thankful that not all of his classmates were having fun. He looked around at the fifth-year's and recalled the panic that had driven him during the last days before his O.W.L. exams. They were clearly faring no better than he had. He smiled briefly at the memory and then set back to work digging through his notes.

The sun slipped slowly down below the horizon and soon the flickering red firelight was all that illuminated his books. The common room emptied slowly of students until there were only a handful of fifth and seventh years left. Harry was now so deeply absorbed in his studying that he actually jumped a little when a hand touched his arm. He turned quickly, finding Ginny struggling to pull herself up from the seat next to him. She gave up after a moment and fell back against the thick cushions, yawning greatly. Harry watched her as she closed her eyes for a moment, looking very sleepy. Her hair fell down around her shoulders and piled up on the cushion behind her head. Once again, Harry found himself utterly mesmerized by the crimson firelight dancing through her

hair. All he could think was that it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Suddenly, his chest tightened and his heart sped up for no reason at all, just as she opened her eyes looking directly into his.

For a moment he saw the firelight reflecting against the deep brown but then quickly directed his gaze at his hands, feeling nearly as awkward as Ginny suddenly looked. She collected her things and got up quickly, muttering 'Goodnight' to them all and stopping only to talk briefly to Neville before she made her way up the stairs. Neville looked quite relieved as she walked away. He picked up his own books and took the now empty seat by Harry.

"Hi, Harry," he said, "d'ya mind if I sit here? It's kind of breezy over there and my notes keep falling on the floor." As he said this, his hands slipped and once again his piles of parchment went sliding noisily to the floor. Flustered, he reached down and started collecting them again, turning very red in the face.

Harry shook his head vaguely, still gazing at the door where Ginny had just disappeared, hardly aware of what Neville had said.

Hermione looked compassionately at Neville and bent over to help collect his notes. When she returned to her seat, her face suddenly lit up with excitement.

"Neville, it's getting kind of late you know. Why don't you go on to bed and I'll reorganize all of your class notes. That way you won't waste time tonight having to shuffle through them all."

Neville looked at her for a moment as if she were trying to pull a joke on him, then tentatively answered.

"Okay. Well, thanks then. I'll... I'll see you in the morning." He got up slowly and glanced back at Hermione every few steps toward the door, as if she were going to start laughing at any moment and say it really was a joke. Finally when the door had closed quietly and Harry and Ron had set back to work, Hermione spread the many loose parchments around her and started sorting through them.

"Poor guy, Neville," Ron said, his quill between his teeth. "Just can't catch a break."

"Yeah," Harry murmured, not taking his eyes off his notes.

Hermione looked happily around her, smiling like a child at Christmas. She hummed quietly to herself as she continued to sort.

"Hermione?" Harry asked curiously, looking up at her, "What about *your* classes? You've hardly studied in days now. Aren't you a bit nervous? I mean, you're normally the Study Queen."

Ron snorted a little but kept his eyes carefully on his own work, ignoring the scathing look Hermione shot him. She turned to Harry, her look softening.

"Well, see, it's like Ron said. Poor Neville, he just... well, these things always happen to him, don't they? And really, it's so hard to study when your notes are all out of order. He'll be much better off when I'm finished with this." She gestured around happily at the mess in front of her.

Harry and Ron exchanged looks then went back to their own work, choking back the urge to laugh. Ron, though, couldn't hold back a small snicker.

"Oh ho, Ron," she said coolly, "you'd do much better yourself, you know, if you spent more time putting *your* notes in order and less time playing silly games like Wizard's Chess. I could have helped you but then you never asked, so it's just your loss now."

Ron looked like he wasn't quite sure how to answer this. He opened his mouth as if to reply then closed it and went studiously back to work. Hermione merely continued to sort Neville's things into small piles. Harry, on the other hand, eyed both of them suspiciously and thought he detected a hint of red in Hermione's cheeks, while Ron's ears were rather pink. Doing his best to ignore them, he returned to his Potions recipes and the biting fear that coursed through him with each new page.

The remainder of their weekend was spent in and around the common room, sitting quietly together reading through old books and sharing each other's notes. They took almost no notice of anyone else and managed to do just as friends normally do. Harry and Ron broke the silence once in a while with talk of Quidditch and how much they would miss it. Hermione scolded them when they missed answers to her quizzing, though she always gave them the correct ones afterward; and Ginny laughed at all their jokes and was in general happy and friendly, most especially when Harry was helping her with her studying.

When Monday morning finally reared its ugly head, Harry awoke with a start and looked blearily around the room. Without his glasses, it appeared that everyone else was still asleep. Judging by the faint pink color of the morning light, he guessed it was still early. Relaxing back into his pillow for a moment, he hoped for a few more minutes of sleep. It was no use though, and instead he slipped quietly out of bed and headed down to the common room.

There was no fire in the hearth to light his way but the sun was waking a bit more now. What had been pink upstairs was now a soft sort of orange. It bathed the walls around the side windows and gave the whole room a very comforting feel. Harry dropped down on one of the seats by a window and looked out over the grounds, still feeling a bit drowsy. His head came to rest on one arm, held up by the thick back cushion of the chair and he pulled a leg up and rested his other arm around his knee. Looking back out through the window, the rippling glass gave the grounds a wistful sort of touch. He felt himself giving in to the warmth and light of the room. His eyes dropped slowly shut and his head slipped down to rest comfortably on the cushion. Soon, he was asleep again.

Morning dreams are often unusual, but for Harry, there was nothing much to speak of in the first dreams that came. He dreamed he was late for his Potions exam and Professor Snape was going to fail him. He dreamed that Dumbledore was making him go back to the Dursley's after leaving Hogwarts, saying he wouldn't be safe anywhere else and that he was going to have to share a room with Dudley. But as his dreams progressed they continued to get worse. Voldemort had captured all of his friends and he was left only with Neville to fight on his side. Ron and Hermione got married and left, moving far away, while Ginny got a job in another country, leaving Harry all by himself.

Eventually, his dreams seemed to settle down again. The last dream that morning found him standing in the middle of a large, very ornately decorated hall, filled with the sounds of a beautiful symphony. The room was completely empty and his heart was strangely light. He closed his eyes and listened to the swirling music, letting it pull him around the floor. Suddenly, the music gave way to absolute silence, a silence so complete it stifled his senses. He slowly opened his eyes, wanting to make sure everything was okay. The sight before him was enough to wake him forcefully and startle him back to reality.

He sat up quickly and rubbed his eyes, trying to account for everything in front of him. The window, the chair, the empty fire grate, they all swam into view as his brain ratcheted back into action. He knew he was in the common room and that it was still early in the morning, but what about the dream? What had he seen and where was it happening?

He closed his eyes tightly and tried to recall the last remnants of the dream before it slipped away. A room... music... dancing, then silence... and darkness. The scene before him was one of chaos and panic. It flickered in and out like an old movie lost to time, with darkened edges and missing scenes. There were Death Eaters, so many that he couldn't count. They were flooding the room, attacking mercilessly. They were coming straight for him while Ron and Hermione grabbed him and pulled him away. The room flickered. Two Death Eaters had Ginny by the arms and were dragging her out the door, kicking and screaming. It flickered again. For one brief moment, Harry saw her turn, saw the fear in her eyes, and then saw her disappear.

His hands shook with panic as he tried to get up. Someone had to know! Something had to be done! He stumbled blindly across the room, colliding face-first with someone just emerging from the girls dormitory. He landed hard, sprawled out across the floor.

Pain shot through his nose and cheek, making his eyes water. He felt for his glasses but they had landed several feet away. Still, he knew he had to get up and find the portrait hole. His friends were in trouble and he was the only one who knew.

"Harry?" a small voice called from the floor nearby.

His mind came to a dead halt and cold sweat prickled on his forehead.

"Ginny?" he whispered, rolling slowly over but still unable to see.

"Harry," her voice quivered, "are you all right? What's happening? Is everything okay? Are *you* okay?"

It took a moment for his senses to register properly and he felt the heat rising into his face as he filled with anger against himself. He had done it again. He had gone off without thinking, without accounting for what he had really seen. And now he had hurt Ginny. Hurt her because he was in such a hurry to tell someone about a silly dream. His anger quickly gave way to shame and guilt and he was glad he couldn't see the reproachful look he knew he was getting from her. This was exactly what the Teacher had been trying to teach him not to do.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he groaned. "Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"No," she said, "but what's wrong? You look like you just saw a ghost, sort of."

He found his glasses and put them on, wincing as they touched a cut on his nose. Turning to Ginny, he studied her face for a moment and was surprised to see that she wasn't upset at all. In fact, he was even more shocked when he realized that she looked concerned; concerned and something else, like she was genuinely worried about him.

Yet somehow it just seemed to make him feel worse. Attempting to get up off the floor, he found that his knee had collided with something on the way down and was now throbbing quite painfully. He shook and stumbled a little.

In a moment, Ginny was at his arm helping him sit gingerly on the nearest sofa. The cut on his face still stung his eyes and he was feeling a bit unstable. She helped him sit and then took the seat beside him to inspect his injuries with a gentle hand.

"Hold on, Harry, you didn't answer me. Is everything all right?"

"Yes," he said, looking away from her. "It's fine, I just... had a dream, that's all."

She reached over to touch his hand. "I know what that's like," she said softly, "I have those dreams all the time. But you're going to be fine now. It wasn't real."

The sound of footsteps echoed down the stairs from above.

"See, everyone's still here, there's nothing to worry about. They're fine and you're fine. Now let's get dressed and get some breakfast. There's lots to do today." She walked away, waving quickly and smiling as she turned to go up the steps to the girls' rooms.

"Yeah, but it was *you* I was worried about, not me," he muttered to himself as he struggled to his feet. The trip up so many stairs wasn't a welcoming thought and he decided that, like it or not, he was going to have to go down to the great hall in his pajamas.

Not that that was so very unusual. It was common practice during exam time for students to wear their pajamas to meals and while studying. They felt comfortable in them and because of their study habits, many found it quite helpful to just roll into, or out of, bed. The teachers, however, rather frowned upon it and could often be seen scowling when a student clad in such things passed by. Professor McGonagall in particular always seemed to don a scornful look when she saw students so informally attired. She certainly wasn't afraid to speak her mind on these matters, either. Many students were sent back to their dormitories by her to put on "more appropriate attire for school."

Harry arrived for his first exam after a fairly quiet breakfast with his friends. Although not particularly hungry, he was happy to accept a piece of toast from Ginny. It helped bring him to his senses more than anything else had that morning.

Having stowed all of his exam-taking necessities in the common room, a quick trip up and back, along with a change of clothes, was all it took to get to class. Because of it, Harry found himself rather earlier than usual. He decided to take advantage of the time to get just a little more cramming done. As he pulled his book out, Draco Malfoy arrived with Crabbe and Goyle.

Harry had always admired Hermione for her ability to resist the jabs and spikes spread throughout Malfoy's talk. He never could seem to master it himself. To Harry, it was as if Malfoy knew just which buttons to press to make him seethe with anger.

He knew today would be no different. Trying to keep the trouble to a minimum, he simply put away his things and stood quietly to lean against the wall. Predictably, Malfoy strutted directly over to him, trying to look as high and mighty as possible. Crabbe and Goyle merely followed stupidly behind him.

It was then that a thought struck Harry. What if the Teacher was right? What if, by rising above his enemy, he could overcome him? It would take all of his strength and determination but Harry felt that today, for the first time, he might be able to do it. Summoning up his willpower, he looked Malfoy in the eye and said nothing, waiting for him to make the first move.

"Well, well, Potter. Made it this far, have you? Think they're going to just keep letting you skate by? Famous Harry Potter and all? I'll bet they don't do it this time. They'll fail you and you'll have to go back to those Muggles, since you don't have a *proper* family."

Crabbe and Goyle laughed mechanically and waited to do Malfoy's bidding. Harry was struck by how similar it looked to the time when he had seen Mr. Malfoy giving commands to Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle, and had to restrain himself from laughing at the thought.

Harry wrinkled his forehead for a moment, then shook his head and said, "Nope, you'll have to do better than that. It's not up to your usual standard."

Malfoy looked at him angrily and spoke in a deadly whisper. "You'd better watch it Potter. You may have escaped the Dark Lord before but he's gaining power every day and soon it will be your turn."

Harry stared back at Malfoy, trying to decide what he was really saying. Was there real meaning in his words or was he just trying to start a row? But then another tack occurred to him and he went with it, keeping his voice calmer than ever.

"Look, Malfoy, I'm sorry your dad's a Death Eater but there's no reason to take his mistakes out on others. You should try to rise above his poor decisions."

Malfoy's face turned white and he sputtered and spit, finally turning and stalking off in a fury. Happy with his victory, Harry turned back to his bag and picked it up, walking straight through the door which Professor Flitwick had just magically opened.

Harry found a seat on the left side of the room, taking advantage of a cool shadow created by one of the large arches, and pulled out his quill and parchment. In what seemed like only a minute, the room filled up and he saw the telltale bushy brown hair followed closely by a plume of red that could only mean Hermione and Ron had arrived. A good thing too, he realized, glancing at his watch, because the exam was set to begin in only a few minutes. Ron plopped his things down on the table next to Harry and spilled his parchment on the floor, cursing under his breath.

"Harry, how'd you get here so fast?" Ron asked, coming back up from retrieving his escaped parchments.

"Oh, I had my bag ready before breakfast," Harry evaded. He felt his face heat up a little remembering why he was up so early and who he had run into. Ron looked at him suspiciously, so Harry merely shrugged and said, "Couldn't sleep."

About that time, professor Flitwick set off a bang from his wand and spoke up in his high squeaky voice.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, and I trust I can say that now that you are nearly adults... your examiner is here.” He gestured to a man slinking in the shadows of a far corner of the room.

“Professor Snape, I give you the Hogwarts N.E.W.T. Charms class for your examination.”

Snape strode quickly to the front of the room and nodded curtly to professor Flitwick, who bowed slightly in return and quietly exited the room. When all the faces that followed had returned to the front, Snape spoke. His voice was deeper than normal and had a strange, ethereal quality. It seemed to hold them all in a trance as he gave his instructions. Not a word was spoken but by him as they prepared their materials. He instructed them on where they would sit, what kinds of quills were allowed, how to cover their parchment properly, and how to seal it when they were finished.

Harry had never before been uncomfortable in this classroom but he found Snape’s presence unnerving. Between answering exam questions he couldn’t help but cautiously eye the man for any unusual behavior. He didn’t think he was alone in the matter either. Hermione was clearly nervous, looking up so frequently that she lost her place more than once and then scrambled to find where she had left off. Even Ron glanced up at him a few times with a concerned look.

As Harry answered question after question, he was surprised at the ease of it, in spite of hardly having studied. He even laughed a little to himself when he got to the question on Cheering Charms. He easily remembered what had happened to Ron a few years earlier when he had gotten a little carried away.

Walking down the corridor after the exam, Harry was surprised at how good he felt. Everyone had always warned them that the N.E.W.T. exams were the hardest they’d ever take but he really thought that it wasn’t so bad. He also noticed that Ron didn’t seem as stressed as he normally would after a major exam. Hermione, of course, fretted a bit and wanted to go over the questions again. They cut her off quickly and she didn’t even bother pursuing it. On the way back up to the common room for a bit of study time before lunch, they met up with Ginny.

“Hi,” she said, looking around at them. “Have fun?”

Ron merely shrugged. Hermione looked like she wanted to tell Ginny all about it but she deferred with her eyes to Harry.

“It was... fine,” he started. “Well, really, it was easier than I expected. I hope they’re all like this, except for having Snape as the examiner. He’s was a little creepy today, I mean more than usual.”

Hermione nodded enthusiastically and then began herself, describing all of the exam questions in detail to a not-so-enthusiastic Ginny. In the background, Ginny secretly shared grins with Ron and Harry.

After lunch, they continued studying in earnest. With five exams each, they would have one every day of the week and then the whole next week for relaxing while the rest of the school completed their own exams. It was kind of a treat for the students who would be leaving the school after their N.E.W.T.’s. It was one last chance to enjoy the school and its grounds without the stress of classes. Many of them, Hermione included, would probably spend much of that time worrying about their results but most simply enjoyed the warm weather and strolled lazily about the grounds. They would reminisce about their years at the school and discuss jobs and prospects for the future.

With four more exams to go, Harry, Ron and Hermione set to studying hard for their most important one, Defense Against the Dark Arts, which would take place on Tuesday. Again, as in previous years, it was Harry they turned to for most of the answers. Though Hermione excelled in

all of her classes, she had to admit that Harry always beat her in Defense. Even Ginny broke from her study routine just to sit with them and benefit from Harry's expertise.

The subject always come easy to Harry, as few others had. He could remember the spells, the situations, the reactions, just like he had performed them yesterday. And in some cases, he *had* performed them yesterday. The fight against Voldemort had resulted in a hunger for Defense knowledge that the school had rarely seen.

After a full day and half a night of research, discussion, and practice, they declared themselves ready to face their last exam ever in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry went to bed feeling a mix of exhaustion, anxiety, and sadness about never having the class again. He waved goodnight to his friends and climbed the stairs to the boys' dormitory. After a quick change into pajamas, he dropped into his four-poster bed and went straight to sleep without even pulling the curtains shut.

The night was unusually quiet for Harry and he woke the next morning feeling remarkably rested and prepared. He was confident they had done all the studying they could possibly do, and while never quite sure what to expect from this class, he was reasonably confident he would do well.

At breakfast he observed Hermione and Ron both looking very tired and being unseasonably cool with one another. They didn't seem upset and were still courteous to each other but, as Harry knew, that often indicated a disagreement of some kind had taken place. He thought back and realized that he hadn't noticed Ron follow him up to their room last night. That probably meant that they had argued about something and it was still unresolved. Having long ago abandoned any hope of assisting in their problems, Harry wisely ignored them and ate his breakfast in silence until Ginny arrived.

"Hi, Harry, ready for today's exams?"

"Mm-hmm," he said through a mouthful of sausage.

She smiled and went about her business, finally picking up a piece of toast and asking Harry quietly if he wanted her to butter it for him.

"Sure, er, thanks... and maybe some jam."

"I know," she smiled.

He looked torn between amusement and embarrassment that anybody should pay him such attention but accepted the token from her anyway.

"So, what's up with you two?" she asked, pointing her bacon at Ron and Hermione.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?" said Hermione primly.

"Oh, the way you two aren't talking. That and the fact that I heard you rowing last night."

Harry was, once again, impressed with Ginny's ability for acute and perceptive observations, especially regarding her family. He looked at her with open admiration for a moment, then turned back to the others not wanting to miss the explanation.

Finally Ron spoke up, "Well, if Hermione would admit when she's wrong, we'd all be having a lot pleasanter breakfast, wouldn't we?"

Hermione glared at him and then turned back to Ginny.

"Well, I can't help it if some people *still* don't like Crookshanks. I think he's sweet." She pouted a little and Ron almost looked sorry, but didn't say so.

"Well," said Ginny, "I hope you get it worked out soon, because you have a lot more studying to do, and it's no good not working together. Besides, you've got a Defense exam coming up in a bit and you need to have all of your wits about you. It's no good if you lose your focus by thinking about other things. You need to be calm and relaxed, with no other thoughts on your mind. So *work it out!*" And she went back to eating her breakfast, as if what she had said was nothing more important than wondering when the mail would arrive.

Ron gaped at her, quite bewildered. Hermione looked impressed but kept her smile aimed at the table in front of her. It was a few long moments before anyone spoke.

"Ginny, when did you get so smart?" asked Ron with raised eyebrows.

"Well, in case *you* didn't notice, I am in sixth year now, Ron," she said scathingly, "and besides, Harry's a good teacher and he told us that once."

Harry looked on, amazed and impressed by her again. He remembered saying something to that affect but never believed it would be taken in such a way. It was hard enough for him to convince himself he was right, much less believe anyone was actually paying attention to him.

"Ginny," he said quietly, very aware that the others were listening, "I can't believe you remembered that." He knew his ears were getting red and he ducked his head just a little more.

"Well," she breathed, "you're a good teacher and I thought it was important to remember."

Even Ron smiled at that, and with a quick apology to Hermione, he left the Great Hall to go clean himself up.

The rest of the meal went better, with Hermione deciding she *would* accept his apology and then explaining that Crookshanks had tried to eat some of Ron's class notes the night before. It had ended in a heated argument over the cat. Harry only smiled, knowing all too well the way his friends could be, about even the smallest things.

After breakfast they made their way slowly down to the dungeons where the exam was to be given. Harry didn't like the idea of being tested against the Dark Arts so close to Snape's classroom but all he could do was point it out to his friends, who assured him that things would be fine and then went back to their own conversation without a second thought.

Harry wasn't so sure however, especially when he walked through the door to find the very man waiting silently at the front of the room. His appearance was even more eerie in the dim light of the dungeon, aided by the fact that as his eyes followed them to their seats, he didn't blink at all.

Harry shuddered as he sat down, glancing about to get a feel for the room. It had become something of a habit for him, getting to know the space around him, looking for any possible enemies and learning all available exits. The Teacher had started him on it about their third visit and now it was just an unconscious reaction wherever he went. Harry continued to look around, hopeful of seeing their normal teacher, but to no avail.

When Professor Dumbledore had announced at the beginning of the year that *he* would be filling the open position in Defense Against the Dark Arts, there was a great deal of noisy celebrating, especially from Gryffindor house. Harry had often wondered if Professor Dumbledore would teach the class, given the times in which they were living. It seemed natural for such a man to spread his unsurpassed knowledge to those who would be dealing with it all personally just as soon as they left Hogwarts.

Harry had to smile remembering that opening feast and the hope it inspired in them all. Of course, it hadn't been all fun and games. Dumbledore was one of the most challenging teachers any of them had ever had. The spells were more complex, more difficult, more prone to failure than any they'd ever dealt with. But unlike other classes and other teachers, the students took it as a personal challenge to rise to the occasion, and they did so gloriously. Harry had never seen so much improvement in some of his classmates than during that year they studied under the Headmaster. He thought briefly of Neville mastering many new charms and spells during the time of the DA, but even his mastery didn't compare with some of what Harry had seen over the last year. Even Harry himself recognized new habits in his studying and practicing and he attributed them to Defense class.

On this day, however, Harry couldn't muster up any of those good feelings. It seemed that this man in front of him could dim the very light in the room with his presence. Harry hoped that there would be no practical portion to this exam, just so he wouldn't have to meet Snape face to face.

Harry shuddered at the cold in the room, crossing his fingers briefly and hoping to get it over with and quickly get out.

The exams were distributed and to Harry's relief, there was to be no practical exam. He was concerned, however, when he found pages and pages of detailed questions covering all aspects of Defense, from Dark creatures to unforgivable curses, anti-jinx spells to security wards. It seemed there was nothing left out, and so he started writing. He read and answered question after question. *Is it possible to defend one's self against an unforgivable curse?* He certainly knew the answer to that. *What are the effects of a Dementor on a Muggle?* He remembered what happened to Dudley when they were attacked in the alley. *Name an effective way to detain a Dark Wizard in an unsecured area.* He thought of Dumbledore binding several Death Eaters with an anti-apparition jinx.

Looking over at Ron and Hermione, he saw that they too were writing just as fast as they could ink their quills. Hermione even had a smear of ink on her cheek from where she wiped off a stray drop.

Harry had told them everything about every one of his encounters and just as much they had witnessed for themselves. It looked to Harry like this would be the easiest exam of them all.

"Well, that was easy," said Hermione brightly, as they walked the corridor back to Gryffindor tower.

Harry nodded his head absently, his brow crinkled up in thought until Ron elbowed him in the side.

"Ouch, what? Oh, yeah, that *was* easy. So what's going on? I mean, there's no reason for this. Everyone's always said 'The N.E.W.T.s are the hardest exams you'll ever take', and I believed them. Something just doesn't feel right but I don't know what it is." He growled in frustration.

"Harry," said Hermione, "I think it's just because we're so well prepared. We've been through so much and studied so hard. Studying *does* make a difference, you know."

"Well," Ron moaned, "I can't believe we've had bloody Snape for two exams, plus he'll be there for Potions!"

Hermione shot him a look but suddenly froze, holding out her hands and stopping them so fast that Harry almost tripped over his own feet. He pulled his wand in a flash and saw that Ron also had his on the tips of his fingers. He felt his chest tighten and strained his ears to listen for whatever had spooked Hermione.

When he heard it, a very different feeling rose in his chest, overpowering and eclipsing the worry that had been there a moment ago. It was a monster he rarely felt, struggling to get out, to protect and to fight. His eyes burned with fire and a ringing filled his ears. The looks on Ron's and Hermione's faces turned to alarm at the sudden change in him and they glanced at each other in concern. Harry broke free from them, his robes billowing out behind him and his wand raised in his hand. A strange power seemed to radiate from him.

When they rounded the corner into the next hallway, time seemed to pause for a moment. Harry blinked, willing his eyes to change what they were seeing. Up against the wall, like a frightened cat, stood Ginny. The contents of her bag were strewn across the floor at the bottom of a flight of stairs and her hand, with her wand in it, was hanging limp and defeated at her side. Harry followed the length of another wand, an arm, and then a face. A face that belonged to Draco Malfoy. He was laughing mercilessly, even cruelly at Ginny, as Crabbe and Goyle leered in the background.

Harry lifted his wand and took one step forward, using every bit of strength to hold back the monster inside. Malfoy looked briefly at him and only laughed harder.

“What’s the matter Potter? Come to save your girlfriend? I wouldn’t bother if I were you. Why would you bother with something like this... disgusting, isn’t it?”

Malfoy glanced back at Crabbe and Goyle, who took a moment to catch on, then pointed and laughed as they were supposed to. But he didn’t see that in the moment when he turned his head, Ginny looked to Harry and their eyes met. In a flash, a shock went through his body and he knew... he knew to leave her alone and let her handle it. He couldn’t say how he knew, he just knew. She turned her head back and Harry lowered his wand.

A sick smile spread across Malfoy’s face, “Oho, so you *do* agree. Not worth the effort after all, is she? Well, can’t say I blame you. Of course, it’s not going to stop me hexing her just because I feel like it.”

“That’s what you think,” said a small voice from the wall.

Malfoy turned back to Ginny. Hatred filled his face and he spit at her feet. “What did you just say?” His eyes narrowed.

She spoke more clearly this time and Harry could see the fire starting to ignite in her eyes. He had to hold back a smile.

“I said, that’s what you think.”

“How *dare* you even talk to me, you—“

But what she was, Harry never found out. The concentration it took for Malfoy to hate so intensely left him vulnerable for a split second. Ginny worked with such amazing speed that he could never have known what hit him. In a moment, Malfoy lay crumpled on the floor, clearly unconscious but otherwise apparently unharmed. Crabbe and Goyle squinted their beady eyes at each other and took off down the hall, howling nonsense at each other.

It was only then that time seemed to return to its normal pace. Harry turned and realized that Ron and Hermione were both standing by his sides, gripping his arms, which were now quite numb. Ginny lowered her wand and made sure to step on Malfoy as she walked back toward the stairs to collect her things. Harry shook his head once and in a few quick strides was beside her.

“Here, let me get this,” he said firmly, and with a sweep of his wand, everything flew back into her repaired bag and into his hands.

“Thanks,” she said, reddening in the face a little, “I, er... thanks.”

“No, thank *you*. That was amazing.”

“What happened?” called Ron, as he too stepped on Malfoy on his way to meet them.

Ginny threw her hair back over her shoulder, trying to flatten it quickly with her hand and then began to explain.

“I just got out of transfiguration and thought I’d try to meet you, to see how your exam went, when this git comes out of nowhere and splits my bag with his wand.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Ron, looking disgusted.

“So then those other two lugs came up behind me and Malfoy started threatening me with all kinds of things: hexes, jinxes, Dark magic he probably doesn’t even know. And I *was* a little scared there for a second. Then Harry came running around the corner and Malfoy was distracted just long enough for me to give him what he deserved.” There was a sudden gleam in her eye.

Ron stood speechless, his mouth hanging open for a moment. He glanced back and forth from Ginny to Malfoy, incredulous.

“But... but what if we hadn’t come? What if there had been no one around at all?”

“Ron, mate,” Harry said reassuringly, “we *did* come. Anyway, it looks like she can take care of herself well enough. I mean, blimey, look what she did to Malfoy – he’s still out cold!” He laughed appreciatively.

Ron looked skeptical, “Are you sure you’re all right? He didn’t get you at all?”

“No, Ron, I’m fine,” she answered. “Really.”

“Well, that filthy... slimy...,” Ron shivered a little as the memories came back. “Let’s go. I don’t even want to look at him.”

They started to make their way down the hall toward the portrait hole, when Ron suddenly turned to Ginny.

“What did you use on him, anyway? I’d like to learn that one. Bloody useful, that is.”

“Ron!” Hermione gave him a shocked look.

“Sorry, but he did deserve it. Filthy Slytherin.”

“Ron, they’re not all bad, you know. And Dumbledore still says unity is the best way to defeat you-know-who. It’s only going to be harder if we fight amongst ourselves.”

“Fine, you go off and make friends with the Slytherins. I’m going to stay here.” Then as an afterthought he added morosely, “We’ve got to go study for Herbology anyway.”

“Too right we do,” said Harry, “and we should keep working on Transfiguration and Potions. I bet Snape’s just looking for a way to finish me off. This is his last chance,” he added darkly, just as they stepped through the portrait hole.

“Hold on,” Ron said, “Ginny never told me what she used.”

“And I’m not going to Ron – not yet. It still needs some work and I haven’t had a lot of spare time lately.”

Ron started to say something but she interrupted him, saying again that she wasn’t ready to give up her secret and he would just have to wait. After trying one more time, Ron finally gave up and proceeded upstairs to collect his books and notes for studying. Harry did the same but for the rest of the day his concentration was lacking due to visions of Ginny dropping Malfoy with one hit. It was all he needed to keep him distracted from the sorrows of studying and the continued bickering of his other two friends.

On Wednesday they had their Herbology exam in greenhouse five, which contained some of the most difficult and dangerous plants on the Hogwarts grounds. They had worked in it off and on throughout the year and mostly knew which plants to avoid. Fortunately, nothing more exciting happened than Ron losing a few arm hairs to the Sticky Snowdrop, which lunged at him after he announced that he thought it looked ‘girly with its little white flowers.’

Massaging his arm gently on their walk back across the grounds, Ron continued to rant as Hermione patiently explained *her* point of view.

“Well, you did kind of deserve it, Ron. I mean, it does have little white flowers, but it’s a really useful plant. Don’t you remember what Professor Sprout said it could do for dragon bites?”

“No, that’s why we have you,” he muttered under his breath, nudging Harry in the arm with a glint in his eye.

“She said,” continued Hermione loudly, ignoring him, “it can heal almost any dragon bite, and all dragon bites are poisonous – if you don’t get help in a matter of hours, it will kill you. Of course, it doesn’t work on Horntail bites,” she looked at Harry apologetically, “but it does prolong the survival time.”

Harry remembered all too well the Horntail he had faced during the Triwizard Tournament, and was now even more thankful he hadn’t been bitten.

“So anyway,” she continued to Ron, “I think you got what you deserved.”

“Well, thanks for that. Now have you got anything that’ll help with some raw skin?” he said dryly.

Hermione merely glanced at him with a sharp look and they continued up to the castle.

On Thursday morning they sat their Transfiguration exam, thankfully administered by Professor McGonagall. Harry wasn’t sorry at all to see her as they entered the room. After the

two he'd experienced with Snape starting the week, Professor McGonagall seemed like a kind and thoughtful friend. Not that Harry minded her sometimes sharp wit and authority. On the contrary, over the years he had learned to appreciate it because there was no half-done work with Professor McGonagall. She expected a lot from her students and nearly always got what she asked for.

Even now, sitting the last exam for her of his Hogwarts career, Harry had little time to reminisce about the class and everything he'd learned in it. He was too busy scratching down answers as fast as his quill could move. After completing the written portion, he wiped the splattered ink off his face and tried to calm his nerves for the practical examination.

Each student was required to stand and perform a full transfiguration of a portion of their anatomy, in full view of the rest of the class. Harry tried to imagine Neville in this situation and felt a little bad at the laughter that it caused inside his head. Shaking it off when his name was called, he walked cautiously to the front of the room, very much aware of how many eyes were on him. Even after everything he'd been through, even as famous as he was, he could never get used to the attention.

Professor McGonagall observed him with a calculating look over her glasses, and handed him a half-parchment with his instructions.

Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Test for the seventh year Hogwarts class of Transfiguration

To: Mr. Harry Potter, second row from the front, third desk from the right

Dear Mr. Potter, having fully completed all standard requirements for the class of Transfiguration, you must now prove your knowledge in this complex and challenging area by successfully following the instructions given below. Your examiner will observe your results and may request further actions at his/her discretion. Good luck.

Please add or transfigure the following portions of your anatomy:

- 1. Wings – two, white feathers, medium sized, connecting to the spine just below the shoulder blades, full nervous system control required. Clothing should adjust itself to this addition with no skin visible.*
- 2. Hair – white, shoulder-length, straight, even in length, and for an extra point: parted down the middle.*

Harry raised one eyebrow in wonder, and laughed out loud in spite of himself.

“Really, Professor?”

“Yes, Mr. Potter, really.”

Harry suddenly realized he shouldn't be surprised. He had already watched one person required to sprout a single unicorn horn and another made to add a tail and two additional arms. He set the parchment on the table and held his wand tightly in his sweaty hand. Closing his eyes, he pictured the change exactly as it had been written – just as Professor McGonagall had taught them – and tried his best to aim his wand at his back.

In a flash of blinding white light, his wand clattered to the floor and he opened his eyes, fearful of what he might behold. In the mirror before him stood a young man with black hair and green eyes, wearing glasses and a black robe, and sprouting a pair of brilliant white wings from the middle of his back.

The sensation of carrying wings on his back made him dizzy for a moment. As the murmurs from the class picked up, he forced himself to remember that this was only a class and that the change was *not* permanent.

Stooping to pick up his wand, he accidentally swiped a few pages from the front desks onto the floor with his new appendages. He smiled weakly at Ron, who was beating his fist on his desk and wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. Hermione, looking beet red, was covering up a smile with her hand and looking at him unusually fondly. Harry felt his own ears grow a little red as he picked up the small parchment again and reread the second set of instructions.

Steeling himself for yet another transfiguration, he set about his work as before. Closing his eyes, he patiently tried to picture it: *shoulder-length, straight, white hair, parted down the middle*. He concentrated hard on that image and readied his wand. He briefly wondered what Ginny would think if she could see him now. He could envision her laughing, her copper hair dancing around her shoulders, her brown eyes glittering with delight...

In another flash of light, he spoke the incantation and shakily dropped his wand in his pocket. Hearing a gasp from the class, he hesitated to open his eyes, fearing something had gone horribly wrong and he was now a warthog, or worse.

He braced himself and opened his eyes, staring straight into the mirror. To his utter horror he found he had not given himself straight, white, shoulder-length hair. He had somehow transfigured his own to be straight, *red*, shoulder-length hair – *exactly* like Ginny's.

His eyes met Ron's and the look on Ron's face was barely-concealed mirth. Clearly Ron knew exactly what had happened, and Harry now knew it, too. A deep red overspread his face, and he felt his hands growing hot. Pure embarrassment filled him and he turned back toward the front of the room. A brief *pop* and a flash of light brought him back to reality, only to see Professor Dumbledore standing in the corner, holding a camera. Harry panicked but Dumbledore held up a single hand, pointing the camera toward Harry's desk, and indicating that the picture would only go to him. Not that he wanted it, though. He knew he would never live this down. He also knew that Ginny should never, ever find out.

On their way back to the common room – Harry minus his wings and with his original black hair – Ron continued to chide him at every opportunity.

"Harry," he laughed, "you really should have seen yourself."

"I did, *mate*, in the mirror and in the picture." Harry said crossly.

Ron continued to laugh, even starting to choke. Hermione was apparently still rather taken with Harry's wings, and ogled him occasionally, even with the dark looks that shot across Ron's face every time she did.

"Harry, the wings were beautiful, so white, and they looked really soft. How did they feel?"

"They felt... I don't know. I guess I was expecting them to be heavy but I could hardly feel them." He saw the look on her face. "Hey, it's not like I was going to keep them or anything, so stop that. The hair didn't match anyway."

"Well," said Ron, "I don't know why you had to tell us this way. You could have just been open about it."

"Tell you what?" asked Harry.

"Tell us what?! Harry, if you're going out with my sister, I should be the first to know. You should have told me right away, and –"

"Ron. Ron! I'm not going out with your sister. What are you talking about?"

"You're... you're not? But what was with the hair then? I mean..." He gestured questioningly with his hands.

Harry reddened a little, "I... I don't know. Everything was perfect except the color – it was supposed to be white."

"Yeah well, you missed that by a long shot." An evil look crossed Ron's face, "So, how much is it worth to you for us not to tell her?"

“Ron!” Hermione practically shouted, “Harry, of course we’re not going to tell her. Are we, Ron?”

He looked dejected, “Well, no, but I think Harry should tell her. If you like her, you’ve got a weird way of showing it, Harry.”

“But I don’t like her... I mean... well, but I thought you didn’t want me to like her? Not that I do, but...”

Ron sized him up and Harry looked slightly affronted. Finally Ron spoke again. “Well mate, I don’t think she could do better, plus she’s liked you since first year.”

Harry was left speechless. Hermione smiled broadly and touched Ron’s arm, at which he jumped and turned a little red but then smiled.

“Listen, Harry, she’s my sister, and you’re my *best* friend. And I meant what I said, I really don’t think she could do better.” He thumped Harry on the back.

Harry smiled and opened his mouth a couple of times but no words came out. They continued to walk down the hall and Harry’s expression suddenly clouded over.

“Ron,” he said darkly, “it doesn’t matter anyway. There are some things I don’t let myself... I can’t like anyone right now, even if it is... Ginny,” he choked.

It was as if dark clouds had rolled in. Hermione and Ron had seen it too many times and knew it wasn’t worth the hassle right now. When Harry got this way it was best just to give him his space for a day or so and things would clear up. They spent the rest of the day buried in Potions notes, stopping to ask each other questions now and then, but mostly in silence. Harry preferred it that way.

Ginny, having been warned by Hermione, stayed clear of the common room most of the rest of the day, and at breakfast the next morning, she sat down the table from them with a couple of other girls from her year. The one thing she did, though, was give Harry a piece of toast, which she wrapped in a napkin and left with Hermione to deliver.

Sitting in the cold dungeon of Snape’s Potions classroom was about the last place Harry felt like being the next morning. In addition to still being upset about what had happened during yesterday’s Transfiguration exam, he hadn’t slept well last night and he was also a little worried about why Ginny hadn’t sat with them at breakfast. She had still left a piece of toast for him but she hadn’t said a word to him since lunch yesterday. He thought perhaps someone had told her about what he did and she was mad at him, but it just didn’t seem like her to do that.

The other possibility was that someone had warned her not to be around him, after what he said in the corridor to Ron and Hermione. Mostly he was ashamed of it but a part of him still needed to push her away. It was the only way he could keep himself safe and he tried to convince himself it would be better for her that way, too.

As the room silenced with the entrance of Professor Snape, it occurred to Harry that he had to shake off yesterday’s problems or he would never do well on today’s exam. The clock struck ten and a list of ingredients suddenly appeared on the board, followed by instructions for the most complex potion Harry had every seen, including the Polyjuice Potion they had brewed in second year. The students moved about the room noiselessly and although the class had never been loud, the complete silence seemed eerie to him.

Next to Harry on either side were Ron and Hermione but there was no time to see how they were doing due to the concentration required for this potion. Some of the ingredients were so fresh that they were grown specially by Professor Sprout and brought into the room still in their pots. Others were so dangerous that they were kept in locked cabinets that only Snape could

access, and were tracked and recorded by magical parchments on each shelf. Still others were so expensive and rare they were only used once a year for this very exam.

Having reached the mid-point of the exam, Harry raised his wand for his first inspection. Snape appeared from nowhere and sneered when he could find nothing wrong with Harry's potion.

"Apparently today is your lucky day, Potter. But don't let your head get too big, the most difficult part is yet to come and I for one will be surprised if you don't screw it up. After all, that is only natural for you."

Harry fumed silently for a moment, then forced himself to calm down. He felt a small nudge in his back and turned to see Hermione smiling covertly at him on the way back to her cauldron. It boosted his confidence enough to continue, even after seeing Snape send two other students out of the room after their potions were beyond the possibility of repair.

Moving back up to the board, Snape erased the previous instructions and new ones appeared instantly.

"You have one hour remaining," he said. "Do try *not* to make mistakes. I don't value your lives but I'd hate to fill out all the paperwork if you should wipe out an entire class. Continue."

The urgency in the room stepped up another notch and Harry wiped sweat from his brow, his concentration evident in the many creases on his face. He was working swiftly, trying to balance speed with accuracy, and keeping his fingers crossed that he was nearly done.

With five minutes remaining, Harry was done adding ingredients and was now following the detailed instructions for how to finish the stirring. Once to the left, twice to the right, three times to the left, four times to the right, remove the ladle, dip it back in and stir four times counterclockwise, repeat five times, then stir back and forth twenty-three times.

A moment later a voice spoke from the shadows. "Your time is up." Snape stepped out with an ugly grin. "We will now see whether any of you has successfully brewed the Draught of the Living Death. If you are successful, one drop on a spider will cause it to appear dead for three minutes exactly, after which it will come back to life as if nothing had happened. If not, then you have failed, and you will have killed the spider.

"Each of you bring up one small beaker of your potion to me and I will administer it. You will then go back to your seats and wait to see if you have brewed the Living Death, or if you have... not. Be thankful that the Headmaster would not allow me to test it on you. Most regrettable, in my opinion, because there are some of you who would do well to bring your work up a notch."

Harry stepped up into line and watched anxiously as a single drop of his potion was placed on a spider. He returned to his seat and entertained himself by watching Hermione standing on the tips of her toes trying to see her spider. Ron wasn't nearly as interested. He sat on his stool, staring at the floor and looking slightly green. Harry decided not to bother him.

As three minutes came and went, they were called up in turn to observe their results. Ron and Hermione both went first, and Harry was happy to see that Ron didn't look too upset as he walked out the door. Hermione was nearly skipping. When his turn arrived, Harry walked quietly up to the desk and looked down at his jar. His spider lay motionless at the bottom. His breathing stopped for a moment, and he slowly pulled out his wand. His heart skipped a beat as he tapped the glass gently. A moment later the spider leaped back to life. Snape observed him as if looking at a particularly nasty pile of dragon dung.

"Well, well, Potter. Today *is* your lucky day. You must have cheated but until I find out how, get out of my sight," he growled.

Harry ran for the door.

Chapter Four

Leaving Hogwarts

In the afternoon, the older students were allowed to walk into Hogsmeade, and Hermione, enjoying the high life after making a perfect Draught of the Living Death, felt like letting off a little steam. She enlisted Ginny to accompany her – who was by no means unwilling to do a little window shopping – and they set out into the bright afternoon sunshine together. Harry and Ron, having doubted that the girls really wanted them to go in the first place, opted to stay and start enjoying their time off.

As Hermione and Ginny made their way into Hogsmeade, they were unusually quiet, except to comment on the weather and a few pretty gardens along the way. Each was caught up in her own thoughts. It wasn't until they reached Zonko's that Hermione started to come up from her reflections.

"I wonder what Ron and Harry are doing? I suppose just being lazy boys," she said, half to herself.

Ginny gave a knowing smile, as she too had been thinking about them. "No, I think they're sitting up in their room crying on each other's shoulders about how there's no more Quidditch practice now they're done with school."

"Ha!" Hermione laughed, "I think you're right. Poor things, they won't know what to do with themselves."

"Well, at least they'll still have professional Quidditch to talk about. Ugh, can you imagine what they'd be like if there was no Quidditch at all?"

Hermione made a sour face. "Ron would be even worse than usual."

"You mean, if that's possible?"

Both girls laughed but then Hermione looked sad for a moment. "You know, I think I might miss it a little myself. It's fun to watch them play."

"You should try it sometime."

Hermione looked skeptical but Ginny continued. "Really. Maybe when we go home, I mean to my home, to the Burrow, you could try it. I love playing." Ginny suddenly looked a little misty and downcast herself. "I don't think it's going to be much fun next year."

Ginny had, by great majority, been elected the new Gryffindor Quidditch Team Captain for next year. She could hardly contain herself the day it was announced, but now... she wasn't so sure anymore. With Harry and Ron standing by her side, it had been so exciting, thrilling really. She had rarely seen Harry smile at her like that, a smile of great pride, and it made her heart flip-flop. Now, though, she tried to imagine what it would be like without them on the team, without them cheering her on, even without her best friend screaming her head off from the stands. It was depressing, and she didn't want to dwell on it.

"Ginny, you'll be fine. Aren't you at least a little excited about being captain?"

"Well, yes," she said, "but what's the point if he's... I mean, if no one is going to be there to see me?" She blushed a deep scarlet but Hermione feigned ignorance and carried on as if she hadn't noticed.

"Ginny, we're going to come watch you, you know. We'll come and watch you play, if they'll let us in."

Ginny looked heartened by this and smiled a little broader. “Really? I mean, how? Oh, I don’t want to be too much bother.”

“It’s no trouble really. Besides, I’m certain there’s at least one person who wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Ginny looked away and bit her lip, unable to smile. “I... I don’t know what you mean.”

The thought of him usually drove her mad, especially when other people teased her about it. Try as she might over the years, her feelings had never changed. Her friends had actually tried now and then to get her to date other boys, but it never started well, and never ended well. The day she first saw Harry so many years ago, something changed inside her. Eventually her girlish crush had faded away but it had been replaced by something so deep, so inexpressible, that she had never tried to explain it to anyone. They just wouldn’t understand, she reasoned.

Hermione, realizing what she had said, gritted her teeth for a moment, mentally kicking herself. She was well aware of Ginny’s feelings for Harry and in fact, they raised Ginny in her eyes. She had never said as much of course, knowing Ginny’s dislike for compliments. Nevertheless, she was angry with herself for her comment.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean – “

“It’s okay. You’re allowed to say it, ‘Ginny likes Harry’.” *Actually, loves might be a better word for it*, she thought, then closed her eyes and cursed herself for being weak. It was her greatest struggle to conceal from him what he didn’t return to her. It broke her heart, but still, she *was* determined, and if there was ever anything the Weasleys were known for, it was determination, that and genes for red hair.

They strolled down the High Street and went into the Three Broomsticks for some lunch. With pumpkin juice in hand, they found a table and ate their food. Hermione was still too upset with herself to talk and only gave quick glances at Ginny now and then. Ginny was struggling with herself about why she could never talk to anyone about Harry, when she suddenly surprised herself by saying, “He’s never even noticed me, you know.”

Hermione looked at her as if asking permission to speak her mind. With a sigh from Ginny, she gently did. “Look, I’m sure he *has* noticed you. There’s hardly a girl prettier in the whole school.” Ginny blushed. “Really. He’s just being a boy. Sometimes it takes a long time for them to work things out.”

“But *six years?*” Ginny’s voice was small.

“Well,” said Hermione lightly, as if about to explain a very simple spell, “you can’t count all of those years. I mean, he has had to fight off You-Know-Who a few times, and then there were classes, Quidditch, certain not-to-be-named Ravenclaws... I mean, it’s hard for them. Sometimes they just don’t see you and you have to be a little more forward. Goodness knows it’s not like you’re in the same year as him and he *still* hasn’t noticed you.” Hermione looked far off.

Ginny giggled a little. “Are we still talking about Harry?”

Hermione kicked herself again, realizing she might have given a little too much away. “Ginny, please don’t read too much into that.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” There was a mischievous glint in her eye as she stood up to go pay.

On their way past Honeyduke’s a little while later, Hermione convinced Ginny to go in and try some Muggle chocolate sweets called Kisses.

“But why? Why are they called kisses?” Ginny asked, looking curiously at them.

“Well... I don’t really know... I was just thinking you could offer one to Harry.” Her eyes danced with laughter.

“Oh yeah, I can see how that would go - ‘Hey Harry, fancy a kiss?’ Then he would disappear faster than you could say ‘disapparate’.” She rolled her eyes. Hermione continued to press her though, and when they walked out the door, Ginny held a small bag of them in her hand.

By late afternoon, the girls had almost bought more than they could carry. Having lightened their pocketbooks equally, though, they made it back to the castle easily in time for dinner. Although neither one was hungry, they still went down to the Great Hall out of habit and sat with Ron and Harry, talking about their day and asking about what the boys had done. It turned out that they had, in fact, spent much of their afternoon talking about Quidditch and lamenting its loss. They had even arranged to have a few pick-up matches over the summer, while at the Burrow.

"At home? You mean, Mum's invited Harry to stay?" Ginny was ecstatic and her head suddenly filled with thoughts of being around Harry every day for a whole summer. She quickly banished them far away, afraid of feeling too much like an eleven-year-old girl again. That giddiness just seemed to come out of nowhere sometimes.

"Yeah, she invited Harry *and* Hermione to stay with us for as long as they want." Ron's ears were slightly pink and he carefully avoided Hermione's eyes.

Hermione, for her part, managed to hold back her squeal almost entirely, and it came out as more of a high-pitch laugh instead. Ginny looked knowingly at her, the mischievous sparkle back in her eye, and leaned closer so that only Hermione could hear, "Well, looks like we might get you to play Quidditch after all," she whispered. Hermione turned a deeper shade of red but otherwise ignored her with a silly grin on her face.

The evening was spent lounging around the common room. Knowing that Death Eaters don't care about sunny days and warm evenings, the students still had to obey a strict curfew and were not allowed outside at all after dusk. It didn't dampen their spirits tonight, though, as Harry and Ron felt the need to continue their lively conversation from the afternoon and tried to engage the girls' attention. It was not to be so, however, as the girls had their own topics to discuss. Soon, Hermione was back to trying to convince Ginny to give Harry one of her chocolate Kisses.

"Come on, he'd like it. They *are* rather good, we used to have them at home all the time. Anyway, maybe he'd return the favor," she smiled innocently.

"No!" Ginny laughed, "I'm not going to give it to him! What are you trying to do to me?"

"Oh, come on!"

"No!"

Unfortunately, this outburst had captured the boys' attention and Harry walked over and sat down on the arm of the sofa. "Who's not going to get what?"

Ginny swore her face would catch fire from the heat and she couldn't get a single word out, much less look up at him. Hermione saw her chance.

"Ginny wants to know if you'd like a Kiss." There was a sharp intake of breath from Ginny and the room went still.

Harry felt like the air had been sucked from his lungs. He felt his chest contract and beads of sweat started to form on his forehead. His mind was racing, trying to figure out what she was talking about. She couldn't really mean it... could she? Kiss Ginny? *No, she's Ron's sister. Ron's sister!*

But he knew he was having second thoughts about that. She'd been having an undeniable effect on him. He was still considering what Hermione had meant when Ron stormed over.

"Whoa!" he yelled. "No one is going to be kissing my sister!"

"Ron—" Hermione held up her hand.

"No! I don't know what you're trying to do but I can assure you, no one is kissing anyone tonight!" He looked ready to pop with anger.

"Ron!" This time it was Ginny who hollered. "You're right, no one is kissing anyone. Hermione made me buy these sweets today – Muggle chocolates called Kisses – and she thought Harry might like one." She held Ron's gaze with her own stern look, then chanced a glance at Harry. His look was unreadable and she was dying to know what was going through his mind.

Plucking up her last bit of courage, she continued to look up at him, “*Would* you like a kiss... Harry?”

His breath caught in his chest at the sound of her saying his name and he reached out his hand slowly. “Uh, okay.” He mentally kicked himself. *Why* couldn’t he sound more cool about it?

Ron continued to breathe through his teeth, unsure of what to believe. It didn’t take long for his stomach to answer the question though and soon he wanted one for himself. As soon as he tasted the sweet, his anger was forgotten and he sat back down, calling Harry to come with him.

The girls talked quietly for a while but Ginny never got back the courage to look over at Harry. For his part, Harry was concentrating with what was left of his brain on talking normally to Ron. This proved difficult, as the majority of his brain was twisted up with thoughts of what it would be like to *actually* kiss Ginny.

It wasn’t long before the events of the day and the after-effects of the hot sun got to the girls and they went to bed. The boys carried on for a bit longer but with no one else around, they too finally gave in to a week of stress and exams and went to bed.

After breakfast the next morning, they all agreed to go down and visit Hagrid, whom they hadn’t talked to since that horrible night in the Hospital. Guilt had finally set in regarding their absence and after letting Ginny spend the morning studying and sneaking peeks at Harry, they ate a quick lunch and walked outside the castle. Harry had noticed a small curl of smoke from Hagrid’s chimney, so they decided to go directly down to his hut.

The growls of Fang greeted them at the door, making Harry smile, and then it opened to reveal the Gamekeeper himself, much improved from the last time they had seen him.

“You lot fur’get ‘bout me, did ye?” Hagrid smiled widely, and stepped outside to grab them as-one into a bone-crushing hug. “Knew ya had exams an all, so tha’s okay.”

Ginny, not having spent so many years in his company as the others, didn’t know what to say when they immediately launched into expressing how happy they were that he had recovered so well, so she just smiled.

“You really look great!” said Hermione. “It’s so good to see you up and feeling better.”

“Well, Madam Pomfrey, she’s the best in’t she? Even for sommat like me...” He sighed deeply. “Come on in, I jus’ brewed a fresh pot.”

“Thanks,” they chorused.

“So, Hagrid,” said Harry, “Are you all right now?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine. And Ron, I just want ye t’ know I’m sorry,” he said gravely, “I should’a been able ter help ye.” A dark look crossed his face, “If I’d been able ta git my hands on more o’ them Death Eaters, they’d be sorry now.”

Ron turned slightly green, so Harry spoke up. “Hagrid, we’re all all right now. Anyway, you could’ve been hurt worse if you’d fought back.”

“Yeah, well, more o’ them Death Eaters would’a got what was comin’ to ‘em at least.”

Harry thought for a moment and then decided it would be safest just to turn the subject. “Hagrid, Ron said... well, he said that you were taking him into the forest to see some, er, something new... when it happened.” He looked apologetically at Ron.

“Well, sorta,” Hagrid replied evasively. “Per’aps you lot might like to have a look yerselves?”

Harry, knowing full well what sort of things Hagrid liked to get involved with, didn’t *really* want to see whatever it was that he was hiding, so he didn’t say anything at all. Ginny, on the other hand, looked excited.

“Yes! When can we go?”

Sure, Harry thought, *leave it to her to be excited about some mad new creature of Hagrid’s.*

Hagrid beamed at them, “We can go ri’ now, if ye like.”

As much as Harry was excited about the prospect of a ready-made excuse to spend *more* time with Ginny, rescuing her from some horrible creature deep in the Dark Forest wasn't what he had in mind. Seeing no way out, though, he resigned himself to go along. On the way out the door, he was struck by the thoughts he'd been having about Ginny and wondered *why* he was letting it get to him. Hadn't he sworn an oath to himself to keep people away from him so they wouldn't get hurt?

Then he remembered the incident with the chocolate kisses the previous evening and the way Ginny had hexed Malfoy the week before. It was... unnerving to say the least, and on top of that, she was still Ron's sister, there was no getting around that. What would her family do to him if she were hurt because of him? Harry shuddered to think about it. He shuddered thinking about her getting hurt at all, his fault or not. There was just no way he would *ever* let that happen.

And now they were about to take a walk into the Dark Forest to the place where Ron had been kidnapped and Hagrid nearly killed only a matter of weeks ago. Harry looked over at Ron, worried about how his friend would handle going back into this place. It appeared that Hermione and Ginny were having similar thoughts and Hermione even went so far as to ask.

"Ron, are you sure about this? It's only been a couple weeks, after all."

Ron looked deadly serious. "I'm sure. I've got to do this. I've *got* to." Then he faced straight ahead and walked into the dark trees behind Hagrid. The other three looked at each other, shrugged, and followed. Harry made sure to take up the rear, behind Ginny, and pulled out his wand, igniting it with a quick '*lumos*' before stepping into the trees behind them.

They walked for several minutes along the trail that Harry recognized from previous trips into the Dark Forest, most notably, the one in fifth year when Hermione took himself and Professor Umbridge to meet the Centaurs.

Harry shook himself back to the present just in time to see that they were now leaving the trail in favor of denser woods. The light was very dim now and he made sure to keep a tight grip on his wand and a wary eye on his friends. As they progressed, there was little talking, only enough to warn each other of roots or sharp branches nearby. Harry was reminded of the time when Hagrid had brought he and Hermione into the Forest to meet his brother Grawp. Harry shuddered at the memory and hoped this wouldn't be anything as serious.

"Alri' now, we're gettin' close. Nothin' ta worry 'bout, though, he's loads better than 'e was, Grawp."

Harry stopped in his tracks, as did the others, nearly toppling each other over. He shook his head to making sure his ears weren't deceiving him.

"Er, Hagrid? We're coming here to see Grawp?"

"Sure! Where'd ye think I was takin' ye?" Hagrid smiled broadly, clearly very proud of his giant brother. "See, he's got a girlfriend now and I wanted ye t' meet 'er." Harry couldn't bring himself to say anything after seeing the look of perfect joy on Hagrid's face, so they exchanged dark looks and forged on.

It wasn't long before they reached their destination, which, to Harry, looked like some sort of oversized campground. The smaller brush had been cleared completely away and the forest floor was hard-packed earth. There were a few familiar things to Harry. A crude clothesline hung between two trees, and several other trees had been strung together with some immensely heavy rope, which in turn held up what seemed to be a tent made from skins of animals larger than Harry had ever seen. It all looked fairly normal, save for its enormous size.

Hagrid gestured around, "See? They made a home of it. Lemme see if I can find 'em." Harry and the others barely had time to cover their ears before the deafening bellow Hagrid let out. But soon enough, two Giants appeared and rumbled over to meet them. Harry briefly remembered Hagrid's definition of sixteen feet or so as 'small' and shook his head in amazement.

Hagrid gave his brother a knock to the arm that would have killed a normal human, but Grawp merely smiled a toothy grin and engulfed him in a bear hug, then gestured toward the female Giant.

Harry looked at her in amazement. Grawp's girlfriend must have been at least fifteen feet tall, with longish hair and what appeared to be two boulders for a chest. He blushed a little at that thought and looked over at the others. Hermione stood slack-jawed, looking on in sheer amazement, while Ron held Ginny close, his face having lost all its color.

"Grawpy!" Hagrid exclaimed, "you remember Harry and Hermione! Well, their friends are here too – Ron and Ginny! See, they're my friends, too." Hagrid waved happily at Ron and Ginny, who only stared back in fear.

Grawp smiled again and Harry just managed to duck from the hand put out in greeting. Ron shoved both Ginny and Hermione behind him, with the result that he was hit sidelong in the arm and thrown a dozen feet away. Hagrid didn't seem to notice, being instead intent on introducing them all to Grawp's girlfriend.

"Arma, these here're my friends – Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny!"

They all waved feebly, Ron wincing as he moved his arm while limping back over to the others. Arma smiled at them and then turned back to Hagrid. The three giants stood talking for a few moments, then separated. Hagrid looked on as the other two lumbered back into the forest, then motioned for the four students to follow him.

"See, he's happy as can be. An' it don't hurt havin' one more on our side, too. We don't want to stay no longer though, they can't take too much at once, giants."

Harry was trying to concentrate on finding his way through the dense underbrush but his curiosity was getting the better of him.

"Hagrid, where did she come from?"

Hagrid looked at him in surprise. "Why, from the mountains, o' course, like the rest. Madam Maxine an' I made another trip. She was one o' the ones stayin' in the caves, an' we couldn't just leave 'er. Besides, Grawp's happier 'an I've ever seen 'im."

Harry decided it was best to leave it at that and didn't pursue the matter further. It was enough work just keeping his robes from snagging constantly on the hateful thorns and pricklers, to try and talk at the same time. He did, however, manage to keep a close eye on Ginny. She was easy enough to see, her hair reflecting what little light there was from the moon and from their wands, and Harry once again found himself somewhat overcome by its beauty and the way it shimmered in the darkness. He was amazed that something so pretty could exist in a place as dark and dreary as the forest. The thought gave him some comfort.

Shaking his head back to reality, he only just missed a whiplash from a branch they were passing by. The trip out of the forest seemed much shorter, probably because they weren't dreading what would be at the end. As they finally sat down in Hagrid's cottage, Harry found himself observing Ron carefully for signs of stress from the excursion. Thankfully, he saw nothing to make him anxious for his friend. They stayed a little while at Hagrid's and then walked slowly back to Gryffindor tower.

Harry and Ron got out the chessboard soon after arriving, and Hermione and Ginny bade them goodnight, waiting until they were safely on the stairs before rolling their eyes at the boys' chosen activity.

The effort required to play chess against Ron kept Harry to little or no conversation during their first game, which ended with a fairly spectacular and complex maneuver of Ron's to soundly trounce him. The second game was much lighter, and Harry, still concerned for his friend's well-being, finally decided to bring up the subject he'd been avoiding.

"Ron... when you were, er, at Hagrid's a few weeks ago, what exactly happened in the Forest?"

Ron looked startled but rather than being angry or upset, he seemed to be thinking deeply. Just as he was about to speak, a noise on the girls staircase caught his attention, and his ears turned slightly pink as Hermione and Ginny stepped out into the room, dressed in their pajamas. Hermione's hair was somewhat fluffier than usual, which Harry thought looked good on her, but then his attention was snatched away by Ginny. She was dressed in the same purple silk pajamas he had glimpsed at the Burrow, her hair tied back in a ponytail with little wisps falling down around her face. He felt his face get a little warm and turned his attention quickly back to Ron.

"Thought you two had gone to bed," Ron said, sounding annoyed.

"Well, we had," said Hermione, sitting down and pulling her feet up onto the sofa by Ron, "until I got up for a drink." Now her ears seemed to have the same problem as Ron's. She looked at him apologetically, "I heard you talking... about what happened, and I wanted to be here, to hear it. If you don't mind." She smiled carefully at him, and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly.

"No, it's all right, and I guess you found Ginny on your way down?" He looked sidelong at her, sitting quietly next to Harry.

"Well, I thought she should probably hear it as well. She is your sister, you know, and she's our friend."

Harry seconded the notion rather too emphatically, much to the surprise of the others. When he realized their reaction, he got much quieter, although it may also have been because he noticed just how close Ginny was sitting to him. Her legs were crossed on the sofa like Hermione's and her knee just touched his if he wasn't careful.

Ron built up his courage again and began to speak.

"Harry was gone, again... to the place where the Teacher is, I suppose?"

Harry nodded seriously and Ron continued.

"I think Hermione was studying, and Ginny too, I guess. I was tired of reading stupid Potion's notes and thought I'd take a break. I was walking down by the lake when Hagrid found me – said he'd gotten something new and asked if I'd come see it. Well, you know how he is, I couldn't say no. He took me down to the Dark Forest, and we... well, we walked in, just like normal. I mean as normal as it can get, right? Only there was something wrong. I didn't really notice at the time, but Hagrid did. There were no birds, no animal sounds at all. I remember it now, but it didn't seem odd then, you know.

"Anyway, Hagrid started to get worried and we turned back. Didn't walk very far when... when they came out of nowhere. I don't know how many." He paused for a moment and Hermione took his hand carefully in her own.

"They were so quick. I couldn't... I didn't even have time to get my wand, they were so fast. We wouldn't have had any chance if they'd wanted to... to kill us, even with Hagrid there." His eyes widened, "He was scary though, no wand or anything, just his bare hands, and he took down at least three or four of them. Finally one bastard hit his arm with some curse and things just went downhill from there. Two of them cursed me and dragged me into the Forest. The last thing I remember..." he thought for a moment, "was when they finally put me down, just looking up at them, wondering if I was going to die. There were so many things I still hadn't done yet, so many things I still needed to say." He looked meaningfully at Hermione and for once didn't blush at all.

"When I woke up, I was strapped to that... chair. It felt like days. Not a single person came in the room while I was there, not one. I don't know if I could've made it without Harry." He glanced over at Harry, looking torn, as though he didn't want to show too much emotion but also wanting to express his gratitude.

For his part, Harry glanced briefly at the floor, then nodded slowly back at Ron. A look of mutual understanding passed between them, while the girls wiped their eyes and mouthed 'boys' at each other.

"I guess you know the rest of it," his voice shook, "probably better than I do. I was in pretty bad shape by then, and Dumbledore said... he said... well, you were there. I still can't believe it... that you two would... do that for me." His eyes glistened and he wiped them on his sleeve.

Harry, remembering the pain he and Hermione had gone through and imagining Ron's must have been ten times worse, got up and went to the other sofa. He put his hand on Ron's shoulder, gripping it tightly.

"I would do it again, Ron, because you're my friend."

"And," said Ginny, coming up beside Harry and putting one hand on his shoulder and the other on Ron's, "you would have more help this time."

Harry turned and saw pure emotion in her eyes before looking back at Ron. Then it was Hermione's turn. She gripped Ron's hand and laid her other hand on his shoulder. Her eyes shown brightly as she looked at him.

"We would do it all over again, because we love you."

Then and there they swore to always protect each other, no matter what might come. It was a moment of truth for Ginny, who, having been a part of the DA and always Ron's sister, but never *wholly* a part of their friendship, was now officially inducted into the circle of friends. The tears she shed that night were proof enough of her loyalty, and her actions of her maturity, that Harry even felt a little guilty for not having truly accepted her for who she was long before. The trio was now a quartet.

Sunday passed by Harry in a blur. It was all a jumble of eating, sleeping, playing chess, and subconsciously wishing Ginny didn't have to study. Then, before he knew it, it was Monday, and then Tuesday, and when he woke up Wednesday morning, it took him several minutes to figure out what day it was. It was still technically Wednesday morning, although the clock by his bed read nearly lunchtime. After cleaning up and eating a quick lunch, Harry and Ron decided to get out their brooms and play some bewitched Quidditch that afternoon.

Just as they were leaving the Great Hall, a note was passed to Harry by a flustered Professor McGonagall, who handed it to him roughly and hurried off to chase down some rambunctious third-years.

"What is it, Harry?" asked Hermione curiously.

He opened the note carefully. It only had a few lines of very tidy script.

Dear Mr. Potter,

If you are not excessively busy this afternoon, which I do not believe you are now that exams are finished, please come by my study around two-o'clock. I would like to speak with you regarding your living situation after you leave Hogwarts.

Please note that the password is 'jelly slugs'.

*Kindest Regards,
Albus Dumbledore*

Harry went wide-eyed and showed the others the note. "I can't believe I forgot. I completely forgot. I don't have to go back to the Dursleys!" Then a note of panic entered his voice. "At least, I don't think I do. What if there's still no safe place for me besides with them?"

Ron looked openly at Harry, giving him a few moments to calm down, then smiled. "Harry, mate, remember? My Mum and Dad asked you to come stay with us?"

"Besides," said Hermione, "you're of age now. You don't have to go back to those... " she gave him a look, "those *people* again. You can do whatever you want now."

Harry smiled at the thought. No more Dursley's, *ever again*.

"Plus," Ron added with a glint in his eye, "Ginny would really miss you if you didn't come to stay with us, so you've really got no choice."

Harry had heard all of the remarks her brothers made over the years but this one nearly topped them all. Suddenly glad he wasn't a Weasley, Harry watched Ginny go bright red all the way to the roots of her hair. In a flash she pulled her wand out, aiming it directly at Ron. Hermione grabbed Ginny's arm to hold her back, while Ron, with a look betraying true and well-deserved fear, took off down the hall at top speed. Just as he was about to round the corner, he slipped on the floor that Mr. Filch had just finished mopping and landed spread-eagle on his back.

Ginny nodded to herself in satisfaction and hollered down at him, "See what happens when you mess with me!" Then she turned back to Harry, still as red as a beet, without meeting his eyes.

"Wow, Ginny," he said, "that was... amazing. Remind me never to cross you. He's lucky you didn't throw in a bat-bogey hex as well."

She managed to give him a small, unwilling smile, even though her blush continued. "It's not true, you know. I got over my crush on you years ago." *But*, she thought, *that doesn't mean it didn't grow into something deeper*. Her blush didn't go away and noticed she was biting her bottom lip slightly.

Harry felt like the air had been let out of him and he didn't know why. Perhaps he had been used to the idea that she still liked him, and it made him feel needed. *Even if*, he thought guiltily, *I never returned her feelings*. He cast a cautious glance at her as they walked up the stairs. He could see that she was still scarlet, but whether it was because of Ron, or because she was lying and really did still have feelings for him, he wasn't sure. It was hard to tell from her face, and it was just as hard to determine which *he* wanted more. He had to admit that it was flattering having her around. He remembered when she used to blush any time he'd even enter a room, and how she'd drop things, or lose her place in her book. It always was kind of fun...

Having made his decision about whether he still wanted her to like him, he tucked it away deep down inside his mind in a rusty old filing cabinet. It could destroy him, he knew, if Voldemort were to find out about his *real* feelings for her. He knew he had to keep his resolution, he couldn't allow anyone else to get that close to him, even if... even if he had some very, very small, tiny little miniscule feelings for her. That's what he told himself anyway.

Half-an-hour later, as he eased himself onto his broom, his mind was no less disturbed. He scolded himself silently and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, trying to force Ginny out of his head. Success finally came but only after nearly being knocked off his broom by a bewitched Bludger. His flying after that was superb, or at least Ron said so, and that was enough to make Harry feel good right up until he reached the stone gargoyles guarding the Headmaster's office.

"Jelly slugs," Harry said, and waited patiently while the great stone steps were opened to him. His anxiety increased even more as he knocked quietly on the carved wooden door of the office. The headmaster's voice beckoned him in. He stepped over the threshold into the lofty room and the doors closed quietly behind him.

Although Harry had found himself in the Headmaster's office many times during his years at Hogwarts, he had never really felt at home there. Even though the man standing in front of him

now was both a mentor and a friend, the office still held the heritage and mystique of Headmaster's long gone. It was awe inspiring and Harry just couldn't get used to the feeling of power that infused the room.

Dumbledore motioned for him to take a seat by the hearth, in front of a crackling fire. Harry did so, recalling many talks by this fire over the last few years. Talks of school, friends, the war; it all came flooding back to him as he realized that this might be the last one he had as a student with Dumbledore.

Today, the man whom Harry so often thought of as old looked so much younger it took him by surprise. Dumbledore seemed to notice, smiling as he sat down in the high back chair next to Harry.

"I find, Harry, that end-of-the-year exams can be very invigorating, and it makes me feel young again. Yes, perhaps you don't agree now," he looked over his glasses with a knowing smile at Harry's skeptical look, "but someday you will understand."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about but smiled politely anyway.

Dumbledore seemed unfazed and continued to speak. "I find that one of the best ways to stay young is to be near those who are. One of the easiest decisions I ever made was to become Headmaster of this wonderful school." He looked sentimentally around the room, then focused his eyes back on Harry.

"I suppose you were curious about the note that I sent you? As you are now of age, I wished to speak to you about where you will go after you leave this fine institution. I believe it is safe to say that you wish to join the Order?"

Harry nodded seriously.

"And I believe it is also safe to say that you do not wish to leave your friends Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, and..."

Harry nodded quickly, afraid of what name might come next, though still not sure where this was leading.

"And am I also to understand that you have received an invitation from the Weasley family to stay with them indefinitely until you find suitable housing for yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. Provisions have already been put in place around their home for your arrival. I will leave it up to you to decide whether you would feel more secure with a Fidelius charm in place."

Harry looked deep in thought, "I... suppose... but it would depend on who the secret-keeper was, and—"

"I also have one more option to discuss with you, Harry, which I believe you may wish to exercise above the others. It is a safe location where you will not have to part with your friends. You have been invited to go as soon as you wish; however, I expect you would like to take your Apparition test before leaving. Thus, staying with the Weasleys until after your Apparition exams and then leaving for this place will most likely be your best choice."

Harry knew that Dumbledore was giving his brain one last challenge by not explaining fully. He thought for a few moments, then a slow smile spread across his face. It was almost too good to be true, if he was guessing correctly.

"Do you mean... that he's invited *all* of us? For how long?"

"The summer, until the beginning of the next school year."

Harry looked awestruck. Of all the possible scenarios his mind had entertained, this had not been one of them. To spend almost the entire summer with the Teacher really was too good to be true.

Dumbledore continued, "I received a letter from the Teacher, requesting that I pass along the information to you, since he was concerned, with good reason, about how to contact you. He asks that you send your reply through me."

"Of course!" Harry nearly shouted, letting his enthusiasm get the better of him. "I mean, yes, I think that's a great idea. I can stay with Ron until we take the Apparition exams and then we can go stay with the Teacher the rest of the summer."

"Yes, I thought you might find this option attractive. You may tell your friends in your own time, of course, and I suggest that they discuss this with their families. Perhaps you would be so good as to be with them in order to explain more completely what, or rather who, the Teacher is and what he does."

Harry could only sit and smile at this wonderful turn of events.

"And Harry, please be sure to extend the invitation one beyond your friends Ron and Hermione, for I understand your circle of friends has recently increased by one."

There was a twinkle in his eye that made Harry a little uneasy but he nodded in understanding anyway. He did wonder sometimes how this man seemed to know everything that happened under the Hogwarts roof.

"May I also point out that you do not have to visit your uncle's house ever again, if you do not wish it. There may come a time in *your* life when you have grown past the differences in your lives, but sadly, *they* may not. However, I don't want to discourage you from trying to stay in contact with them, as it is something we Wizards don't do as well as we should.

"Now, Harry, as I have monopolized almost the entire conversation, it is time to ask if you have any questions for me? Do you wish to discuss anything career related?"

"No," he answered quickly, "I... I just want to do what I can for the Order right now. With the house, and my money and... Sirius' money, there's no need for me to work yet. I'd prefer to be useful – I mean useful in other ways than a paying job."

Noticing Harry's mixed emotions, Dumbledore turned in his chair to look him more directly in the eye.

"Harry, there is nothing wrong with inheriting Number 12 Grimmauld Place, or the money from the account Sirius held. It may very well enable you to do wonderful, useful things that many others could only wish to do. No, I understand that you would give it all back, and more, to have him here for just a day, but he would not wish you to dwell on it. He would wish you to use it to continue his work, and to assist you in your own. You do not have to stay in the house, but the money, in addition to your own, will enable you to find someplace to call your own, and to give your time more effectively to the Order." He sighed, "Now look at me, running off again. The trait of an old man, I'm afraid."

"No," Harry said, "it's all right. I don't really have anything to ask anyway. I'm happy with what you've told me so far. I don't know... maybe I'll wait a few days to tell Ron and Hermione, and... the other person." He felt his ears redden, and wanted to curse them back to normal color.

"Well," said Dumbledore, wisely not noticing, "if there is nothing more, perhaps you would like to get back to your friends, and that other person?" His eyes twinkled brightly over his glasses, and Harry couldn't help but smile.

"One last thing, Harry," Dumbledore said, "At the end-of-the-year feast, I would like to make some brief comments about Voldemort, and your name may come up. Do you have any objections to that?"

Harry shook his head, thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head again.

"Very well, very well. Enjoy the rest of your week here with your... friends." Dumbledore smiled, and Harry smiled back.

His smile remained as he ran down the steps and past the stone gargoyles, it even remained all the way back to Gryffindor tower, where it didn't falter on seeing his friends sitting in a far corner talking comfortably. Hermione spotted him first.

"What's going on? You look rather happy."

"I am." Then he made a quick decision not to tell them yet. "I just... well, I don't ever have to go back to the Dursley's again, and I get to go to your house, Ron, at least until after the Apparition exams."

"Oh, right." Ron said, "I forgot! We've got apparition tests to take, er, when are they, Hermione?"

"Week after next," she said breathlessly. Apparently she too had forgotten. Harry had to smile, it wasn't often that Hermione forgot something, especially when it involved taking a test.

Ginny was smiling too but Harry could tell that she was jealous at not being allowed to take the exams yet. He looked down at her for a few seconds, then quickly decided to take a seat by her. To his surprise, a small blush appeared across her face as he sat down, and he couldn't help but notice how pretty she looked that way. He thought it best to turn the subject, for her sake as well as his.

"Hey," he said to her, nudging her arm. "How're your exams? Anything we can help you study for?"

"Yes!" She gave him a quick but thankful glance and started paging through her notes, piled precariously on the corner of the table beside her. Just as she pulled out what she was looking for, the whole stack tumbled off the side. Harry dove across her and made a miraculous save, letting only a few smaller pieces of parchment slip by.

They sat in silence for a moment, watching the missed pieces drift to the floor, and then Harry felt his ears growing red, realizing that he was now fully sprawled across her lap. He got to his feet as gracefully as possible, ignoring the smirks from Ron and Hermione, and handed her back the pile.

Why their smirks were so annoying to him, he couldn't quite tell. Suddenly, he thought of the fun it would be to wipe those smirks right off by kissing Ginny senseless in front of them.

Of course he couldn't do that, and the thought only served to make his own blush deepen and to increase his annoyance with himself. He handed her the stack of notes and then took his seat again, trying to steady his voice, and pretending nothing at all had happened.

"So, what class are you working on?" he asked.

She grimaced, "Potions. You sure you want to help?"

Harry nodded, while Hermione, having immediately forgotten she was laughing at Harry, went straight into study mode. After nearly an hour of intense questioning from Hermione and Harry, Ginny stopped pacing and collapsed onto the sofa giving a dramatic sigh. Harry chuckled to himself, thinking how similar they were in their hatred of Potions, or rather of the Potions Master, except that Snape didn't absolutely loathe Ginny like he did Harry.

They took a little break to eat dinner, after which Hermione insisted that Ginny continue studying until very late into the evening. As distressed as Harry normally was about studying, Ginny was rather the opposite tonight. She was happy enough with the companionship of her three best friends that studying became just another way for them to sit and talk. And while normally they would have done more talking than studying, with Hermione present, Ginny was kept on task. Hermione did most of the questioning, although Harry put in his fair share, while Ron simply served as Ginny's partner for sharing things like eye-rolling and secret chuckles that only siblings can understand.

Finally, at nearly half-past eleven, Ginny fell onto the sofa for the last time, groaning in frustration.

"Okay, I'm done. Enough."

“But you’ve still got—“

“I’m tired,” she interrupted, “and sleep would do better for me now than more of this rubbish.” She waved her hand at her books, and immediately her frustration turned to shock as the books shut themselves and piled neatly on top of each other. She mouthed ‘wow’ to herself and then laughed tiredly.

“That’s the least effort I’ve ever put into wandless magic. Maybe I should stay up later – being tired tomorrow might have its advantages.” She pretended to consider this carefully, then shook her head. “Nope, too tired. Goodnight. Thanks for helping me study.”

She smiled at Hermione and Ron, and when she faced Harry, he felt his ears redden again. “G’night, Ginny,” he managed to scratch out. Then, feeling extremely frustrated with himself, he bade the others goodnight and went upstairs.

It was a long time before he fell asleep that night. His mind’s eye was filled with images of the day and of Dumbledore explaining that Harry would never have to go back to the Dursley’s, but that he should consider never giving up on them. Harry did consider it for a while, finally determining that he would forget about them completely, until, and if, he ever got the chance to visit them without the threat of Voldemort.

He rolled around for some time and finally managed to get rid of the lumpiness of his bed, getting his body comfortable. His mind, however, was no better off. His thoughts kept returning to Ginny.

Ginny Weasley, the girl he’d known for so many years as Ron’s little sister. Lately, her role seemed to be changing in his life. Once, she had simply been an ego booster for him. Her constant embarrassment around him and her rather obvious crush had given Harry a weird sort of keen attachment to her. He suddenly recalled their recent conversation in the hall and wondered whether she really had gotten over him, or if that was even the right way to put it. Maybe... given up... instead of gotten over. Either way, the feeling in his stomach told him he hoped not. He closed his eyes but it was still there. It was an empty feeling as if he were hungry, a tightness in his chest like a dead weight, a confusion in his mind that fogged his concentration. He wanted to do something crazy just so she would realize she still had a chance.

He thought of this evening, of the look in her eyes while she answered his questions, of the way the firelight reflected in them. He could see her sitting with her quill held loosely in her hand, absently flicking the feather across the table. A few stray hairs hung down across her cheek, repeatedly pushed behind her ear until allowed to stay in frustration. He remembered the feeling of wanted to touch them himself, tucking them back where they belonged. He thought about the handful of freckles across her nose that crinkled up when she laughed.

Eventually, he gave up fighting it and allowed her to fill his mind completely. He was bothered somewhat by the way she had grown up over the past year. Whether it had *actually* happened so fast, or whether he had only now allowed it to be so, he couldn’t deny it had happened. Gone was the skinny little eleven-year-old who squeaked when he entered the room. In her place now stood a confident young woman whose passion for life and mischief shone brightly in her eyes, and who, Harry had to admit, had finally grown into her body. He pulled his hand over his eyes and then smacked his forehead once. If Ron knew, he would kill him, really. Deciding that it wouldn’t do at all to think that way about her, he resolved once again to push her out of his mind.

When sleep finally came, it was unusually restful and peaceful. When Harry woke in the morning, he could only admit that dreams of her were far better than any other, and he couldn’t remember the last time he had slept so well.

By the time two days had passed and it was late Friday afternoon, Harry had almost succeeded in his resolve. He had continued to help Ginny study, as had Hermione, but he hadn’t let her get under his skin again. He smiled and spoke politely with her, and helped her in any way

he could, but he was careful to keep several inches between them when they sat, and not to keep his eyes on her for more than a few seconds at a time. These were little steps, he knew, but all the same, it seemed to be helping. The only difficulty was that he had gone back to his old dreams at night, and therefore wasn't sleeping as well. He thought of it as a small price to pay, for, in the end, he knew she would only become more ammunition for Voldemort if he let anything happen between them.

The celebration at dinner that night was fantastic. The house-elves had prepared a wonderful variety of foods to toast the end of the year. The noise in the Great Hall was at a level which made conversation difficult but Harry didn't mind. He was happy. His exams were done, he wouldn't be leaving his friends after school, and he didn't have to go back to the Dursley's. Once in a while a stray thought crossed his mind of missing classes and teachers, as well as the thought hiding just behind the others that he still had to face his biggest challenge, but tonight it was all about the party. As the desserts were cleared away from their plates and the conversation in the room suddenly decreased, Harry craned his neck to look up at the Headmaster, rising in his chair to address the room at large.

"Once again," he began, "we find ourselves at the end of another year. I trust your heads have been filled to the brim with plenty of useful knowledge, and I also trust that you will do your best to empty it all out by the end of summer."

He suddenly looked a bit sad. "As all of you are aware, Lord Voldemort has been progressively moving into the open this year. I do not wish to leave you on such an unhappy note but I must make sure you all understand the significance of the situation. During Voldemort's last rise to power, he attempted to remove students from this school by the use of fear – fear for themselves and fear for their families. Please know this, only by our continuing to live life normally can he truly be defeated. I encourage you to tell your parents to write me if they have concerns about the security of this school, and I will do my best to convince them of its safety."

He looked about the room, and his glance fell briefly on Harry and his friends. When he spoke again, his voice was calm but serious. "As some of you already know, there is an organization that is dedicated to the destruction of Voldemort. While it is selective of its members, I encourage all of you to help in its mission by keeping constant vigilance of your surroundings. If you have suspicions about something or someone, please do not hesitate to contact any teacher at this school, or any of the fine Aurors at the Ministry."

His eyes ranged over the room again but came right back to Harry. "On a final note, one of the key members in the fight against Voldemort, a student at this school, is now graduating from Hogwarts. His bravery in confronting Voldemort face-to-face on multiple occasions has contributed to slowing Voldemort's return to power over the last several years, and I'm sure this student will continue in his fight to end the fear and overshadowing darkness of such evil."

"Harry," he lifted his cup slowly, "to your continued success." He drank, while the rest of the student body echoed his toast and drank from their own cups.

As Dumbledore dismissed them, the melee that followed was one Harry probably could have done without. Having never liked the fact that he was famous, he *was* somewhat heartened just by the sheer number of people that stopped to shake his hand and wish him luck. He knew, perhaps, that some were just wanting to speak to the famous Harry Potter, but there were many more who had real, honest reasons to stop. A boy from Hufflepuff told Harry about how his father and younger brother were murdered by Death Eaters for no reason other than that they were Muggles. A sixth year Ravenclaw girl explained that she was only coming back to school next year because she wanted to do her part, as Dumbledore had said, and live her life as normally as possible.

There were many other stories too, some of which were merely 'thanks for fighting the good fight', but most were heartfelt stories of loss and fear. Harry listened attentively to them all,

staying for nearly three-quarters of an hour after the meal ended. He wanted to know. He had to know. It would all help him stay focused on his job by understanding the people Voldemort had effected at his school. He also knew how difficult it was for some of them to tell their story, and hoped that he helped in some small way by listening and sharing their pain.

When it was over, the four walked slowly up to Gryffindor tower, not speaking, each lost in his or her thoughts until they stood in front of the portrait hole. Hermione was opening her mouth to say the password when Harry spoke.

"Wait," he said quietly, "I'm not sure I can go in there." He glanced around at them all. "Anyone fancy a drink in Hogsmeade? Dumbledore said anyone sixth year and up could go out for the evening."

"Yeah," Ron said slowly, nodding his head, "I think that sounds good."

Hermione nodded, realizing she too could use a break from the school, even though they were leaving the next day.

Ginny smiled and said, "That sounds like a wonderful idea. You've had enough to think about tonight, Harry."

He smiled gratefully at her and they turned back toward the stairs.

Half-an-hour later, sitting comfortably at a corner table in the Three Broomsticks with Butterbeers in hand, they laughed easily, the gravity of the evening having evaporated. Ginny sat by Harry, her arms resting on the table and her eyes enjoying watching Harry laugh and be happy. Hermione sat by Ron, and Harry tried not to raise his eyebrows too much when he noticed they were holding hands under the table.

"So how's Quidditch going to be next year, Ginny?" he asked, covering up a small cough and a laugh, trying to indicate the situation across the table to her.

A dark look crossed her face. "Honestly, I'm not really looking forward to it. I love playing and I think we'll have a decent team, but without y – ... all of you there, it won't be the same."

Harry just stared at her, all joking aside. He had yet to get used to her candor, and his mind hadn't even reached as far as thinking about next year yet. He tried not to feel too sorry for her, but before he knew it, words were tumbling out of his mouth uncontrolled.

"What do you mean? We're going to be there for all the games. I... we wouldn't miss it for the world. It's fun to watch you play." He finally managed to shut his mouth but he couldn't take back what he had said. Maybe he'd had too much Butterbeer.

Hermione tried to cover up a small smile, while Ron only nodded.

"Harry's right, of course we're going to be there. You don't think I'd let my little sister play in some dangerous Quidditch game without my being nearby."

She gave him a dirty look and fingered her wand lovingly, pleading with her eyes for Harry to let her hex Ron just once.

Harry held up his hands, "He's your brother, deal with him however you want."

She smiled sweetly at Ron. "Oh, Ronald," she sang, pointing her wand at him, "how about a nice Bat-Bogey hex?"

"What," he said sourly. "Harry feels the same way. Don't you, mate?" Ron looked quite sure of his friend's agreement.

Harry felt his insides grow cold. How was he supposed to answer that? If he agreed with Ron, then Ginny would still believe he thought of her as a little girl who needed protecting, but if he didn't agree with Ron, then he'd have to *deal* with Ron.

"I... er... well..." he sputtered.

"Yes, Harry," Ginny said dangerously, "please explain." Her eyes flashed menacingly.

He knew his face was as red as a tomato but that hardly registered compared to the situation at hand. Both Weasleys were now staring forcefully at him, waiting for his response. He was going to have to make himself get a grip and take control.

"Ginny," he turned to her, "yes, I do want to come watch you, and for more reasons than because it's a dangerous game, as Ron puts it."

"Ron," he looked at his friend, "of course I want to be at the games in case something happens, but Ginny's not a little girl anymore, as she has proven many times. She's been through as much as we have."

"And," he looked around at all of them with fire in his eyes, "I would think that none of us would *want* to be far from the others, seeing as how Voldemort could be anywhere, and we'll need to be together – *all* of us."

They looked at him, stunned, and even backed away slightly at the ferocity in his eyes. Ginny was red from her collar to the roots of her hair and could only look at the table. Seeing her reaction, something warm quickly rose up inside of him, giving him a sliver of hope that perhaps she wasn't really over him yet. He knew he should try to ignore it. Slivers of hope could lead to slices of hope, which in turn might lead to slabs of hope, and Harry wouldn't allow himself to get to that point. Voldemort was his future; beyond that, there was nothing. He'd learned enough from his life so far that he knew better than to plan too far into his future.

"All right," he said, "I'm going for another round of Butterbeers. You lot had better have worked this out by the time I get back." He winked at Hermione as he got up, and the corners of her mouth turned up just slightly as she turned to Ron and started talking.

When Harry returned a few minutes later, it wasn't with just one round of Butterbeers, it was with several. Addressing the looks from the others, he simply said, "Hey, it's the end of the year, the end of school, and I think we need to celebrate."

"Yes," said Ron, "to us!" He lifted his bottle, and they all met his over the table, chorusing, "To us!"

They talked for some time about what they would miss, what they wouldn't miss, and what their friends would be doing after graduation. Harry was just happy that he would get to stay with his friends. He was lively and upbeat the whole evening, continuing to bring them more and more Butterbeer as the night got later. Ginny eventually cut herself off, explaining with a story about getting sick once at home when her brothers had given her an entire bottle of real firewhiskey, and she had nearly burned down the house halfway through when she accidentally burped out flames. Harry had to laugh at that, but then couldn't stop himself from keeping his eyes on her a little longer than normal. Fortunately, she didn't seem to notice.

"So what *shall* we do with ourselves this summer?" Ron asked, a light slur in his words.

"I just don't know," answered Harry airily, with the smile of someone holding an important secret. Only Hermione seemed to suspect something, while the others just shook their heads.

"Well," she said, "First we need to –"

"Study for the apparition test." Ron interrupted. "Yes, we know, Hermione. I mean after that. We've got a whole summer in front of us, with nothing to do at all. It's amazing!" Ron's eyes were wide as he looked off into the future. Ginny giggled at him.

As the evening wore on, Ron and Harry tried to pace themselves somewhat, while Hermione, having never really had much more than one bottle of Butterbeer before, and now having a small legion of empty bottles sitting in front of her, could hardly stand when they finally got up to leave.

With the help of Ginny, Hermione made it safely outside, and they started walking slowly back toward the castle. The night was warm and bright with moonlight, and Harry found himself

wondering when the full moon would come, and where his old professor, Lupin, would be handling the transformation that night.

They continued to laugh and joke, taking turns at supporting Hermione. When it came time for Harry to help, he took her from Ron's shoulder and she laid her head on his, looking unabashedly up at him. They had slowed for a moment to get better situated, when she spoke, unfortunately loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Harry, do you remember when we were down by the lake, the first time I heard your thoughts?" He stopped suddenly, concerned about where this train of thought would lead them.

"Yes," he said nervously, looking off down the road.

She continued to gaze up at him, "Do you remember trying it again, to see if it really worked?"

"Yes," he said again, growing more nervous as he remembered his thoughts at the time. He was now aware that Ron and Ginny had stopped and were listening from nearby.

"I heard what you thought, Harry, when we tried it again. Do you remember?"

He was now only vaguely aware of his surroundings. What she said sent a chill up his spine, and he was screaming inside for Ron and Ginny to go on without them. It was going to be bad, and he knew she was going to say it.

She proceeded without an answer from him, "You... you said I was pretty when I was concentrating so hard."

He was suddenly aware of her moving closer to him. "I pretended I didn't hear you, but I did," she said. Her eyes were fixed on his face. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead as his anxiety increased ten-fold. She wouldn't...

But she did. Before he could even register the looks of shock and anger from the others, Hermione had pressed her lips to his and wrapped her arms around his neck. Harry held his arms at his side, unsure of what to do. Finally he tried to pull away, with the result that they fell over sideways. Harry scrambled frantically back to his feet, looking down at her with wide eyes, while she appeared to have fallen asleep on the ground.

What happened after that took Harry a long time to forget. He remembered the look of hurt in Ron's eyes and the anguish in Ginny's. Together they collected Hermione and walked off without Harry. He could do nothing but stare, and when he finally regained his faculties, they were far ahead. He had no desire to catch up.

The lecture from Mr. Filch about sticking together in a group barely registered in his brain. When he finally crawled through the portrait hole, he only dimly realized that the common room was, fortunately, empty. Pulling his shoes off, he lay down sideways on the sofa and threw his cloak over himself to keep warm.

It was the last thing he remembered before falling asleep.

The sound of slippers on the floor didn't even wake him as they approached at nearly two o'clock in the morning. He didn't notice the cloak that had slipped off now being pulled back over him by a pair of slim hands. Only the faint sound of muffled tears brought him from his slumber, and he woke to see Ginny sitting on the floor, her back against the sofa and her head in her hands.

He stirred and she turned abruptly, swiping at her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you, Harry."

He rubbed his face and slid his glasses back on. Her eyes were red and he could see wet lines down her cheeks.

"It's okay, I wasn't that comfortable anyway," he replied, sitting up and stretching.

"Harry, I have to tell you something – th-that's why I came down – but you have to listen until I'm finished before you say anything, okay?" It wasn't a question but he nodded anyway, wishing to provide ears for anything she wanted to talk about.

"Tonight, when Hermione... kissed you," she sucked in her breath as if trying to steady herself, "I was angry and hurt, and I didn't know why." She raised her hands in front of her in a question and he was concerned by the sadness in her eyes.

"Then we came back here and I went to bed. I couldn't fall asleep, though, thinking about why I was so hurt by it, and angry with myself for what I wouldn't allow it to be." She looked up at him and he didn't look away. "Harry, you know how I used to feel about you, and I told you those feelings were gone, right? Well," she shrugged her shoulders and laughed a little to herself, "I guess I was wrong. It's that simple. Seeing her kiss you, and hearing what you said, or thought, or whatever it was, made me realize I'm not over you, not at all. I know that's probably not what you need to hear right now, and I don't plan on doing anything about it, I just... wanted you to know. I promise I won't make any issues with the two of you getting together, really I'm happy for you. She's great, maybe not quite your type, but great."

He made to say something but she stopped him. "It's okay, Harry, I won't get in the way at all. And I'm just kidding about her not being your type." She looked down at her hands for a moment, then sighed. "So that's it, that's why I came down. It's really late now, and we've got to get up early to get packed and on our way home. Sleep well, Harry. Maybe you should go upstairs. I think Ron was wondering where you are." They sat in silence for a few moments, before she rose from the sofa and started toward the stairs.

"Yeah, he probably wants to kill me." Harry muttered.

She turned back with a curious half-smile on her face. "Why?"

"Come back and sit down again. You need to hear the other side of the story." She obliged him and curled up at the other end of the sofa. He touched his hand to his head, feeling a bit warm, and attributed it to the alcohol.

"I know what you saw tonight looked like Hermione and I getting together, but it's not true." She looked incredulous. "Really, it's not. First – this is so hard to say – you remember what it was like when Ron was... gone. Well, add to that, I'd just come from studying with the Teacher and I was exhausted, as usual. I was really stressed and Hermione needed someone to cry on. Plus, she's one of my best friends." Ginny looked away toward the fire, her eyes glistening.

"No, please don't look away," he unconsciously reached out to her, "because you are, too. You... your friendship has been just as meaningful to me as hers..." Then he added quietly to himself, "sometimes even more."

"Anyway, she was more upset than I'd ever seen her, and we went for a walk that lasted all afternoon. We grieved together, I guess, and it helped both of us. As for what I thought in my head – what she repeated tonight – I have no explanation for that. I do think she's pretty, especially when she's concentrating, but I think the same thing about you."

His head physically jerked when he heard his own words and his eyes widened for a fraction of a second when he realized he'd said it out loud.

"As for the kiss," he continued quickly, "I have no idea where that came from. Hermione doesn't drink Butterbeer that often and I think she just had too much. She probably won't even remember it in the morning."

"And why would *Ron* want to kill me? Well, that's simple, didn't you see them holding hands tonight? He likes her, I'm sure of it, and she likes him, too. Honestly, I'm glad to see they're back at it again. For a while I was worried they would marry other people and move away..." He looked sad for a moment but then realized he'd gotten off topic.

"Yeah," Ginny said with dawning comprehension, "I remember her being embarrassed about something when we went shopping the other day, and... of course! It *was* Ron she was talking about."

He smiled. "All I'm saying is that I'm sorry for what happened tonight. I guess there's a lesson here for a limit on Hermione's Butterbeer drinking. But please, I don't want anything to hurt our friendship, Ginny, most of all another friend. Can we... are we still okay, then?"

She nodded, then got up.

"See you in the morning?" he asked.

"All right. Goodnight," she replied, with a small smile.

Harry climbed the stairs to his dorm, realizing only slightly that it would be the last time he slept in this room. He crawled into his bed and fell instantly to sleep.

From that distance, he couldn't hear Ginny crying in her own bed, having poured her own heart out and gotten absolutely no response from Harry.

Breakfast the next morning was subdued compared to the going-away feast the night before. There were a lot of sad faces, many seventh years not wanting to leave their home, and Harry felt included in that lot. He looked around the hall quietly while they ate, the happenings of the previous night all but forgotten in his current mindset. And yet, he wasn't as upset as many were. He still knew where he belonged, he would be staying with his friends, and they were about to begin two whole months of intimate study with the Teacher. He felt a tightness in his chest, though, when he looked up at the Headmaster. Dumbledore had become a true friend and mentor to him, and while he would still be in contact now and then, it couldn't be what it had been. Dumbledore still had responsibilities to the school and the protection of its students, and Harry had no desire to take him away from that. He simply was going to miss the talks they had had, and the closeness of a man whom he could tell anything.

It was going to be difficult to leave this place, but new business and training beckoned to him. He held his head high as he walked out the front doors of the school for the last time.

Chapter Five

Ginny's Book

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley stood in the afternoon sunlight, near the end of Platform nine and three-quarters. They watched expectantly as the Hogwarts Express squealed loudly to a stop, bringing their children home again. Mrs. Weasley smiled nervously at her husband, who gave her an encouraging nod and they began to walk briskly along the train. As they passed car after car, she became more and more nervous until her husband finally paused and touched her arm.

"Molly, dear," he said calmly, "do you recall where we sat on *our* last trip home from Hogwarts?"

She smiled and blushed a little. "Yes, we had a compartment with the others in the very last – " She squeezed his hand, "Do you really think so? The last car?"

He nodded toward the last car and raised his hand in greeting to their youngest son, who had just stepped down onto the platform. Mrs. Weasley practically ran to him, gathering him up into a true Weasley hug. After putting her hands on his cheeks to see that it was really him, she immediately turned to Ginny, who groaned loudly. In the midst of the disembarking chaos, Harry could clearly hear her say "Mum! I'm okay, really, I'm fine." Her mother only squeezed her tighter and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Harry was suddenly reminded of the twins' behavior when their mother tried to hug and kiss them, and he laughed a little.

After saying hello to Hermione, Mrs. Weasley came to Harry, who had gone around to talk to Mr. Weasley. She pulled him into a loving hug and Harry couldn't help but enjoy it. He was finally back with his family and there was nowhere he'd rather be. Glancing over Mrs. Weasley's shoulder, he thought he saw a grin of approval from Ginny but the next second it was gone. She was just chatting away with her father and he thought perhaps he'd just imagined it. Finally, in one large group they made their way out of the station.

With the Ministry now fully engaged in the war against Voldemort, it was in their best interest to provide protection for Harry in all respects. As the group stepped out of King's Cross, two large black cars pulled up, seemingly out of nowhere. The Ministry drivers quickly took their belongings and in no time they were rolling down the road toward the Burrow.

Against Mrs. Weasley's pleas, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had all clambered into one car, while the others, including Order members Mad-Eye Moody, and a tired-looking Remus Lupin, whom Harry had greeted excitedly, rode in the other. The drive was long enough that they had some time to talk, and Harry knew something that needed to be talked about.

"I think," he said, sighing a bit, "we need to talk about last night."

Ron gave him a rude look and turned back to the window, while Ginny smiled a little, nodding encouragingly to him. Hermione, on the other hand, looked completely bewildered.

"What happened last night?" she asked curiously.

Ron's head snapped back so fast, Harry swore he got whiplash just watching. "What happened last night!" he barked. "You mean you don't *remember*?"

Her expression instantly went from curious to fearful. "No, I... I don't remember. Did someone get hurt?"

Defying his normal lack of emotional depth, Ron replied coolly. "That depends on how you define hurt." He crossed his arms and turned back to brood at the window. "Why don't you ask Harry? I'm sure *he* remembers."

She looked back and forth between the two. "Okay, someone please tell me what happened. The last thing I remember was Harry telling a joke about Dudley and the Ton-Tongue Toffees. I had a bit more to drink last night than usual, but... oh no! Did I do something stupid?" She looked around fretfully.

"Hermione," Harry offered slowly, "Do you remember anything about the walk back to the castle?"

She put her hands over her face, massaging her forehead. "I don't... not really... it seems like I had some help..." She growled in disgust. "I can't remember *anything*!"

"No?" Ron questioned from the window, "You don't remember hanging yourself all over Harry, talking about how he said you were pretty, and then... and then... Argh!" Ron punched the door with his fist. "Hermione! You kissed him! You kissed Harry!"

She paled instantly, "I didn't... I don't remember that –"

"Well, you did." He turned back to her, looking stricken. "And I suppose you don't remember saying you heard him *think* you were pretty?"

She raised her hands back to her face, muttering, "Oh no... oh no! I was never supposed to say that out loud!"

"Ha!" he yelled, "So you admit it!"

"I don't remember anything!" she said, tears building in her eyes.

"Ron!" Harry interjected, "That's not her fault. I... I *did* think that, only I didn't know she had heard me until last night."

"Humph," he grunted at Harry, then muttered, "I don't see how it's any of your business anyway."

Harry laughed in spite of himself. "None of my business! I happen to think Hermione's a pretty girl. I don't see how you couldn't!" She blushed and smiled. "But," he continued, poking Ron in the chest and winking sideways at Ginny, "it doesn't mean that I like her, or that she should be my girlfriend!"

"You're right!" Ron yelled, "She should be mine!"

There was a collective intake of breath and Harry tried not to let his grin show. Ron froze, his eyes looking back and forth as if searching for an escape. "I... er... I..."

"Ron," Hermione said quickly, "whatever you say next, make it be right, or I'll never forgive you." Harry saw a very uncharacteristic softness in her eyes that made him want to look away, but he found he couldn't.

Ron closed his eyes, seemingly gathering his thoughts.

"Hermione," he said in a husky voice, "I... " he reached out and took her hand, taking in another breath, "What I said just now, it was the truth. I've fancied you for a long time, and if you want to, I'd like to try making us into... well, *us*." He looked hopefully into her eyes. There was a long pause while they simply looked into each other's eyes. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Hermione jumped out of her seat and flung her arms around him.

"Oh, Ron! I've been waiting for so long..." She said, choked up with emotion.

While Hermione held fast to Ron, Ginny moved quietly to the now-open seat by Harry.

"It's about time, isn't it?" she whispered in his ear. Her breath sent shivers up his spine and he tried not to think about how close she was.

"Yeah," he said, "it's about time."

Hermione turned and smiled at them, "Very subtle, Harry."

"Well," he said, "you're the one who kissed me!"

Ron turned to Hermione, who was now sitting next to him with her hand in his. "Hermione, why *did* you kiss him?"

For a moment Harry feared his friend was getting upset again, but his worry faded quickly when he saw the look on Ron's face. He was still smiling as if nothing could stop him and he appeared genuinely curious.

Hermione bit her lip, looking at Harry. "Well, I guess it was because of the letter... and maybe partly because of the wings."

Harry frowned. He wasn't sure he wanted them all to know about what he had said to Hermione in that letter, but he realized that of the four of them, probably only Ron had not read it. He sighed and nodded for her to continue. There would be time to worry about Ginny's reaction to it later.

"He wrote me a letter," she turned to Ron, "while you were gone, and gave it to me when we got to the Burrow. He said he loved me like a sister, but before I read the 'sister' part, I thought it was something else..." She blushed again but still looked at Ron, who appeared a bit shocked. "Well, I knew I fancied *you*," she continued to look at Ron's face, "but when I was done, I thought it would be funny to kiss him just once before I was, erm, taken off the market, as it were."

"Yeah, well, you did that," Ron said. "Unfortunately, you were too drunk to remember, and now we get to tease you about it the rest of your life."

"I'd like that," she said, and he immediately turned red, catching her meaning rather more quickly than usual.

"I don't know, I think it might be better just to forget it ever happened," Harry muttered, seriously.

Hermione turned to him with a look of genuine concern. "I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't have done it and I'm sure I hurt everyone last night. I really didn't mean to. Oh, please don't be mad at me."

Harry knew he wasn't mad at her but couldn't keep himself from saying, "Yeah, well, I do think you may have hurt *some* of us." He looked at Ginny. She was smiling a little but he was close enough to see that it didn't reach her eyes. She was probably remembering their talk last night, he thought, noting that her eyes were still just a little red. Of course, he, too was still thinking about it, and remembering the feelings she had admitted to him. He thought about the tone of her voice when she opened her heart to him, and the way her face was profiled against the dying fire. At the time, he hadn't even realized he didn't give her any response to her feelings.

"Harry," someone whispered urgently. Suddenly he realized he was staring, and that the voice was Ginny's. "Harry, snap out of it!" He blinked a few times, and turned back to the others. Ron and Hermione were too happily involved with each other to notice that they had lost his attention, and he was thankful for that.

"Sorry," he apologized, "my train of thought must have gone off track."

She merely nodded in acceptance and leaned her head against the seat, looking wearily out the window. They rode the rest of the way in silence, and upon reaching the Burrow, the boys and girls separated, two unwillingly, and two willingly, to unpack their things for the week ahead.

The feelings building in Harry were very foreign to him and the harder he tried to push them down, the more they grew, it seemed. When they exited the car, he felt Ginny's eyes pleading with him to remember what she had said and how she felt. He gathered up his things as quickly as possible and escaped to Fred and George's old room. He then took as long as humanly possible to unpack, fighting an inner battle with himself to get her out of his mind for her own protection. It left him drained and in a bad mood.

When he finally came down to dinner, he ended up seated at the farthest end of the table from her, and whether on purpose or not, he decided it was for the best and ate his dinner in relative silence. Mrs. Weasley was too preoccupied to notice, what with the new couple to laugh with and congratulate, and Moody and Lupin were too deeply engaged in conversation even if Harry had wanted to talk to them. When they were all done eating, he slipped off to the family room and eased into the sofa by the fire, closing his eyes against the throbbing of his scar. He'd gotten used to it for the most part but it never *helped* matters when it hurt. He sat this way for a few minutes, only opening his eyes again when Hermione showed up, alone.

"Hi," she said, sitting down next to him. "Ron's going to be talking with them for a while, so I decided to let them have some family time." She hesitated, "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

She looked at him as if she didn't believe that for a second.

He tried again, rolling his eyes, "Okay, I'm really worried about what happened last night. You and Ron seem to have gotten things worked out but it still feels like there's something unresolved. I just can't figure it out." He sighed in frustration and ran his hand through his bedraggled hair.

"Harry," she touched his arm and he jumped a little. "I'm sorry. I should never have kissed you, and I *certainly* should never have repeated... See, this *thing* we can do, it's going to take some practice, and some discipline. I feel so bad for letting that slip last night, and I'm mad at myself for getting into the situation in the first place. Maybe... maybe we can work on it this summer." She smiled half-heartedly.

Harry nodded. "Thanks. I wish it hadn't happened but I'm glad that *something* good came out of it."

She only nodded back, seeing that his heart was in his words but that he was still upset. She leaned back and turned to watch the fire.

"Was Ginny upset when she read the letter?" he blurted out.

Hermione was startled by the change of topic and her words were rushed as she answered.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. I didn't think you would mind if she read it, and she asked to, and I didn't want to tell her no. I was just so happy right then, from what you said. I didn't realize what she might think of it." She paused to take a breath, then continued more slowly, "She was... upset. She cried and... oh, Harry, I shouldn't be telling you this. It's not really my business."

A look of intense pain crossed his face and he shut his eyes for a moment.

"No, I'm glad you told me. I shouldn't have any secrets from you anyway." He paused and looked down at the floor, "You know what I wrote in that letter? I really do... I really, er..."

"I know," she said, "and I wish you'd realize that we're not going anywhere. I know you've tried to trust people before but you still haven't learned that we *can* love you, and do."

"Yeah, well, it never seems to work out very well for people who do that, does it?" His words were full of bitterness, and a sudden darkness crossed his face. Memories of Sirius crept over him, and of darkness and pain. He felt his throat getting tight and tears prickling in the corners of his eyes. Sirius had loved him, no doubt, but *because* he loved him, he had paid with his life. His parents loved him and they didn't live to see his second birthday. Cedric... well, he and Cedric had developed a mutual trust and he had been killed without a second thought, just because he was *near* Harry. Even though it had been years, he still felt the pain and guilt as if it were yesterday. And there were so many innocent, nameless others who had died at the hands of Voldemort, chalked up on an unwritten tally that he always kept in the back of his mind.

He felt himself getting angry with Hermione. He knew it was unjustified, but she – well, none of them – would back down. Their determination to be his friends meant a lot to him but the thought of any one of them dying because of him was more than he could take.

He looked up with a dark fire in his eyes. "You can't do it!" he hissed quietly. "If you stay with me, you'll end up dead, too!" His breath was starting to come more rapidly now, and his ears were filled with a dull ringing. He knew she was talking to him but he couldn't hear half of her words.

"Harry?" her voice was quivering and her own eyes shown with tears. "You're not going to push us away. Please don't do it! We've been in this together for *seven* years now, and you still don't realize it, do you? We're not going anywhere!" Her last words were spoken so loud that it brought his hearing back. The fire still burned in his eyes though, and he had no intention of letting her get her way.

"I've... I've been thinking, Harry. About ways we can help you, and I think... I think I've found something. Please just listen." He turned his head away but she could tell he was listening.

"Now this could be really hard, not just actually doing it, but letting yourself do it. I know you're strong Harry, and I know if you set your mind against it, you'll never let us in, but this could really work. I mean, we found Ron after all, why can't we use this to help you deal with some things too?"

"Spit it out," he snapped, "what's your idea?"

"Well, now I want you to really think about this, okay? It could help you a lot. I was thinking that maybe you could let us into your feelings. Maybe... maybe we could use *Memoria Acies* to let us *feel* your feelings. Imagine spreading your pain across four people, and how much better you'd feel after that. Then we could truly understand your pain and try to help you."

He turned back to face her, seething in anger and not even knowing why.

"Why would I want to do that? Why should *you* have to feel *my* pain? I'm the guilty one! I'm the one who's responsible for all these people getting killed. You shouldn't have any part in it. Let me handle my own problems, my own way!"

"And what's that way, Harry? By going off and brooding, bottling it all up inside! You should learn to let it go sometimes. Let us help you, it's why we're here. We love you, and we *want* to help you. As for it being your fault, it's *not*. How many times do we have to tell you that? It's not your fault, Harry. It's not! Voldemort is so full of hate and greed, he'd be killing people whether you were here or not. It's *his* fault, not yours. If there were no prophecy, you wouldn't have to fight him. It's not your fault that this is happening to you and to those around you. We chose to stand by you and we're not backing down."

She was now red in the face and almost as angry as he was.

"I don't have to fight him," he said quietly, "It's just the way it's going to be. The prophecy doesn't really mean anything."

Hermione looked at him completely dumbfounded.

"But... but I thought –"

"No," he said, "the prophecy doesn't *force* me to do anything. Dumbledore finally made me see it in a clearer way. I *do* have to fight Voldemort but not because of the prophecy." He paused for a moment, suddenly realizing that he needed to explain this to all of them.

"Hermione, I don't want to say this three times, can you get Ron and Ginny?" He pulled his glasses off and rubbed his hands across his face. Hermione was startled slightly by the dark lines under his eyes, and immediately felt a little guilty for having yelled at him. She got up from the sofa and went back into the kitchen, leaving Harry to work out how he was going to explain the intricacies of the prophecy to his three best friends.

When she reached the kitchen, a sea of redheads turned to watch her come in. She felt her face get a little warm, wondering what they were all thinking, and stopped at the end of the table. She hesitated for a moment.

"Harry wants to talk to us, Ron, and you too, Ginny." She watched as Ginny blushed at being included in whatever it was they were about to discuss, and smiled a little at her friend's

pleasure. She'd felt like that about Ron for a long time. She promised herself to talk to Ginny about it later.

Everyone watched curiously as they left the room but thankfully no one asked any questions. When they all arrived back in the family room, Harry had left his seat and was pacing back and forth in front of the fire. The look on his face betrayed a mix of both anxiety and exhaustion and Hermione hoped this wouldn't take long so they could let him get some rest. She knew that he only showed his emotions when he was tired, and he would probably be mad at himself tomorrow.

Harry stopped pacing briefly as they sat down. Ron and Hermione sat together on the sofa, and he noticed the pink tinge of both their ears as they reached out to hold hands. Ginny took a seat in the armchair closest to the fire, looking up at Harry as if nothing mattered in the world but what he was about to say. It shook his resolve slightly, seeing her willingness to listen and help. He wondered briefly if what Hermione said could really work, but pushed that away, returning to the prophecy and what he needed to tell them.

"Okay," he began, "Hermione and I were talking a few minutes ago and I realized that you all might be under the wrong impression regarding the prophecy." He steadied himself as their eyes widened in concern.

"I'm sure you know that the wording of the prophecy makes it sound like Voldemort and I have to fight each other because it's our destiny. But what's more important is... is the *idea* behind the prophecy. It boils down to the fact that I don't *have* to fight Voldemort."

The collective gasp in the room made him second guess why he was telling this to them. What if they tried to convince him not to fight? What if they gave up on him when he told them he was still going to?

"Then why do it?" Ginny asked. Harry was concerned to see her trembling but he had to give them an honest answer, no matter what the result.

"Because I have to," he said.

"But, but you just said –" Ron sputtered.

"I know what I just said," he sighed. This was going to be harder than he had thought. "I don't have to fight Voldemort. It's possible I could survive without ever facing him, by just running away and hiding... forever. The prophecy says neither of us can live while the other survives. It took me a long time to figure out what that really means, and I only did when Dumbledore helped explain it. It's like this: I can't *really* live while he's alive because he's always going to come after me. I can't *live*, not that I can't survive, but I can't *live*. I can't do the things I want and lead the life *I* want. So, in a way, I have to fight him if I want to live, if I want to live my *own* life." He stopped to give them a chance to think about it. It felt like several minutes before anyone spoke.

"Well," said Ron, "why *don't* you just run away. It's not like you'd have to be alone, I mean, we'd all go with you."

Harry had to smile at his friend's show of loyalty, but he shook his head.

"No, Voldemort would just pursue me. He knows part of the prophecy, the part that says I'm a danger to him. And... well, I can't just let him win. If there's a possibility that I can destroy him, then I have to do it. If he's going to keep killing and causing pain, I can't just let him do it. I have to fight. The prophecy says we have to fight, because *I* say we have to, not because it's my destiny or something." He paused again but not long enough for anyone else to speak.

"I know you're all thinking I should just run away, but I'm not going to. I have to stand up to Voldemort so that I can have the chance for a real life," he sighed and looked at the floor, "whether I get it or not. Now, if you want to leave, I won't blame you. You might not understand why I have to do this, and I certainly don't want any of you to get hurt, because it would be my fault. I've been thinking about this for a long time now, and I've made my decision. I have to go

against him.” He turned and stared into the fire, hugging himself tightly. It was a long time before anyone said anything.

“You prat!” Ron exclaimed, getting up from his seat and stalking toward Harry, who cowered a bit. “We’re not going anywhere, so stop trying to push us away!” Ron pointed a finger at him and jabbed him in the chest to emphasize each word.

“We. Are. Not. Going. Anywhere.”

Hermione joined him in an instant, her resolve clearly stated in her eyes. They stood next to each other holding hands and looking at him defiantly. He turned toward Ginny to relieve the pressure and felt a cold chill run down his spine. She was crying. Half of him was trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his heart, wanting to pull her close and comfort her, the other half strangely angry because she was the only holdout.

Suddenly, without warning, she jumped up and flung her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder. He put his arms loosely on her back, not knowing quite what to do with her outburst, and enjoying holding her a little more than he ought to.

“Harry,” she sniffed, “When are you going to learn? We love you and we’re going to stay by you until the end... and I mean growing old together, all of us.” She pulled away as suddenly as she had sprung at him, and he was surprised by the fierce look in her eye. She put one hand on her hip and pointed the other at his face.

“We are not going to leave you, and I for one would like to see you stop trying to make us! Next time, we might not take it so well, and you’ll find yourself hexed into next Tuesday.” She huffed and sat down again. Harry was so shocked by her reaction that he couldn’t control himself and burst out in chuckles.

“Ginny, you just looked so much like your mum, I love you!”

The silence that suddenly filled the room was so deafening he thought his ears had been hexed off.

“I mean, I think you’re great,” he sputtered, “it’s funny when you do that.” He sighed, “Look, I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that... well, I just didn’t mean it like that.” He looked away.

“It’s okay,” she said quietly, “I know what you meant. It’s fine.”

They all looked at each other uncomfortably for a few moments. Finally, Ron called Harry to go upstairs with him, trying to convince him to get some rest. Harry followed, glad for an excuse to leave the room.

When they reached the landing at Harry’s room, they paused as if they felt there were something that needed to be said, but weren’t sure what it was. Harry’s head was spinning, and he could barely hold himself up. He gripped the doorknob, leaning on it slightly, and rubbed his other hand roughly across his forehead. Ron only stared at him, clearly unsure of what to say. Harry just shook his head, said goodnight, and disappeared into the room behind him. When the door finally clicked shut, Ron was alone. He shook his head in wonder at his friend but then smiled as he thought of the *other* events of the day and of the happy dreams he would have of the girl he could now call *his*.

He was both nervous and excited as he climbed the rest of the stairs to his room. Hermione, the girl he’d secretly watched from afar, the most beautiful girl in his year, was now his *girlfriend*. The smile on his face broadened a little bit. It was still hard to believe, and even as he sat down on his flaming-orange bed, he questioned why she had chosen him. But then, in the end, she *had* chosen him, so maybe it didn’t matter. He changed into his pajamas and laid back onto his bed, not even bothering to get under the covers. His eyes trailed around the room but never focused on anything. His brain was busy imagining her sitting downstairs with Ginny, talking and laughing. He could almost see the smile on her face and hear the warmth in her voice. It was a warmth that he’d never truly heard until today. He’d always loved her voice, whether it was

whispering in his ear, or yelling at him from across the room. But now, it had an added facet, one that was just for him, a softness, an under-layer exposing her real feelings. It gave him a wonderful warm feeling knowing that that voice was just for him. It was his alone.

Of course, he knew there were many things that would change now. It was going to be like getting to know her all over again. His nerves jumped at the thought and a tiny voice wondered what would happen if either of them were hurt during the war. He shoved that aside with force, and concentrated on the future. Unsure really of what their future might bring, and worried about making any little mistake with her, he vowed to take his time and begin their new relationship slowly. That's what his dad had always taught him, right? He thought back to the many talks he had shared with his dad about girls, and he remembered learning how much more conservative the wizarding world was than the Muggle world. Of course it seemed obvious now: the sovereignty of the teachers, the common school robes, the caution that most new couples showed toward each other. He recalled even hearing that many boys still asked permission from a girl's parents before asking for her hand in marriage. He knew he didn't want to make any mistakes with Hermione, and that no matter what it took, he would always give her whatever she wanted, because she was *his* girl.

Back downstairs, that girl sat with Ginny in front of the comfortable fire where they were talking quietly.

"It just hurts," Ginny said, "when he says things like that, is all. Especially in front of everyone," Ginny said dully. She wasn't crying, nor was she happy. She just felt numb.

"I know," replied Hermione, "and I'm not even going to say he's got a lot on his mind. That may be true but it's no excuse for treating you like that." Then a small smile spread across her face, "Still... he did say he loves you."

Ginny shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, but he didn't really mean it."

"Of course he did," Hermione shot back, "He does love you. The problem is he still thinks that it's the love of a sister."

Ginny sighed, her face was turned to the fire, but her eyes were focused elsewhere. "I don't know why I do this to myself. I should just get over him and move on, date somebody normal, like you said. But I've hurt for so long, I don't even know what normal is. Hermione, he's a part of my life, more than ever. I can't give him up... I mean I can't give up on him... Argh! I can't even say it right! We're closer now than we've ever been, and he needs friendship now more than he ever has. I wish I could give him everything he needs, and get over him at the same time. I guess I'm just doomed to spend my whole life being his friend, and never really anything else."

Hermione looked at her sympathetically.

Ginny continued, "I've tried getting over him before. I've dated other guys, it's just..."

"None of them compare to him," Hermione added softly. It wasn't a question.

Ginny turned away from the fire, "Ron?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Hermione blushed and nodded slowly.

Ginny reached out to her, showing her first genuine smile. "I'm glad you finally worked things out. He may be my brother, and the world's biggest prat, but he likes you." She paused and looked down for a moment. "How long have you liked him?"

"Well, it's been coming on so gradually, I hardly know. I suppose I would have to say since first year."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Since first year?"

"Well, he did save me from the troll... He was really brave, knocking it out with its own club..." Now it was Hermione's turn to look far-off, with a silly grin and goggly eyes.

Ginny tried not to laugh at the new Hermione sitting next to her, “Ron? Brave? I always thought he was a bit of a git myself.” She bit her lip, realizing that it was far easier to laugh about Ron than it was to face the truth about Harry.

“Maybe so but I like him anyway. And now I know he’s liked me for ages too but never could pluck up the courage to do something about it. So, that means there’s still hope for Harry, who’s an even bigger prat than Ron.” Hermione tried to look serious when she said this but couldn’t stop the corners of her mouth from twitching a little.

Ginny could only smile and try to steer the conversation away from herself and Harry. When she finally went up to bed nearly an hour later, the joys of her friend had completely driven Harry from her thoughts, until the darkness of her room brought back the old feelings. She gave a long, depressed sigh as she climbed into bed.

She knew she’d never date another boy without comparing him to Harry. It was such a fruitless cause even trying that she suddenly came to a realization – Harry was really all that mattered. Even if he never did feel the same way about her, it didn’t matter. He still needed her, still needed her support. There was no one besides her who could give to him so completely of her emotions and support. If they were going to get through this war, they had to stick together, no matter what, and she would be right by his side. Even if it would be better to be with him as more than just his friend, it was still the best choice just to be *with* him. An ironic smile crept onto her face as she drifted off to sleep: it had been seven years, what was another one or two?

The next morning they all converged on the Weasley kitchen at mid-morning to share some breakfast. Harry sat in the same seat he had the night before, and upon examining his plate, was surprised to find a piece of toast with butter and jam. He looked up quickly and saw Ginny at the other end of the table, giving her eggs much more attention than one normally attributes to such things. He could have sworn she had been looking at him but dismissed it as his imagination. As much as he wanted to keep his feelings for her under wraps, he appreciated the gesture she made every morning with a simple piece of toast. Strangely, it was probably the best gift anyone had ever given to him, and he hadn’t even asked for it.

After having a bit of a lie-in that morning, Harry felt much better than he had the day before, though he still carefully avoided Ginny the rest of the day. For her part, she managed to keep her eyes away from him most of the time. Even when Mrs. Weasley sent them into the garden for a bit of de-gnoming, she stayed as far from him as possible. In fact, she was so intent on it, she didn’t even realize he was doing the same.

After a brief lunch, during which no one said much of anything, they all grudgingly agreed to start studying for their apparition training, which would begin the next day. Hermione spread their books out on the floor in front of them and handed out schedules for the week ahead. She claimed that without them, they would have no chance of passing at all. Ginny was too happy about learning Apparition a year early to care, Ron was gladly doing anything Hermione asked of him now, and Harry just went along with it because it gave him something to focus his mind on.

When they entered the Ministry the next day, it was under the heavy guard of members of the Order and Ministry Aurors. They were led to the same guard Harry had met in fifth year for wand inspection but this time Harry had no intention of giving his up. Fortunately, the power of being famous helped him today, and Harry grumbled quietly as the wizard gazed transfixed at his scar, and let him pass without question. When the others had passed their inspections, they proceeded to one of the open lifts, and with almost no interruption at all, arrived at level six, the Department of Magical Transportation.

They were greeted at the desk by a young woman who was both cheerful and efficient. Their paperwork was quickly completed, their trainer was assigned, and before they knew what had happened, they stood in a large room and a man entered holding a clipboard. He was about

identical in height to Harry, with a round face and a short black mustache. His robes were crisp and he walked with a decidedly quick step, although he didn't appear to be in a hurry.

Harry looked around and noticed that other than a few portable walls, the room appeared quite empty. The floor was thickly padded, as were the walls. The light pouring in through the many skylights scattered stars all around the high ceiling.

"Same as the rest of the ministry, magical weather. Though with the new minister, we've been getting pretty much the same weather as outdoors lately. There was a time once when we got nothing but rain for weeks on end. Magical maintenance was angling for a raise that year." Harry looked around and saw that the speaker was none other than the man who had entered behind them, whom he assumed was their trainer.

"Yeah, I've heard that before," Harry muttered.

The man walked over to them and offered his hand. "My name is Sir Andrew Catskill, Director of Introductory Apparition Training." They introduced themselves and shook his hand while he proceeded to explain their training.

"Due to your special circumstances, we have accepted you into the extremely condensed one-week Apparition class. You will live and breathe Apparition for the next five days, culminating with your examination on Saturday. Each morning you will arrive here no later than eight-thirty a.m. We will then discuss theory until ten, after which you will have a short break. Practical training will go until one in the afternoon, then you are free to leave. You are responsible for your own transportation to and from the Ministry, and I trust you have already arranged such. When you leave, you *will* spend the rest of your day studying. I do not recommend practicing away from the eyes of a licensed trainer. However, I believe that one may already be scheduled to assist you in the afternoons and evenings, if required.

"I expect your full cooperation in this endeavor, otherwise you will not be successful. Apparition training usually lasts 12 weeks, and we only offer this condensed version in very unusual situations. I have not been apprised of your situation, and I will not ask you questions about it. I have been assigned to your class by my superior, and I plan to teach it as I would any other class. Are there any questions before we begin?"

Harry looked around and was slightly surprised by Hermione's lack of questions. As no one else had any either, they began.

They started by studying the history of Apparition and then moved on to its appropriate uses and courtesies. Harry wasn't surprised to find out that it was improper to simply appear inside someone's house without first notifying them. He almost laughed out loud imagining a wizard suddenly appearing dramatically in the lounge of the Dursley's home with no forewarning. Of course it would have been nearly as funny even if they *had* informed his uncle first!

Harry found himself deeply engrossed in the subject and wished all of his classes at Hogwarts had been as interesting. Sir Andrew was an excellent teacher, extremely knowledgeable, but able to put things on the level of his pupils. Before Harry knew it, their theoretical lessons were over, the break had ended, and the time had come for their first practical lesson.

Sir Andrew spread the four of them out in a simple line, leaving enough room between that they might have been able to touch each other had they stretched out their arms. Harry was a little worried to find himself standing next to Ginny, because he didn't want her to see his embarrassment if he made a mistake. Ginny only smiled briefly at him, then turned her attention back to Sir Andrew while making sure her hair was tight behind her head. Their teacher stood in front of them at an angle, and with his wand, drew boxes on the floor about four feet away from each of them.

"Your goal," he explained, "is to Apparate into your box quickly and cleanly. You will not need your wands, so please pocket them.

“Now, I want you to look into the square I have drawn in front of you. In your mind’s eye, picture yourself standing in it, as if it were where you have always longed to be. It is your own place, a location set up just for you. With this idea in your head, close your eyes and imagine stepping into empty space and reappearing inside the box. Apparating is simply a matter of will. The strong minded often find this easier than the weak minded, and I believe you all fall into the first category. Your magic will carry you there if it is where you truly want to be. If you are distracted by thoughts of lunch or an afternoon nap on the lawn, you may very well find yourself suddenly standing in your mother’s kitchen, or in the grass by the garden. Of course you can’t do that from here because of the wards, but that’s a topic for another day.

“Let’s try it now. Remember, close your eyes, picture yourself stepping into space, and appearing where it is you really want to be – the box drawn on the floor in front of you. Ready? Proceed.”

Harry felt silly standing there with his eyes closed, picturing himself appearing inside the box. But he had to give Sir Andrew the benefit of the doubt and try his hardest. He imagined that the box held his favorite chair from the Gryffindor common room, and that it was waiting there just for him, beckoning him to it. He felt himself slipping into its comfortable grasp and leaning back into its soft depths. He quietly pushed aside the thought of a red-haired girl peacefully reading her favorite book in it. Summoning up his strength, he did as instructed and imagined stepping out into space, focused entirely on where he wanted to end up.

The feeling of what happened next was difficult for him to describe later on. It was as if a door were closing in front of him, and he needed to jump through it quickly before it did. The fear of missing the opening, or getting his arm stuck nearly made him lose his concentration, but when he opened his eyes, he was suddenly filled with the greatest feeling of exhilaration, nearly as good as flying. He had done it. He had actually done it! And he had also managed, at the same time, to conjure up the chair from the common room and find himself seated in it. He quickly tucked down beside him the small book that sat resting on the arm.

Sir Andrew looked at him wide-eyed and a grin spread across his face as he hurried over.

“Mr. Potter! That was very remarkable indeed. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen it done quite that way but I must say I’m very impressed. On the first try, too!” He scribbled notes furiously on his clipboard, then nodded to Harry before stepping back to the side. Harry looked at the others and felt his face go red at their looks of surprise. He thought he even detected a disgruntled snort from Ron at the far end of the line. As comfortable as the chair was, he climbed out of it, and with a wave of his wand, banished it to the side of the room – it could still come in handy later, he thought.

In the minutes that followed, only Ron was able to make the leap as Harry had, though without the comfortable landing. After some twenty minutes of the girls trying, Sir Andrew called them all back together.

“I see that we are about halfway there, and I would like to take a few moments to have you regroup. It may be helpful for you to learn from each other. Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, if you would please explain how it was that you managed to Apparate your first time, while the others listen, it might help them. When they are done, Ms. Weasley and Ms. Granger, would you please try to explain your block to them. Sometimes trying to find the words to explain it will help you to achieve it.” He ushered them into a group, then walked away to inspect the chair Harry had accidentally conjured.

Once huddled together, they mostly just looked at each other for a few moments, too nervous to speak. Finally, Ron broke out with, “Gosh, that was hard!” He ran his hand through his hair and let out a sigh of relief. It was just what the others needed, because they all laughed and then started talking.

"I guess," Harry began, blushing just a little, "I just pictured what he said. I imagined the box holding something that I really wanted. It was sort of comfortable to me, and I could see myself ending up there very easily. I don't know... it's like," he looked down, his ears turning more pink, "it's like smelling your mum's cooking, and knowing that I get to eat it in a few minutes."

The others laughed, and Ginny added, "Well, don't get too caught up in that, you might just beat us home, and then there'd be no food left for the rest of us!" Harry gave her a little shove, and she pushed him back, smacking him playfully on the arm.

"Hey, now," said Ron, "no fighting, we're here to learn, remember?" Hermione beamed at him, and nodded quickly in agreement. They all took their places again.

Another hour later and frustration was setting in from all sides. The girls hadn't been able to move an inch, and neither Harry nor Ron had been able to do it again. Sir Andrew finally blew his whistle sharply and they all gathered near the chair Harry had conjured earlier.

"Well now, that was fun, wasn't it?" Sir Andrew smiled around at them. Harry couldn't understand his happiness about their trying but wasn't about to argue. Ron sat down on the floor and closed his eyes, while Ginny looked out the window dejectedly. Hermione appeared near tears and took a seat next to Ron.

"Why all the long faces? You can't really have expected to do this on the first try, can you?" He walked around them, motioning with his arms.

"Apparition is a difficult thing, and rarely do I ever see anyone do it right on the first day," he smiled at Harry and Ron, "What I'd like you to do is this: go home, take a break and eat a healthy lunch, then get out your books and study what we've covered this morning. Remember, it's all about focus. Studying helps to focus the mind, and you may find that by immersing yourself in the material, you are better suited to actually perform tomorrow."

Hermione was the only one who looked at all excited about going home to study, and the others followed her quietly out of the room and down the lift. No one spoke much as they met their escorts and left the Ministry. Even the ride home was fairly uneventful, except for the occasional grumbling of Ron's stomach, at which they all had to laugh.

Only when they finally reached the Burrow did any of them start to show signs of life again. Harry started to feel better the moment they walked through the door, although he partly attributed it to having bumped into Ginny on the way in and sharing a small smile with her.

After a lunch of roast beef sandwiches, they grudgingly picked up their books and settled down to study. After their teaching in the morning, Harry almost found the subject matter interesting and was mildly eager to finish the first two chapters on the magical creation of Apparition and its modern day uses. He ended up so wrapped up in it that by the time dinner rolled around, he hardly noticed that he was now reading by candlelight.

As they sat around the kitchen table, a strange owl landed gracefully on the window sill. Mrs. Weasley let it in and they all watched as she untied a rather sizeable letter from it and released it back into the warm evening air.

"Who could that be for?" Ron asked with a mouth full of mashed potatoes. A small bit slipped out onto his chin, and Hermione dabbed it off with her napkin, laughing at his reddening face.

"Why, it's for Hermione!" Mrs. Weasley said, surprised. "Who could be sending you something this size, dear?"

Hermione looked up, her eyes ablaze with curiosity, and accepted the heavy scrolls. She slid her wand smoothly across the seal and unrolled it on the table in front of her. Ron leaned in close to read over her shoulder and she didn't bother to shoo him off. As she read on, her face lit up with pride, while his took on lighter and lighter shades of gray.

Finally she rolled it back up and put her hands on the table, as if to steady them. Ron leaned back in his chair, looking deathly pale, and Hermione began to explain.

"It's a letter from the Wellshanter League," she said quietly, clearly struggling to hold back the awe in her voice. "They want me to become a member."

Harry watched everyone's reactions curiously, unsure of exactly what she was talking about. Mr. Weasley smiled broadly and nodded his head slowly while Mrs. Weasley held her hand over her gaping mouth. Ron continued to look like stone, while Ginny looked genuinely happy and touched Hermione's shoulder with her hand.

"Are you going to accept?" she asked quietly.

Hermione turned to her with an obvious gleam in her eye. "No," she replied, "I'm not. I'm just amazed they even want me."

Almost before she could finish, a cacophony of sounds burst forth in the room.

"Hermione, dear, are you sure that's what you want to do?"

"Hermione, think of all of the wonderful things you would get to study, why, I bet they do all kinds of research on Muggles."

"But... but it's what you've always wanted..."

"Are you sure?" one voice asked quietly, coming from a very unsure-looking Ron.

"Yes, I *am* sure," she replied, looking him in the eye. He let a small smile tug at one side of his mouth.

Mr. Weasley reached across the table and put his hand on hers. "Hermione, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. You're talking about the *most* respected magical research group in the *world*. Are you sure you want to pass that up?" His voice wasn't lecturing, but kind and curious.

"Yes," she said softly, "I do." She took a deep breath then looked across the table, directly into Harry's eyes. "I have my reasons for staying, one of whom is sitting across from me." She turned to Ron, "Ron is another," she turned to Ginny, "and Ginny is another."

"Oh sure, just put me second," Ron teased, unable to contain his smile any longer.

"Well..." she paused, "Harry is the most important man in my life, you know." She fluttered her eyelashes across at him, as Ginny nearly collapsed onto the floor in laughter, while Ron shot daggers at her.

Hermione took Ron's hand in her own and immediately he forgot why he was mad. She turned to everyone and explained herself.

"You see, I've got a list of priorities. You can see it if you want." She bit her lip and turned to Ron, "Should I go get it, so everyone can see?"

"No," he laughed, "I'm sure they can imagine."

Harry tried his hardest to contain his laughter, and in the process managed to choke. Mr. Weasley had to pound his back several times before he could breathe again.

"Sorry," he croaked.

"It's quite all right," Hermione replied airily, "As I was saying, there are things in life that are more important than a job. We've all," she motioned to herself, Ron, and Ginny, "promised to stand by Harry's side through this war. I'm not trying to say he's weak, it's just what friends do." She raised her voice and looked directly at him, "There are some risks worth taking!"

Harry felt her eyes drilling into him again and looked up, a guilty smile on his face.

"There are things more important," she continued, "like eating this pudding, and defeating Voldemort." She pulled back at their reactions, looking scandalized, "What, it's not like I'm going to leave it for Ron to eat!" Then she looked around at them, proud of her joke. Everyone rolled their eyes.

"Well, I am a Gryffindor after all," she added, "and we have to work together to do what's right, even if it means giving up... other things." She looked down at the scrolls in her hands.

"Hermione," Ron said, "I... I don't... You should go. Really."

"No," she answered softly, "I'm not going to. I knew that a few job offers might come in, and I knew I wasn't going to take them. I want to stay. That's that."

Harry saw Ron's smile and he glanced at Ginny. She was watching Hermione proudly, clearly approving of her decision. He looked away quickly when her gaze turned on him.

Later, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat by the fire – Ginny had been roped into washing dishes – Harry decided it was time to bring up his plans for the summer. He watched his friends talking quietly on the sofa before deciding to interrupt them.

"So I've been thinking about what we should do this summer." They turned to look at him. "And I was just wondering what your plans are." He looked from one to the other.

"Well," Ron began, "I didn't have anything. I guess I just thought we'd be helping you."

Hermione nodded and said, "Right, we're going to help you. We can study defense, and practice hexes. I can come up with a list of everything we should be trying to learn!"

Harry smiled at her reaction. It was just as he expected.

"Well, what if I already had someone to do that for us?"

Ron cocked his head to one side looking curious, while Hermione looked a bit disappointed. "Who?" they asked together.

"Before we left school, Dumbledore told me that he'd received an invitation for us. It asked if we'd like to go and study for the summer... with the Teacher."

Ron's eyes opened wide in anticipation and Hermione started fidgeting nervously.

"We'll have to get permission from your parents of course but he's already invited us to go. He wants us to spend the whole summer there, studying and practicing. I've got to warn you though," he smiled, "it's hard. I mean, he can be tough. We've been working on some things for a long time that I still can't –"

"What can't you do, Harry?" Ginny asked from the doorway, drying her hands on a towel. Harry just stared back at her.

"Harry's just asked us to go study with the Teacher for the summer," Hermione said in awe.

Harry watched as Ginny's smile faded slowly away.

"Harry," she asked quietly, "why couldn't you ask me, too? You know I want to help. I could... no, never mind. It's fine."

She turned and walked back through the door. Harry watched her go, his mouth hanging slightly open and his eyes showing nothing but concern.

"But, but," he stammered, "she's invited too! Dumbledore all but told me to invite her and we need her help!" He put his face in his hands, "Well, that was good."

Ron just shook his head. "It'll be fine, Harry, really. She's like this all the time. Just give her a bit, she'll be back, and she'll be happy again. You can tell her then."

Hermione punched him in the arm, looking quite angry.

"We can't do that," she said, "Ginny's hurt, she thinks we didn't include her."

"Yeah, but she's always like that," Ron tried to reason.

"No, you just *think* she's always like that. I swear, Ron, just because you finally realized you like *me* apparently doesn't mean you've developed any actual emotions yet."

Ron looked scathed, "Of course I have! It's just, she really is like this. Harry, you know what she's like, don't you?"

He turned to Harry but his head kept turning. Harry was gone.

"Humph," Hermione grunted, "at least he knows what to do."

As Harry walked through the kitchen, he could still hear the voices of his friends arguing over what should be done. For him, though, there was only one thing that could be done. He had to find her and try to explain.

He looked around the kitchen but found only Mrs. Weasley. She indicated the back door and smiled knowingly at him. He smiled back weakly, then stepped outside. It was still warm but a stiff breeze blew by him, messing his hair up even more than usual. He looked around but she wasn't on the back porch. Walking out into the garden, he paused for a moment, straining his ears to hear something fleeting on the voice of the wind. It sounded like a sniff and a sob. He turned in circles with his eyes closed, feeling, rather than looking for the source of the sound. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and started walking. The sound became stronger, and the sheer pain of it made his heart ache. She was hurt, and *he* had hurt her.

Turning a corner, he spotted her small form sitting on a carved stone bench. Her head was down in her hands and he could see her shoulders shake with each quaking breath. He walked toward her, and she lifted her head at the sound of his footfalls.

"Harry, go away," she said.

He unconsciously reached out to her and rested his hand on her shoulder, taking a seat by her side.

"Ginny," he said, surprised by the depth of his voice, "I'm sorry. I should have waited. That wasn't how you were meant to hear that."

She turned her head further from him.

"Please?" he asked, shocked by the sudden feelings that accompanied that word. It was pleading, and trusting, and wholly unobstructed. His entire heart went into that single word, and she turned her head.

"You were meant to hear it like this," he took her hand, "Ginny, it would be an honor for me if you would come with me this summer. Will you, please? I can't go without you."

There was a great pause while she searched his eyes, then the smallest of nods and a twitch of her mouth told him yes. It was several quiet minutes before her tears subsided. She laid her head on his shoulder, periodically wiping at her face. He didn't know why, but for some reason, he wasn't uncomfortable. He remembered her hugging him after Ron's dramatic return home but none of the same feelings were present now, so he held her just as close, willing her to feel some of his comforting thoughts but still too afraid to say them out loud.

Finally, she rose from her seat and grasped his hand. Together they walked back up to the house in silence.

The next two days passed in a blur. Apparating seemed to be all they talked about and Hermione was on a roll, writing to, or asking every witch or wizard she knew for advice and for descriptions of their first time learning to Apparate. The events of Monday night passed apparently unnoticed. Harry never brought them back up until it was time to avail Mr. and Mrs. Weasley of their plans for the summer.

"Mr. Weasley," he said after dinner one night, "I don't think Dumbledore ever mentioned that I've been studying with a man named John. Well, I usually just call him the Teacher. I used to go every few weeks during school for a couple of days to learn, er... defense." Harry felt his ears redden a bit, he was still uncomfortable getting special attention, even if it was to teach him how to defend himself against Voldemort.

"I see," said Mr. Weasley, "and where do you go for this... training?"

"Well, you see, er, it's not... well, I don't know," he raised his shoulders in a shrug. "I think it might be somewhere in the States but I've always Portkeyed there from Dumbledore's office. Anyway, he invited the four of us to go there this summer, after we take our Apparition tests. He wants to work with all of us."

"Well," Mr. Weasley replied evenly, "I think that would be a very good thing to do."

They all stared at him.

"But, Dad, don't you even want to hear what Harry's learned?" Ron asked.

"Yes, I *would* like to hear about it, but I can agree first, can't I?" He smiled at Harry, "Harry, I trust you, and I trust Dumbledore, and if you would like to tell me more about it, I'd love to hear it."

Over the next half-hour, Harry explained in detail the sorts of things he had been learning from the Teacher. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were all equally eager to listen given that Harry had never properly explained his training to them either. Sometimes they nodded in approval, other times they smirked at his embarrassment, and they always gasped appropriately at the right points in his stories. It felt good to tell them everything, he realized, knowing that it was long overdue. When he finally reached the end, they decided to talk to the Grangers the next day to ask their permission for Hermione to go. She assured them that it would be fine and they shouldn't worry about making it sound too dangerous.

As Harry lay in bed that night, his mind kept wandering back to the look on Ginny's face as he told story after story around the dinner table. She had been so truly happy, he couldn't remember the last time he had seen her smile like that, *or look at him like that*. In a way it reminded him of how she had once behaved around him; shy and removed, blushing at the slightest glance from him. Tonight, though, had been something different. A hint of pride was mixed in with her excitement, and Harry felt almost giddy about it. She was *proud* of him. It was a different feeling than he remembered from years past. It felt good, and right. He remembered always feeling slightly embarrassed by her... well, not really *by* her, rather *for* her, when she would run from the room or put her elbow in the butter. But now it was somehow different. She was so much more herself than she had ever been. She had the confidence to smile at him and look at him, while he now had the trust to want her with him while they stood side-by-side and learned from the Teacher.

Harry tried to hide a smile at the thought of her standing next to him, learning the same magic, trying the same spells, practicing day after day. Oh yes, it was going to be a wonderful summer! With that thought he drifted off to sleep and pleasant dreams.

As they entered the Ministry the next day, thoughts of a certain book flitted across Harry's mind. It was, in fact, the same image he'd used the past two days to Apparate successfully, the book that he had seen in Ginny's lap in his memories. He felt his face grow just a little warm at the thought and hoped that the others didn't notice.

Ginny's book. He'd watched her without even realizing it, for so long, sitting quietly, peacefully, reading it. It was a safety net for her and he knew that anytime she was feeling sad or upset about something, she'd end up in that chair with that book. It must have given her such comfort, and Harry was glad for it.

Fortunately for him, his friends were too engrossed in their own practice to notice that every time Harry conjured a chair, a small book also appeared on its arm. Once or twice he thought he saw a strange look on Ginny's face, but it was gone just as quickly and he dismissed it as nothing.

Sir Andrew continued to praise Harry for his aptitude but as the others were coming along well with their own skills, his time was becoming more evenly split with them. Their studies in the morning continued to hold Harry's attention, covering everything from Apparition distance to comparing the internal magic of Apparition to that of Portkeys and other magical transportation.

As their lessons concluded Wednesday afternoon, Sir Andrew explained their topics of study for the following days.

"Tomorrow we'll begin discussing approved Apparition locations and international Apparition laws. These are both critical to your being able to move about without breaking any laws or regulations, as well as planning your travel appropriately. On Friday we'll go over some

more advanced subjects including anti-Apparition wards and side-along Apparition. Finally we'll conclude with a brief review of this week's material and information about the licensing procedure. Are there any questions?"

Hermione looked for a moment like she wanted to ask something but appeared to decide against it on seeing Ron's face. He grimaced and rubbed a hand over his stomach. Ordinarily, Harry wouldn't have expected her to go along with it, but she merely turned her head away, hiding a small grin, and shook her head.

They partook of another full lunch provided by Mrs. Weasley and then spent the afternoon studying. Harry was starting to find the study of Apparition quite enjoyable now, although he couldn't deny that some of that enjoyment came from the proximity of Ginny and the satisfaction of finally having a common class with her. He often found himself seated next to her, engaged in deep magical theory discussion, while Ron and Hermione formed their own study group. He found he didn't mind at all. Ginny's depth of knowledge in many areas impressed Harry and the two of them were a perfect complement to each other in studying.

After dinner, Harry began to feel the telltale prickling of his nerves, which only increased after the quick trip through the fireplace flue to the Granger's house. He swiped his hands on his pants and greeted Hermione's parents cordially, trying to hide his concern through a forced smile. Only when Ginny purposely took a seat by his side and threaded her fingers into his did he begin to relax a little. His nerves now had something else to busy themselves with: the sensation of her hand in his. It was nearly enough for him to forget why they were there at all. Apparently it was also nearly enough to make Hermione forget why they were there, as she kept watching them, and smiled to herself so often that she missed some questions from her parents.

It turned out that the Grangers *were* rather concerned about their plans for studying with the Teacher. Hermione had not told them about the letter she received from the Wellshanter League, but they inquired about other prospects until she finally informed them, politely but firmly, that she was going to help Harry before doing anything else. In the end, they were more worried about *why* their daughter needed to learn such advanced magic than the actual teaching of it, but they grudgingly agreed to let her go.

After promising to visit again soon, Hermione hugged and kissed her parents, collected a few things from her bedroom, and they left. Back at the Burrow, she explained her thoughts to them all, now well out of hearing range of her parents.

"Of course they're going to be worried. *I* know it's not safe, but honestly, I am of age now and asking them is really only a courtesy. I mean, I love them, I really do, but sometime I have to start leading my own life."

"Hermione," said Ron thoughtfully, "I think you've been doing that for some time now."

She smiled sweetly at him and took his hand, blushing pink.

"Oh how sweet, Ron," Ginny said, screwing up her face and pretending to gag, while Harry fell out of his seat laughing. Ron's ears turned red, but instead of being angry, he stuck his tongue out at her.

"You're just jealous," he said, "because you don't have a boyfriend."

In an instant, Ginny's wand was drawn, she flew across the room and carefully aimed it at Ron's nose, all faster than he could blink.

"You can't do that," Ron said cheerfully.

"Oh yeah, who's going to stop me?" she snarled.

"Well, besides Mum, you're underage. You can't do magic at home."

Ginny swayed slightly on the spot, then pocketed her wand and huffed out of the room.

Harry frowned at Ron. "Nice going, now I've got to go straighten that out too. Way to make her feel wanted."

Ron at least had the decency to look sorry as Harry pushed open the door and walked out. As soon as he was gone, Hermione's voice sounded behind him, scolding Ron.

Ginny wasn't hard to find this time, as she had only gone as far as the fireplace. She stood facing the stone hearth, and Harry walked up behind her feeling a strange desire to reach around her and pull her close. He shook it off and instead contented himself with his hand on her arm. She jumped a little at his touch but then half-smiled at him.

"All right, Ginny?" he asked.

"All right," she replied, "I just don't know why he has to do that, to rub it in like that."

"Well, that's Ron, the emotional range of a teaspoon."

She laughed, and Harry watched as her shoulders relaxed a little.

"Sometimes he just makes me feel... like I'm still not one of the group," she said quietly. "Even without what he said, I still feel that way sometimes." She sighed deeply, then added, "I don't know why I'm telling you this..."

"No," he said firmly, "you're as important as any of us. I know I don't help matters that much myself. It was just stupid of me the other night not to wait for you before asking about the Teacher. I'm sorry, I really am, but... please believe me, you're important to us... to me. I don't know what I'd do without you, with those two together now." He kicked the floor a little. "It'd be awful lonely without you around."

"Thanks," she said shyly, and he could see a bit of pink in her ears. "I'd better be going to bed now anyhow, but..." She turned a little on the spot, with a small gleam in her eye, then pounced, hugging him fiercely before going upstairs. He could only watch her go, smiling, as her ponytail brushed back and forth across her neck.

Get a hold of yourself, he thought, *she's still off-limits.* His smile faded away, and then he too went upstairs for bed.

Once again, time sped by in a blur, and Harry found himself lying awake in bed on Saturday morning with one thought in his head; would he pass his exam? The Apparition exams were to take place at noon, in the same hall they had practiced in all week. Sir Andrew was to meet them there and promised to stay for moral support, but a different examiner would actually proctor the test.

At breakfast, Harry looked around the table and was relieved to see he wasn't the only one who looked nervous. Ron sat idly picking at his food while Hermione fretted in her seat, alternately taking a bite and then turning to check an answer in her book. Ginny hadn't even bothered to get any food and just sat leaning against the wall with her eyes closed.

Before they knew it, a knock at the door signaled the arrival of their Ministry escorts and they filed out and into the waiting car. The drive to the Ministry was as fast as ever, considering just how far it really was, and they talked very little. A few remarks about the weather and some musings about where they would have to Apparate to was all they could muster.

At the Ministry, Sir Andrew greeted them as normally as ever, his wide smile and energetic pace helping to ease their fears somewhat as he led them into the familiar hall. It appeared much as ever, except for the addition of a small table to one side where two people sat, looking over four file folders.

"Mr. Worthington and Ms. Kingsbury will actually be observing your exams today. I'll be around, in and out and that sort of thing. Not to worry," he added, winking sideways at them, "you'll do fine. I've never had a better class."

For a moment Harry thought nothing of his statement but his curiosity began to get the better of him.

"Uh, sir? Is that true?"

Sir Andrew clasped his hand on Harry's shoulder and looked him in the eye.

“Well, yes it is. I’ve been teaching this class for twenty-three years and you’ve impressed me more than any class I’ve had. Make no mistake, there’s something unique about the four of you. You share a common heart, a desire, if you will, to prove yourselves. Yes, I have no doubt you’ll do fine today. Good luck.” He tipped his hat at them and disappeared back through the door again.

“Well, shall we get started then?” a voice asked. Mr. Worthington had risen and came around to the front of the table. “I understand from Sir Andrew that you all have grasped the technique very well. That should make our testing easier, no splinching to repair – always nice not to have to reassemble people. Now, as there are two of us presiding over your test, this should go nice and fast.”

He turned back to the table for a moment, studied their files and then faced them again.

“I believe we’ll start with Ms. Granger and Ms. Weasley. Let the ladies go first, eh?” His partner rolled her eyes but got up and came around the table as well.

“Miss Granger?” she asked, “If you’ll come with me.”

“And I’ll take Miss Weasley,” he said.

Harry and Ron watched in concern as the girls were led off through a side door that seemed to have just appeared. Turning to each other, they shrugged and walked over to a window. The sun was shining and a few clouds drifted lazily by. Harry pulled his wand and spun it between his fingers, smiling as a pair of comfy chairs appeared neatly next to him. Taking a seat, he tipped his head back and closed his eyes, wondering nervously what kinds of testing the girls were going through right now.

While they waited, the two boys talked of Quidditch and school and studying, never staying on one subject too long. The chairs were comfortable and the sun was warm. Harry found himself becoming quite relaxed and noticed that Ron also was looking rather content. Over the course of an hour or so they alternately chatted and were quiet. The room was just starting to get a little too warm when two figures appeared running full speed toward them. Before Harry knew what hit him, a short red-head was wrapped around him, laughing and smiling with a happiness that warmed him through. He looked over at Ron and saw that Hermione had buried her head in his shoulder. Harry nearly choked with laughter as he heard very un-Hermione-like squeals muffled in Ron’s shirt.

Ginny pulled away from him suddenly, with a blush that spread across her whole face. Harry he could almost feel the heat but pretended not to notice.

“We passed!” she screamed, “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be, we only had to go just county to county and then once cross-country.”

“You’ll be fine,” Hermione added, seeing the look of fear on Ron’s face. “Really, you will, it wasn’t any harder than doing it right here. You just have to concentrate.”

“Yeah, easy for you to say, you’re done.”

“Well, I still think you’ll – “

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley,” a voice interrupted.

Harry turned and saw the examiners standing by their table again. He turned to Ron and nodded. “Well then, shall we?”

Ron nodded grimly back and they walked across the room and through the door. Oddly, what waited on the other side was no different than the room they had just left. They stepped in and Mr. Worthington held up a photo for them both to look at. It showed a room again very similar to the one they were in but with bright yellow walls instead of plain white.

“You are both to Apparate to this room. It is located just on the other side of the building, to the west. Please proceed when you’re ready, one of us will be waiting there to greet you.”

Harry turned to Ron but saw that his attention was already being drawn to the task at hand. He closed his eyes and focused on the room in the photo. A chair pushed its way into his vision,

with a small book sitting on the arm and he felt his face go red. Hoping that if anyone noticed his color they would attribute it to concentration, he took a deep breath and squeezed his way into space, appearing the next instant in the bright yellow room. To his side was the chair and book, which he quickly hid in the cushions. He let out a sigh of relief and watched as Ms. Kingsbury scribbled something on her clipboard. Only a few moments later a popping sound announced the arrival of Ron, who, when he realized he had made it, let out a whoop and punched his hand into the air.

“Maybe that wasn’t so bad after all,” Ron said, suddenly trying to sound quite casual.

“That was just the beginning,” said Mr. Worthington, who had just appeared next to them. He handed them each a small, worn book. “These books show the locations to which you must travel. There are pictures and descriptions at each check point, as well as a journal that you must sign – that way there’s no skipping a stop. Periodically you will find one or the other of us scoring you at a check point, pay no attention but keep your mind focused on where you’re going. Take your time and don’t get ahead, keep your attention on where you are trying to go next, and nowhere else. Oh, and make sure you spend at least a few minutes resting at each check point. Any questions?”

They each thought, then shook their heads.

“Okay then, this shouldn’t take long. When you end up back here, there will be a short debriefing and then you’ll be done. Let’s go.”

Harry opened his book, studied the next location, and closed his eyes.

The sensation of long distance Apparating was similar to traveling short distances but seemed to require more energy. Glad for the advice of resting, Harry made sure to spend at least a few minutes at each stop catching his breath. He always felt like his chest was being compressed during the actual move and it was starting to take its toll. The rests became longer the farther he went.

He saw boring white rooms, colorful, entertaining rooms, a field, the top of a building, and a tall, grassy knoll. As the test continued, he gradually became more and more comfortable with the actions to take, though not any more energetic. It also seemed that each time he landed he noticed a small book lying nearby. Before he moved on to the next check point, he always made sure to vanish the book first, lest any uncomfortable questions should be asked.

At the last check point, he sat down for a full ten minutes on the ground before proceeding back to the Ministry, and when he arrived, he was glad to take a seat in the chair offered to him by Ms. Kingsbury.

“Well done, Mr. Potter. You passed with no mistakes, a feat rarely achieved.” She smiled. “You should be proud of your work. Now, normally I would spend some time discussing your mistakes but you’ve done so well, I don’t have anything to discuss.” She read her notes again, and made a few marks at the bottom.

“That looks all well and good,” she handed him a piece of paper. “There you are, all done. Now go celebrate with your girlfriend.”

Harry’s face burned and his brain seemed to disconnect from his mouth.

“She’s, erm, she’s not... she’s Ron’s sister, not my...girlfriend,” he stammered.

“Oh, well, my mistake,” she smiled cheekily at him, then waved him toward the door.

On the other side, the hug that was waiting for him made him never want the day to end. When Ginny let go, Hermione hugged him just as tight. “I won’t kiss you,” she promised, “well, not on the lips.” She pecked him on the cheek, while Ginny giggled at Harry’s squirming.

“Honestly, Harry, you’re getting better, but you’ve still got a long way to go.” Ginny stood on her toes and pecked him on the other cheek, while Hermione stood back and laughed. This time though, Harry wished she’d been a little off-mark and hit his lips instead.

They waited a few minutes and performed the same greeting on Ron, who was grinning ear-to-ear and holding his certificate up proudly.

"We made it!" he said.

"We made it!" they all echoed.

That evening, after a full day of celebrations and a full meal of roast beef, chicken, potatoes, and a large treacle tart, the four sat down by the fire, tired but happy. Harry felt his eyes closing more than once, and struggled to keep them open, while Ron and Hermione talked quietly next to him about how they had gone about Apparating.

"I just used the book that Ginny always read in the common room," Harry said absently, his eyes still closed. "She always sat in that chair and read it. That's what I imagined reaching out to."

His head tilted back against the cushions and his mouth dropped open slightly while the others just looked on. Ron's look was collected and resolved, and Hermione was grinning madly, but Ginny only looked off into the flames of the fireplace. Even after a statement like that, she was still waiting for him to remember her midnight confession to him and give some offering in return.

A bit later in the evening – and after rubbing the shoulder Ron had punched to wake him up – Harry made his way upstairs to start packing. Since he had only been a visitor there for a week, his belongings were all still nearby and didn't take long to gather. When he finished, he wandered upstairs to see how the others were getting on.

He stopped at Ginny's room and smiled at the sounds of frustration slipping under the door, imagining the look on her mother's face if she could hear. Unable to resist, he opened the door and stood in it, watching the spectacle before him. Ginny was storming about her room, picking up piles and piles of clothes and trying to fit them into a bag on her bed. Only when Harry openly laughed did she turn. He ducked quickly as her wand appeared in front of his face, though he couldn't hold back his smile.

"What?" he asked. "Are you going to hex me because I found you in all this state?" The laughter was evident in his voice.

"No," she answered with an evil grin, "worse, I'm going to make you help. It's your fault, after all, that I don't know what to pack because I don't know where I'm going."

"Oh, well, that's easy." He stepped grandly into the center of her room and held out his wand dramatically, saying "*Pack!*"

What happened next was only slightly better than what his belongings had done when he witnessed Tonks using the spell. Most of Ginny's belongings leapt into the air and piled themselves into her bag. When the storm was over, Harry still felt something amiss, and his embarrassment could hardly be described when he reached up and gingerly removed a pair of Ginny's knickers from his head.

Somehow he didn't find it quite as amusing as she did, and in running out of the room he nearly tripped over his own feet. Ginny actually fell off her bed laughing and her stomach still hurt when she went to bed that night.

The next morning Harry entered the kitchen with the full belief that the incident would be completely forgotten, or at least kept just between them.

He was wrong.

With only one foot through the door, a storm of giggles burst out from not only Ginny, but Hermione, too. Thankful that at least Ron had not yet heard of his graceful packing skills, Harry held his head high and proceeded into the room. He glanced at Mrs. Weasley and was even more horrified by the almost-entirely-but-not-quite-concealed smile on her face. His steps became even more forced but he was still determined to salvage what was left of his pride. The two girls

were sitting side-by-side at the table and at least had the decency to feign innocence as he approached. Only when he put his plate down did they burst into laughter once again.

He pulled his wand and took careful aim.

“Harry,” Ginny said between laughs, “It’s hopeless you know, there’s no way you can avenge this one.”

“Want to bet?” he said quietly, “*abiungo brassieres!*”

The effect was instant. Both girls screamed and threw their arms around their backs, frantically trying to fix their now unhooked undergarments.

“Harry!” screamed Hermione, “what did you do?”

He just leaned back and smiled, “Amazing, the things you learn, sharing a dormitory with Dean and Seamus. *Never* thought I’d actually get to use *that* one.”

About then, Ron entered. In the midst of the chaos and explanations, the girls escaped, while Harry, leaving out the details from the night before, gave a full account of the last few minutes. It was hard for them both to eat, they were laughing so hard.

Late that afternoon, Mrs. Weasley collected them to begin the ritual goodbye hugs and kisses. She dabbed her eyes so many times that her handkerchief was quite wet by the time Harry found himself in her embrace. Then they all moved outside in a tight circle. Mrs. Weasley patted each of them gently on the back before stepping away to her husband’s waiting arms.

On the ground between them was an old scrap of parchment for a Portkey. Faded writing was still visible on one corner but Harry recognized the author. It was writing he knew, it was the writing of a friend, it was the writing of the Teacher. He smiled to himself and let the warmth flood over him. It was finally time, they were leaving to spend the whole summer there, in a place with no distractions, just freedom with his friends, and a bit of learning to survive.

Distantly he heard the voice of Mr. Weasley counting down the time until the Portkey took them away. His finger was pressed into a corner of the page and he couldn’t keep his eyes from drifting to a narrow finger opposite his. Just as his eyes rose to meet hers, he felt the familiar tug behind his naval, and they were off.

Chapter Six

A Safe Place

The landing was rough, even for a portkey, and as Harry got to his feet he shook his head to clear the shock. The stones of the bridge beneath him surely hadn't helped any. As he got his bearings, he noticed Ginny still on the ground and offered her a hand up. She gratefully accepted and together they took in the view across the water. As Ron and Hermione got their own bearings, Harry turned toward the peninsula, searching for the house he was so familiar with.

In the distance, at the end of a long lane, was a low-built house with white walls and brilliantly green grass. The vivid gardens made Harry smile as he picked up his bag, grabbed Ginny's hand and started off down the well-worn path toward the Teacher's house, motioning for Ron and Hermione to follow. They grasped hands and quickly fell in step beside Ginny.

"The bridge crosses over here from the mainland," Harry said. "If you go right, the lane takes you down to the Teacher's house at the end of the peninsula. If you go left or straight, it takes you into the forest and on the other side is the lake. Let's go up to the house first, we can explore later. I want you to meet the Teacher."

Ginny watched him out of the corner of her eye and was surprised at how comfortable he appeared as they walked down the lane hand-in-hand. His whole persona was different, from the gait of his walk to the slope of his shoulders. After several minutes it finally hit her. He was truly relaxed. She realized, sadly, that she couldn't remember a time when he had been so truly, completely at ease.

"Do you like it?" he asked, rather close to her ear.

"I love it," she answered, not entirely trusting her voice with him so close, "it's... wonderful!"

They followed the lane along the river to their right, watching the sailboats go silently by. The river was so wide, in fact, that it almost looked like a lake, and on the far shore the bustle of the local town could just be seen. As they got closer to the house, the trees on the left thinned out until there were only those planted purposely to frame the lane and the brick garden wall, which was now appearing to that side under a heavy growth of ivy.

Finally they reached the house itself, and Harry, dropping his bags on the ground, sat down in the grass and started untying his shoes. The others looked on curiously until Ginny started to giggle, then plopped down beside him and unlaced her own shoes. A moment later, all four of them were walking the rest of the way up to the house, enjoying the soft feel of the grass under their bare feet.

At the front door, Harry paused and knocked, grinning contently, though by the time the door opened, he was positively beaming. The man at the door smiled broadly and reached around Harry, pulling him into a one-armed hug. He had the look of someone you could instantly trust, with the aura of a father and teacher. His hair was salt and pepper, with more salt than pepper, and his eyes were alight with life and contentment. He was well-built and perhaps a few inches taller than Harry. His age was rather hard to determine. His clothes were functional, jeans and a pastel pink shirt. Harry had to smile at that. This man didn't care what anyone thought of him, although Harry did have to wonder if he really knew that many people around town.

"Come on in out of the sun," he said to the others, "your bags will find their own way inside, never fear."

They stepped across the threshold into an open room where the air was cooler and a mild lake breeze drifted through the open windows.

"Now," he said, "let me have a look at you." He looked around at them all, as if summing them up. For a moment Ginny felt as if she were back in Dumbledore's office. He had the same penetrating gaze, as if he could sense everything about you but would never betray your trust by telling you he could.

"You must be Ginny, I've heard a *lot* about you," he chuckled, offering his hand. She took it and felt a bit of warmth in her cheeks at the inference, but nodded easily.

"And you're certainly Ron." They shook hands firmly while Ron nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

"Oh," the Teacher laughed, "there'll be none of that here, but we'll get to that later. And you must be the famous Hermione Granger," he said, turning to her.

They grasped hands and Harry smiled at the blush that spread quickly across Hermione's face.

"Why don't you have a seat?" he offered warmly, gesturing to the many chairs and sofas spread around the room.

"Sure," they answered tentatively, still in the process of sizing up the man in front of them.

"Uh, sir?" Hermione asked, "What *should* we call you, if you don't like 'sir', and you don't mind my asking?"

"Well, for starters, let me say that you're allowed to ask anything you please. You *are* here to learn, after all. For my part, I'll try to give you the most honest answers I can. There's no sense in beating around the bush and wasting time with half-answers and such, is there? Now," he winked at Harry, "I can also tell you that sometimes I find that a question is the best answer to a question. I imagine Harry, here, can tell you all about that and how frustrating it can be. As for what to call me, Teacher is fine, or you may call me John if you wish." He leaned back in his chair and smiled pleasantly at them. The room was quiet for a moment before Ron broke the tension.

"John it is then," he said, "Er, just...where are we staying?"

"Let me show you," John said, getting to his feet and motioning for them to follow. They walked out through a side door and into a beautiful garden, though they hardly had time to look at it trying to keep up. He led them along a path right through the densest part of the garden toward the high brick wall at the far end. As they approached, an arched opening became visible between two tulip trees and they passed under it. On the other side was a comfortable-looking guest house with a large porch and white-washed shingle walls.

John stopped and motioned toward the house. "You'll be staying here in the guest house. Four bedrooms upstairs, two on each side, a decent kitchen and a very comfortable sun room. I've watched the sun rise and set many times from that room."

The look of excitement on their faces was hardly disguised and he smiled as he turned away.

"I'll leave you to it for a while then. Dinner's at six. Most of the time I'll make dinner for you but you'll have to take care of breakfast and lunch. We'll work that out later. See you in a bit." With that, he disappeared back into the garden.

"See, what'd I tell you about this place!" Harry exclaimed.

"Oh, Harry, this is incredible!" said Hermione, looking around and trying to take in everything at once.

Harry led them up the steps onto the porch and laughed out loud at the four rocking chairs grouped around a small table off to one side.

"Looks like he knew all four of us were coming! And here're our bags," he added, peering through the screened front door, "I never have figured out how he does that..." He stroked his chin thoughtfully until Ron appeared next to him, waiting to get inside. Harry opened the door

and let them all enter, feeling his heart skip a beat as Ginny caught his eye and stepped inside, brushing against his arm as she passed by. He could have been mistaken but it almost seemed that she did it on purpose.

Immediately inside the door was a staircase going up to the second floor. On their right was the lounge and to the left was the study. Harry passed through the study and led them out into the sun room. A small gasp from Hermione summed up their thoughts as they turned in place trying to capture the whole view in their minds. The room faced South, and as the Teacher had said, the windows on either end offered a wide-open view to the East and to the West where the sun would be setting in a few hours' time.

From the sun room they went into the kitchen, which was large enough to work in comfortably and held a table for four, but still had the cozy feeling of a cottage. The kitchen passed them into the lounge and then back to the front door where they picked up their bags and climbed the steep steps to the bedrooms. After a moment of awkwardness and a great deal of blushing, Harry and Ron turned left, while the girls turned right. Just as the Teacher had said, there were two bedrooms on each side. A door between the rooms allowed Harry to close out Ron's snores, while another door led to a connected bathroom for them to share. Harry guessed the girls had a similar arrangement.

As soon as Harry dropped his bag on the floor, he sat on the bed and let out a contented sigh. Swearing he heard three similar sounds coming from the other rooms, he laughed a little and opened his bag with his wand. His clothes he sent sailing smoothly into the closet, while a few quills and some parchment landed in a pile on the desk. His prized photo album came to rest on the table next to the bed. Opening the window, he let Hedwig out to explore and then went downstairs and outside to sit on the porch. Ron came down a few minutes later and the two boys waited quite some time for the girls to show.

"What took you so long?" Ron asked when the screen door squeaked shut behind them.

"Well," replied Hermione, "we had to put away our things and then change clothes. Since we know what the weather here is like now, we could dress more appropriately." She flashed a smile at Ron, who, from the look on his face, had instantly forgotten what they were talking about. Harry on the other hand, was still incredulous.

"I don't see what takes so long. I mean, I didn't change clothes, but if I'd wanted to it wouldn't have taken me half an hour."

"Yes," said Ginny matter-of-factly, "but you're not a girl."

"Oh," said Harry, "well, if *that's* the case, then –"

"It's almost dinnertime, I think," laughed Hermione. "Why don't we go? I don't want to be late."

Harry had to relent but decided it was for the best anyway. Ginny attracted him far too much and he would have had a hard time letting the subject drop. Suddenly he understood a little of why Ron and Hermione had fought for so long – mostly just to keep each other's attention, even if in a negative way.

They made their way back to the main house through the garden, stopping a few times to admire its many benches, walkways, and fountains. Harry led them around to the back entrance and then inside, where John was waiting for them, reading a newspaper. He smiled at the bemused look on Ron's face on seeing the paper.

"I find," John said, "as I believe your illustrious Headmaster does, that keeping up with the Muggle news can be very insightful, although here we get very little news about what's happening in Britain, so don't hear much about Voldemort."

They all paused for a moment at such a casual mention of the name. Sensing their hesitation, he asked, "Now, why do you think I can say his name so easily?"

He looked around at them and seeing no reaction, added, "Oh, come on, you must have some answer. Didn't Harry tell you how much I like to ask questions?"

"Well," said Ron, "maybe it's because you're so far away?"

"Maybe because you've never met him," Ginny added

"Because you're not scared of him?" said Hermione.

The Teacher seemed to ponder all of their answers. "I think you are all correct. I have never met him, I only know about him through what I hear from others. I do live far away, although I travel occasionally to places you're quite familiar with, including Hogwarts. And... I am not afraid of him. Now, shall we eat? Dinner's waiting on the patio."

Talk was sporadic while they ate. Everyone was too busy enjoying the barbecued chicken, baked potatoes, and sweet corn to engage in any serious conversation. When they were finished, John sent their dishes away with a quick wave of his hand and asked if they might enjoy a bonfire on the beach. Harry could see that Ron's smile nearly reached his ears and figured his own was the same.

Ten minutes later, having changed into shorts and t-shirts, the boys met the girls on the front porch of their house. Even if Harry would have had time to think about what the girls were bringing for the beach, it still wouldn't have prepared him for the sight that awaited him.

Both girls had their hair pulled back into ponytails, and while he was used to Ginny sporting the look, Harry noticed how different Hermione looked. She appeared much more relaxed and casual than normal. Harry laughed at Ron, who seemed quite struck by the new look. Both girls wore tank-tops and shorts, with open sandals on their feet. Harry tried hard not to look at the spread of freckles reaching over Ginny's shoulders and felt his ears getting warm. He quietly wondered if he'd ever seen that much of her body before.

Following the path that Harry led them on, they reached the beach in a few minutes and found John already hard at work stacking wood. Two large logs sat in an 'L' shape far enough back from where the fire would be that they could sit in the sand and lean back without getting too hot.

Harry pulled off his shoes and socks and set them by the end of the path on the sand. He stepped out into the sand and was happy to find it still warm from the fading sun. He looked back over the dune grass inland, but couldn't see either house from the beach. The soft wash of the waves called his name and he walked down to the water to let it cool his feet. The sun was resting on the horizon now, casting brilliant arcs of reds and oranges through the few clouds scattered about. Harry found himself quite at peace. Only a tiny fraction of his brain still realized that nothing in the outside world had changed. For now, there was only sunset, beach, and friends.

John had a comfortable fire burning before long and Harry picked a log and sat down in front of it, hoping that Ron would choose the spot next to him. By a fortunate stroke of luck, John sat down on the log by Harry, handing him a long, straight stick. Ron and Hermione took the other log, while Ginny stood close to the fire warming herself.

"That's to poke the fire, Harry," John said, indicating the stick, "and you know where the wood is, right?" Harry smiled and nodded, while John leaned back a little and looked out at the sunset. "Beautiful, isn't it? There's nothing like the view across the water." His eyes fell on Ginny, "Oh, I'm sorry, Ginny. Please, take my seat. I'm going up to the house now, anyway." He glanced at Harry, "send me a message if you need anything, all right?" Harry nodded.

John stood up, leaving the only open seat for Ginny next to Harry. Even in the light of dusk, the blush in her cheeks was obvious and she stammered as she spoke.

"I don't... I can stand. The fire's nice."

"Oh, go on and sit down, it's just Harry," Ron grumbled.

Harry swore he could almost see the steam pouring out of her ears as she glared at her brother. Then, still looking at Ron, she sat down next to Harry, rather closer than normal, and

looked pointedly at Ron. For his part, Harry tried to keep his composure, as she was now so close he had an easy view of the freckles he had been trying to ignore earlier. He forced himself to look at the fire and it seemed as if its heat had suddenly increased.

The sparks in it were mesmerizing. The swirls and furls of smoke and flame seemed to excite the imagination and before long they were engaged in a deep conversation about the very core of magic. It was leading to something Harry had wanted to tell them for a long time but was still trying to figure out how.

"So the school uses some of the most ancient wards known to wizard-kind," Hermione was in the middle of saying, "I'd be surprised if even Dumbledore understood them all. The founders were really powerful and each one put up his or her own layers, above and below each other, so in the end, it's nearly impenetrable. I imagine they even added their own special protections to their houses and common rooms. I heard Dumbledore say one day, when he was talking to—"

Harry had been listening intently but suddenly his world was turned upside-down in the most unexpected way. Ginny, who was still sitting rather close to him, had moved her hand and slipped it into his, her smooth fingers fitting perfectly between his and her thumb rubbing the back of his slowly. The sensations it sent through his body were exhilarating. Suddenly it seemed as if Ron and Hermione were gone and they were all alone together on the beach. Nothing else mattered, and even if Voldemort himself had appeared, Harry wouldn't have noticed.

He glanced down at their hands resting gently together and allowed himself a contented smile. He flicked his eyes past Ginny's and saw, to his amazement, the same cautious smile on her face as she gazed at the fire. A small shiver ran down his back and he wondered if anyone else in the world could be as happy as he was right now. It just didn't seem possible. They were holding hands! He was holding hands with Ginny! It wasn't just a passing run-down-the-lane-pulling-her thing either. There was something he felt in her presence, but couldn't explain. It was a peace, a healing, a comfort that he'd never properly felt until her cautious touch in this quiet moment.

Just then his thoughts were interrupted by a small voice.

"Harry looks like he wants to tell us something. I wonder if I should interrupt Hermione?"

"No," Harry said.

"No what?" Ron asked, looking confused.

Just then, Harry realized what had happened. "Sorry, just... just talking to myself."

"But, Harry," said Hermione, "you never talk to yourself." She looked at him curiously.

"I - I guess I just got wrapped up in my head. Sorry to interrupt. Er, go ahead. Wards, right?"

"So, anyway," she said, still eyeing him suspiciously, "I imagine it's a lot like the protections around the Sorcerer's Stone, remember? There were different levels and tests and things that you had to get through, only around the castle it's probably a hundred times more complicated."

"But," said Ron, "it's still possible for someone to get through. I mean, we did it, and we were only in first year."

"Right," she replied, "but the school's magic is so much older and more complex. And I bet that the Headmasters have each added their own layers too. Can you imagine? There must be hundreds of layers by now." She looked at the fire in awe, while Ron just smiled at her, letting her enjoy her moment.

Then the small voice was back. This time, Harry recognized it inside his mind. It touched him that the voice sounded concerned.

"Thanks, Hermione, but it really feels like Harry wants to tell us something."

Harry continued to look straight ahead into the fire, but focused his mind on Ginny and spoke the words in his head. *"How... how did you know? I haven't said a word."*

He turned to look and met her gaze. They were filled with such emotion and compassion that for a moment, Harry was completely lost in them. Green mingled with brown until he drew his gaze aside once again.

"Harry?" her voice came again, *"Are you... in my head?"*

"Erm, well, yes. I didn't mean to pry, and I'll stop now if you want." He turned his head away, but felt her other hand on his arm. He turned back to her and met her eyes, seeing the pleading in them.

"Don't go," she said, "I like you... I mean, I don't mind you here."

"Okay, just make sure you don't have any, er, weird thoughts - I might hear them."

She just smiled, so he continued, *"I did have something I wanted to say, but it's not really important. I... I can tell you later. It's just about the magic of this place."*

The next moment, to Harry's amusement, she picked up Hermione's conversation as if she hadn't missed a word.

"So what you're wondering is this: can the same thing be built around a person? If it's possible, we might want to look into magical wards used around other places, not just Hogwarts. We can see what they have in common and what they do differently. Maybe look into entrapment spells as well. They're meant to be used to hold someone in one place, but what if we could turn it around and hold everyone else out. Of course, it would be much more difficult to build it around a person, but still worth looking into."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Exactly. Only it's going to be really hard to find these things out, they're secret for a reason. We'll have to spend some time asking around. Maybe the Teacher knows some places to look."

"He does," Harry said suddenly. "I mean, I know he knows of at least one because... it's here, this place. We're protected right now. You probably figured that out because no one minded us coming here, but it's deeper than you can imagine. This is a place that Dark Wizards can't touch, even if they did know about it. This whole peninsula was created by magic. Not magic like Wizard's magic, but by real magic, all by itself. The Teacher, er, John, told me a little about it. That's why I came here so often. This place is safer than Hogwarts. We can't be touched here."

He looked at his friends and smiled. Their awe was evident, and the effect was just as he'd been hoping for.

"I don't know all the details but he told me that it's been this way for a really long time, maybe thousands of years. The native people used to use this land for ancient magical rituals."

"But how did John end up here then?" Hermione asked.

"Hmm," Harry thought out loud, "I don't know. He's never told me. Maybe when we work on layered protections he'll tell us, but I don't know. I've been coming here for a long time and he's never really talked about it."

Hermione smiled at him, "Did you ask?"

"Well, no." He grinned and they all laughed.

Their talk continued late into the night. By the time the fire burned down to coals, Ron and Ginny were asleep, while Harry and Hermione's discussion had lost most of its fervor. Eventually, the cool of the night and the lack of firelight sent a shiver around the group and they trudged slowly back up to the house. After a bit of stumbling and helping each other up the stairs, they separated to their rooms and fell straight to sleep.

At the time when the sun would normally be peering over the horizon the next morning, Harry made his way down the creaky stairs toward the kitchen, annoyed at the rain that had absconded with his plans for another perfect day.

"Good morning," he yawned and waved to the girls sipping coffee at the table. Between them a stack of toast and a stick of butter lay untouched.

"Ron's still asleep, I think," he continued, glancing at the uneaten food and lifting an eyebrow. "Not hungry this morning?"

They shook their heads sleepily while he turned to look out the window.

"Great weather," he said sarcastically, watching the rain fall in sheets, "at least we can Apparate to the main house without getting wet – thank goodness for that."

He poured himself some coffee absentmindedly, then took a sip and nearly spit it back out.

"Sometimes I forget I don't like coffee." He looked at his mug critically and poured it down the sink, frowning. "Don't we have anything else?" He set the mug down and started rummaging through the cupboards.

"I think there's some m-milk," Ginny stifled a yawn, "in the fridge, and some orange juice. You like orange juice."

Harry absently pulled the pitcher of juice out and poured himself a glass. As he sat down at the table, he crinkled his eyebrows at Hermione, who seemed to be enjoying her own private joke.

"What is it?" he asked.

She just giggled more. "Honestly, don't you see it?"

"No," they said in unison.

"Oh, well, too bad." She got up, smiled smugly at them and took her mug of coffee upstairs.

"What's up with her?" Harry asked.

"No idea," Ginny said, taking a sip from her mug and turning to watch the rain.

Harry marveled for a moment at how pretty she was with her red hair falling down around her face, and how her white pajamas with little red hearts made her seem more like the little girl he remembered from so many years ago. And yet, she wasn't that girl, and she hadn't been for a long time...

"Do you remember the first time we met?" he asked, drawing his words out carefully.

Her cheeks blushed a little and she turned away.

"Yes," she sighed, "I was just a stupid little girl, watching my *hero* get on the train without me. Ha! Can you believe I used to think of you like that – like my knight in shining armor. I was so jealous of Ron, getting to be friends with you that year and always writing home about it." She tried to mimic Ron's voice. "Guess what Harry and I did today? We knocked out a troll! Can you believe it? A troll!"

She shook her head and laughed a little, "I used to idolize you. I even had a Harry Potter doll. It didn't look anything like you, come to think of it."

Harry cast his eyes down at the table. Something in what she said seemed to drain the happiness from him and he suddenly wished he were back in bed.

A touch on his arm and he jerked his head up to see the concern in her eyes.

"Harry," she said softly, "I didn't mean for it to sound like that. I mean I don't think of you as a prince anymore because the real you is so much better. The hero I imagined doesn't exist. The real person is you, and you *are* a hero, but you're human as well. You're someone whose life's been harder than I can even imagine, and you have strengths *and* weaknesses. If I could have the hero I used to imagine, or the real you, I would always choose you."

She blushed again but didn't try to hide it. It was worth it to see the trace of a smile cross his face. Any bit of happiness she could give him was worth its weight in gold.

"You know," she smiled sadly, "Tom called me a silly little girl once, right before he took me into the Chamber in first year. I guess he wasn't too far off the mark."

Harry wasn't quite sure how to respond. He felt a strange ache inside thinking about the pain and guilt she must have felt. It was something they'd never really talked about and he secretly wondered if she'd ever talked to anyone about it.

"You're not, you know... a silly little girl I mean. In fact, I think you're great. If it were the same thing all over again, I'd fight for you again. Looking back on it, my only mistake was not getting to know you sooner. I regret that now."

Her face flushed again and even though she could meet his eyes now, all she could say was a small "thank you."

He marveled for a moment at the passion in her eyes and reprimanded himself again for never allowing their friendship to grow properly.

"I... I think I'm going to go take a shower now. See you in a bit?" He paused for a moment. "I, uh, if you like, maybe we could talk about it more sometime?"

"I'd like that," she nodded, taking another sip of her coffee and turning again to watch the rain with a very contented smile.

In an hour's time they sat with John in the same room where he had greeted them the day before. He was nearing the end of a piece of toast and finishing a story from the local newspaper. He laughed out loud as he finished.

"Ha! These Muggles think of everything, don't they?" He folded the paper and tossed it over his shoulder where it disappeared into the air. Harry smiled, reminded once again of why he loved magic so much.

"Well, I trust you had a good night's sleep and a good breakfast. Tonight you'll find the cupboards and refrigerator fully stocked for the rest of your week. Like I said yesterday, you'll take care of your own meals, except for dinner, which will be here every night. Whatever food you like, just make a list, and it'll be delivered once a week. Also, you're free to use magic to clean your clothes and such, but if you're interested, there's a Muggle washer and dryer in your house. Now, are we ready to get started?"

He rose and motioned for them to follow him. They walked along a hallway through the house, admiring the photos and paintings on the wall, until they reached the end where a tall, richly-stained wood door stood before them.

"This is one of the places we'll be working," he said as he turned the handle, leading them inside.

The room reminded Harry a bit of the Apparition practice room at the ministry. It was very large with a high, sloped ceiling, and it appeared very bright, but he couldn't quite figure out where the light was coming from, perhaps the walls themselves. Inset to the left side, in the wall they had just come through, was a darkened room with bookshelves covered floor to ceiling in books, and several deep leather armchairs spread around. On the other side of the entry door was a stairway, cut into the wall and winding away below the floor. The room in front of them was empty, but Harry had a feeling it would be easy enough to conjure whatever they needed for training.

"I suppose you're wondering why we never worked in this room before, Harry? Well, I just finished it. When Dumbledore wrote me about you coming to stay this summer with your friends, I thought we might need a more adequate place to work. Of course, like I said, we won't limit ourselves to this room. The library in the corner is entirely for your use, if you choose, and the stairs by the door lead down to the catacombs. We'll be making good use of them as well.

"Have a seat," he added, twisting his wand so that five mats dropped onto the floor. They gathered together in a small circle and he dimmed the mysterious lights with a flick of his hand. To Harry it felt like the walls had suddenly moved in closer to them.

The Teacher's voice was now deeper and quieter but Harry heard every word. His interest was growing by leaps and bounds.

"I have a lot of things in mind for us to study this summer," John began, "not the least of which is your amazing ability to connect your minds together. Dumbledore and I are very interested in learning more about that skill and helping you develop it. I'm certain it will be a powerful ally in your fight against Voldemort. We're also going to work on battle tactics and strategies, including wards, hexes, curses, and other means of disarming your attackers. You must also be able to turn a fight your way. If you are in a forest, use the trees; if it is dark, create a helpful light. At the same time, you must have a good defense and you must know how to hide and disappear. If you are wounded, you must also have a working knowledge of the healing arts."

Harry noticed John's eyes fall on Ginny as he said this.

"And finally, Harry, *you* must have a way to destroy Voldemort. This will be your most difficult challenge. Neither Dumbledore nor I have the answer. It lies within you and you must discover it for yourself."

Harry felt that all eyes were on him and he swallowed thickly. "I know, or at least I figured that," he said darkly.

"Don't be concerned with it right now. When the time comes, you'll understand what you need to do. Now, where would you like to begin?"

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated his efforts, stilling his thoughts and focusing on the small group surrounding him.

I want to begin by talking without words, he thought, opening his mouth and gasping for breath from the effort. Ron's strong hand gripped his shoulder and held him up.

"Harry wants us to... work on talking without words."

"I agree," said the Teacher, "now let's see just how far Harry can take this."

"No," cried Ginny, "don't let him hurt himself! You saw how hard that was!"

Harry looked at her in surprise but was even more astonished at the smile on his mentor's face.

"Very good, Ginny," the Teacher said, "that was exactly the response I was hoping for. I had no intention of going further, I only wanted to test your feelings. It seems you have a good gauge of Harry's strength and I'm going to trust you to help keep him from hurting himself. Even though I know Harry would *never* go too far."

The sarcastic comment and the smile would normally have irked Harry, but today he felt oddly comfortable with it. In the presence of friends it was nice to have people who knew him so well looking out for him.

"You two," he added, indicating Ron and Hermione, "have known Harry for a long time and you've seen him in difficult and dangerous situation, so I'll also ask you to keep an eye on him. Harry, for your part, I only ask that you give your friends your ear and promise to consider what they have to say."

Harry nodded.

"Okay. Now, Harry, would you mind explaining for us your experiences so far? Tell us everything – how you worked it out, your emotional strength, your physical strength... the more we know the more we can learn to control it."

Harry looked around at them and exhaled deeply. "Sure, right... well... it started with Ron. You know, when those bastards – sorry – had him locked up. I was sitting up in the common room and Dumbledore had forbidden us from leaving the castle to search for Ron. I remembered what we had worked on here. I don't know, I guess I'd never had that much focus before, or purpose, because I found him that morning and told him we were coming to bring him back.

"Then, with Dumbledore... and Hermione" his face colored, "I, well, I used their magic with mine and it made me stronger. Strong enough to find him again and stay long enough for Dumbledore to bring him back. Then there were two... no, *three* other times. The first was when we went to visit Ron's family. It was only just across the room, but again, with Hermione's help, I talked to Ron... well, kind of took the mickey out of him for not sitting with us.

"Then, the next morning, Ginny helped me wake him up. That was the easiest time I've ever had of it." He felt his cheeks getting warm again. "The last time was last night on the beach. I was going to tell everyone about the protections of the land, which we want to know more about by the way, and Ginny somehow recognized that I wanted to say something. We only talked for a few seconds, but it wasn't as hard as before.

"One thing I've noticed is that, besides being able to talk to people, I can hear their thoughts sometimes. I think it's only when they're directed at me, and only when we have an especially close connection... friendship or something.

"That reminds me, there *was* another time. The first day I was back at Hogwarts after Ron was kidnapped - that was the first time I heard someone's thoughts. It was with Hermione, when we were down by the lake... that was when she heard me thinking... well, she told you all about it over butterbeers in Hogsmeade, so I won't repeat it now.

"And then... and then last night I heard Ginny thinking about interrupting Hermione to tell her I had something to say. That was... wait a minute, Ginny, how did you know I wanted to say something anyway?" He turned to look at her.

For her part, Ginny seemed as confused about it as the rest of them.

"I don't know," she said, "I was sitting there next to you and... I could just feel it. I can't explain."

Harry felt all their eyes drilling into himself and Ginny and he hoped they wouldn't read too much into it. He was especially concerned about the Teacher, whom he knew he could never hide anything from. However, that man only looked at them keenly for a moment and then asked Harry to continue his explanation.

"The only thing," Harry added, "that seems consistent is that it's really tiring. The first time I found Ron I was so exhausted I slept for another few hours. I don't know if it's been getting easier after that, or if it's just easier over shorter distances."

John looked thoughtful, "I think it's probably a case of both being true. As you master this skill it will probably get easier, but also as your subject is closer, it will probably take less effort. I think it's something worth examining more closely."

"I've got an idea," announced Hermione, "let's set up a trial for Harry. We could have him try it over different distances and with different subjects. If he keeps the contact short enough, each trial shouldn't be that tiring, although there would be a general trend downward." She bit her lip and for a moment Harry was sure she was going to add something, but she stayed silent.

"Is that all, Hermione?" asked John kindly, "you're allowed to say anything you like here, you know."

"Well, it's just... I can't help but wonder if Harry is the only one who can do this. Can it really help us if we can't all do it?"

"I think that's an excellent question and one I don't truly have an answer for right now. Harry may very well have some abilities that are solely his. However, I'm inclined to say that this isn't one of them. I'll spend some time with all of you working on this skill. It's not an unknown magic, and I believe with better training than sitting on the sofa at Ron's house, you'll all be able to achieve some level of proficiency. As to your idea for a test, I think that's exactly what we need to do, so let's do it."

"You mean, right now?" she asked, surprised.

“Sure, there’s no time like the present. You can all Apparate, right? I think that will give us enough distance to make it a reasonable test, and... yes, I believe you should all try it. How about Ron, then Hermione, then Ginny? Yes?”

They all nodded, eager to get started. Harry could barely contain his excitement. This was so different from how he had learned at school. This was the real thing, this was chasing after the very essence of magic. And best of all, he was surrounded by friends.

The Teacher took Ron, Hermione, and Ginny aside and gave them instructions on where they were to go. It would work best, he decided, if Harry didn’t know how far away they were, a blind test. Harry would judge his effort on two trials with each person, and in the end they would uncover how far away they were for each trial and how much effort was required for each person.

They walked down to the beach, where Harry sat with the Teacher on the sand, just where they had sat the night before. He was relaxed and smiled at them all as they walked away. On the walk down to the beach, they had decided on the addition – not today but on another day – of a similar trial, but with the help of someone else’s magic. In this way they could begin to feel and learn each other’s magic, to become comfortable in it and trust it. In time it would become an everyday practice. For now, though, Harry sat by himself with only the Teacher nearby to observe. Having left his shoes behind somewhere – Harry wondered where – he ran his toes through the sun-warmed sand and closed his eyes. Beginning by relaxing his warm feet, he began to calm his mind and prepare for the adventure ahead of him. *This* was real magic.

The next week passed in a comfortable blur. Each morning, the Teacher led them through mental and physical exercises to help them focus. The days were filled with activities varying from studying books, to practicing hexes, to deep discussions about magic. They entertained themselves by watching the sun set on the beach or from the comfort of their sunroom, and by learning to work their Muggle outdoor barbeque. It was only by Hermione’s quick thinking that Ron didn’t completely lose his eyebrows in a particularly large fireball one evening.

They were learning to work alone, but more importantly, they were learning to work together. Though in many ways their friendship had given them trust in each other, they now began to depend on that trust in deeper ways. After the incident with the barbeque and Hermione’s quick thinking, the Teacher started incorporating trust exercises into their daily work. He began small, with minor spells and hexes that required the effort of two people, but, as he explained, one day it would eventually lead to putting their lives in each other’s hands.

“As you are well aware,” he said, “Voldemort has many followers, each of whom is unique and each of whom is vicious. They’ll stop at nothing, once the word is given, to take your life from you. While I have every faith that you’ll be powerful enough when you meet them to destroy them, it’s impossible for one person to watch all directions at once. You will have to depend on each other. Have you heard the phrase ‘divide and conquer’? Well, it means exactly what it says. You must learn to depend on each other and distribute the enemy amongst you. This is especially true if Voldemort is present. He will most likely focus all of his energy on Harry, which will require all of Harry’s energy in return. This will leave you three,” he gestured to them, “with the task of taking on the Death Eaters while also defending Harry from them, thereby giving him a chance to focus properly on Voldemort.

“In addition to fighting, I think we will also start working on observing each other’s stress level. Remember the first day when I wanted Harry to show us all how far he could take his thoughts, and to see if he could talk to us all at once? Remember how Ginny stopped me before he even had a chance to think about it? That’s what I’m talking about. It’s generally easier with romantic involvements like you have here, but I’d also like Harry and Ron, and Hermione and

Ginny to work together. You need to be able to determine not only how much further you can go, but also how much further everyone else can go.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest. “But Ginny and I aren’t – “

“Oh, yes,” John added, “sorry, I was referring to Ron and Hermione.”

John’s smile was plain, and from the blush on Ginny’s cheek, Harry knew she had taken it just as he had. In his mind, he wondered if she was a little disappointed by the fact that John’s comment hadn’t applied to them, too. He didn’t bother to investigate his own feelings on the subject, knowing all too well what they would be. Learning new and complex spells was hard enough without the distraction of the most beautiful girl he had ever known working beside him, stopping now and then to tie back her entrancing red hair and smiling sideways at him.

On one perfectly cloudless afternoon, with a bright blue sky above, Harry pulled his hands from the dirt of the garden and wiped his brow on his sleeve. He smiled in spite of the dirty work, marveling at how different he felt about working in this garden versus working in the Dursleys garden. This was enjoyable, that had been torture. On the other hand, a warm summer’s day full of hard work generally makes a teenaged boy’s thoughts turn to taking a swim in the lake, and Harry was no exception. As they hadn’t yet had a chance to really swim – their time on the beach had so far only allowed for dipping feet – Harry laid down his tools and sat back on the grass, squinting up at the sky.

“I think I’m going to go down to the lake for a swim,” he announced. They all looked up from their work. Harry could see the wheels turning in their minds, creating images of relaxing in the warm water and diving into the surf. Ron and Hermione looked at each other, sharing I’ll-go-if-you-will grins, then nodded to Harry, saying “We’ll come, too.” Ginny, on the other hand, looked slightly concerned.

“D’you want to come, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“Well... maybe I’ll just bring a book and sit on the beach. I don’t... I don’t know if I feel like swimming,” she answered noncommittally, without looking at him.

“Suit yourself,” he said, standing and moving closer to her, “but I know *I’d* have more fun if you came.” He flashed her a small, nervous smile, wondering briefly why it bothered him so much that she didn’t want to come.

Finally she stood, looked at her dirty hands, then wiped them on Harry’s shirt. Though the day was warm, he felt a coolness on his skin where her hands had touched him, as if a mark had been left behind.

“I guess I’ll come,” she said, “but I still reserve the right to sit and read if I want to.”

“All right, see you in bit?”

They all nodded and made for the house. Harry and Ron were changed and back on the porch in only a few minutes, while the girls took somewhat longer.

Sitting on her bed, Ginny picked up her swimsuit from beside her and looked at it, turning it over in her fingers. It wasn’t the condition of it that bothered her – it was actually brand new – what bothered her was what it might look like in *Harry’s* eyes. She jerked her head up at Hermione’s voice as she stepped into the room.

“Ginny?” her friend asked.

She didn’t reply, instead looking back at the suit in her hands.

“Ginny, are you all right?” she asked again.

“Fine,” she finally answered, “I just... What if it doesn’t look good on me? I’m not... I know I won’t look as good as you... and... I know I’m being stupid, but what if Harry doesn’t like it?” She tossed the suit on her bed and propped herself up with her hands on the side of the bed. The words had come out very fast but that didn’t make them any less true. She had just admitted to Hermione that she still liked Harry. Her friend came and sat down beside her.

"You're going to look fine, you know. *I* think you'll look *better* than me. After all, you've got all that Quidditch practice on you, while I just sit around and study. I bet you're in a lot better shape than I am. Besides, I'm sure Harry will think you look good, no matter *what* you're wearing. He's not like he used to be. He... well, he *notices* you now." She looked away with a smile, "He looks at you like Ron looks at me..."

"Okay, enough talk about how my *brother* looks at you," Ginny laughed. "I just... I don't have what you have, and even though you're Ron's girlfriend, Harry's still going to notice you first."

Hermione was slightly affronted, but tried not to show it. "That's not true! He's like a brother to me, and brothers don't look at sisters like that. Anyway, you're all he's interested in. You could show up wearing your school robes and he would think you look great."

Ginny still didn't look entirely convinced but when Hermione stood up to go, she picked up the suit again and promised to be down in a few minutes.

"Wearing it?" Hermione asked commandingly.

"Yes, wearing it," she admitted grudgingly.

A few minutes later, after Hermione had explained to the boys that Ginny was still getting ready, she did in fact come down wearing her suit. Like Hermione, she was wearing shorts and a t-shirt over it, so neither Ron nor Harry thought much of it. If truth be told though, Harry was having an amazingly hard time walking without tripping over his feet because he was so caught up with *wondering* what she looked like in a bathing suit. He'd been swimming before, but only at the Weasley's house, and only with Ron and his brothers. This was entirely different.

The sun was warm and by the time they reached the beach, Harry and Ron both quickly stripped off their t-shirts and ran across the blazing hot sand down to the water. When they realized the girls weren't with them, they turned back to wait.

Had their mouths not been open from their run moments before, they would have dropped open now. The girls had pulled their t-shirts off and were now folding their shorts in neat little piles with their sandals. Harry was sure his heart had stopped beating, and, glancing at Ron, was fairly sure he was in the same condition.

The girls turned and motioned for them to walk back to them. They trudged back up through the sand, oblivious to the heat, and mesmerized by what they saw. Both girls wore one-piece suits. Hermione's was solid blue, while Ginny's was all black. As they walked, Ron turned to Harry, and seeing the look on his face, spoke quietly so the girls couldn't hear.

"Harry, mate, that's my girlfriend and my sister, which are you looking at?"

"Sorry, but she... I mean *they* look good." Harry shrugged his shoulders and turned back to stare at Ginny. He'd never seen her look so beautiful before, and had Ron not been there, the look on his face would surely have destroyed all of her earlier worries. The feelings he had buried down deep were struggling up inside him. At the moment, he was making no effort to hold them back.

"H-Hi," he choked out as they met up again. It wasn't much, but it was more than Ron could muster.

"Hi boys," Hermione said, as if about to scold them for not doing their homework. "You'd better put on something to block the sun, otherwise you'll get burned to a crisp. Turn around so we can work the charm on you."

They didn't move.

"Turn around," she said again.

Not wanting to arouse her anger, they grudgingly turned around.

"*Umbra*," both girls said, pointing their wands at the boys' backs.

Immediately, Harry felt as if his skin was being covered over with a smooth layer of cool oil, and then the feeling was gone.

"Did it work?" he asked, looking over his shoulder and touching his back with his hand.

"Of course it worked," Hermione said, "Now it's your turn. The spell is *umbra*, with the emphasis on the 'um'."

Harry moved to stand behind Ginny, picking up his wand from his clothes. He paused when he reached her back.

"Harry?" she said nervously, "What is it, is there something wrong?"

"No, no. Er, what's the incantation again?"

"*Umbra*," she said, giggling a little. Perhaps Hermione had been right about him after all...

Harry said the word and she shivered a little. It wasn't so much the feeling of the magic, as it was the way he said it so close behind her. The feeling of him doing something so personal for her gave her goose bumps and made her heart skip. That familiar old feeling was returning again, but for some reason it didn't bother her at all.

They walked down to the water together not so much as a group but as two pairs, and then the two boys waded out to their knees.

"Is it warm?" Hermione asked with concern.

"It'll be warmer in July but it feels good now," Harry answered.

Finally the girls started wading into the water, surprised that it was warmer than they expected.

After a bit of splashing around during which everybody got very wet, Harry reached his hand just under the water, curling it into a fist. Having worked with the Teacher on some wandless magic, he wondered if he might be able to make this work. To his surprise, a moment later a spout of water sprayed upwards several feet above his head.

"Harry! What was that?" Ron shouted from behind Ginny, whom he was trying unsuccessfully to dunk.

"I don't know. I was just trying to spray water without my wand, and it worked!" Beginning to get a little excited about it, he turned toward them, keeping his hand just under the water. Suddenly a powerful jet launched over Ginny right onto Ron's head. Hermione was laughing so hard that she nearly fell over herself.

"Ron!" she laughed, "You should see your hairstyle, it's classic!"

Harry nearly hurt himself laughing as Ron made his way over, wiping water from his face.

"Okay," he said, "if you're going to do that, at least play fair and show us, too."

"All right, you put your hand just under the water and make a fist." He paused to watch them all try. "No," he added, "you have to leave it open. Like you're holding a broomstick. Then just force the water to make a spray."

"What's the charm?" Hermione asked.

"There isn't any. I don't know, I just did it by... well, I just did it. If you can feel the magic in the water, it's not hard at all. Focus your mind on the water, that's all there is to it."

After several minutes, Ginny was the only other person to master the skill, and she took great pleasure in spraying Ron every time he tried to concentrate.

While the others practiced, Harry swam, jumping into the waves and diving to stand on his hands with his feet above water. He hadn't felt so free in a long time. He knew just how he would be spending a lot of his time this summer.

An hour later, Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way back up the house together. Ginny, who wanted to swim a while longer, stayed in the water. Harry would never have let her stay by herself had she not allowed them to put an anti-drowning spell on her. Harry was still amazed sometimes by the things that Hermione knew, and by the look on Ron's face, he felt exactly the same.

When they reached the house, Hermione sat down on the porch and gave Harry a significant look. With a foul face, Ron went inside alone while Harry sat down.

"Nice day, isn't it?" she asked conversationally.

"Sure."

They rocked in silence for a while.

"Hermione? Why did Ginny... why didn't she want to come down to the beach with us? Did I do something to make her mad? She seemed to have fun once we got there."

Hermione sighed. She was happy enough to give advice and comfort to Ginny, but she had to think about what to say to Harry. She wasn't sure how much to tell him without giving away all of Ginny's secrets.

"Well, she's a little shy. You know she's always been the only girl in the house, besides her mum, and she just wasn't sure how she'd look in her new swimsuit."

She worried for a moment that she'd said too much, but Harry's face told her otherwise. Perhaps she'd been right about him after all.

"I thought she looked great," he said into his shirt, "but she always looks great. I kind of figured she knew that... She's so pretty... not that you're not, but..."

"It's okay, Harry," she laughed, "I'm not worried about what you think of me. How long have you felt like this?" It was a simple enough question, not asking directly if he liked her, but inferring it somewhat.

"Like *what?*" he asked, without really needing an answer. "I..." he rubbed his hands over his face. What was the harm in being honest?

"I've liked Ginny for a long time, I've just never *let* myself feel that way about her... until now."

Hermione tried to hide her glee, allowing only a wide smile to come across her face.

"How long has... I mean... does she feel... the same?" he asked.

"Harry, I can't tell you that. Only, think about what you feel when you're around her, and what her magic feels like in the air around you. Next time you work with her using *memoria acies*, talk to her. The more you know her, the better you'll know the answer to your question."

He sat deep in thought for a while, then stood up.

"Thanks," he said, "I'll do that, and if she needs more time, I'll wait, if she hasn't totally given up on me. She's worth the wait, no matter how long it takes." He sighed and then went inside, suddenly feeling the effects of spending a day in the hot sun followed by a long swim.

It was a little warm in the house and Harry had only enough energy to crank the windows half open before collapsing wearily on the sofa in the lounge. He grabbed a cherry crunch from the table and popped it in his mouth, letting the sweet flavor overcome his drowsy senses. It seemed he couldn't get enough of the little red candy that Hermione had introduced them to this summer. Now he understood why Dumbledore had liked lemon drops so much. There was something so simple about Muggle treats.

He lifted a hand slowly and sighed at the scars on it, trying to remember where they all came from. Try as he might, though, his mind was more tired than he could ever remember and he soon gave up. Soft music from the WWN radio in the corner played with his senses and he felt his eyes closing, taking him off to comfortable sleep. The cushions of the sofa were soft, and he propped his head up on the one remaining pillow within reach, thankful that they hadn't lost them all around the house yet. Throwing his feet up on the far arm rest and his laying his hands on his chest, he finally gave in to the darkness behind closed eyes, knowing even though he was tired, sleep would not come quickly.

A little while later, Ginny's small form slowly crossed the grass in the evening sunlight, still damp from her swim. Her eyes were bright and an easy smile played on her face from the warm water and the soft green grass. She tossed one sandy towel over the porch railing and opened the squeaky back door, pausing just long enough to glance out over the shimmering water and watch a

flock of gulls making their way down the beach. Stepping inside, she let the door slam shut behind her.

Once inside, she threw her other wet towel with the rest of the dirty laundry. Seeing one of Harry's t-shirts folded up with a stack of clean laundry, she giggled silently to herself and snatched it from the pile, pulling it quickly over her wet hair and swimsuit. She lifted a corner of the sleeve to her face and sniffed deeply from the white cotton. It was clean, but smelled faintly of warm grass, and something else... something just... *Harry*. She knew it at once, but couldn't describe it in words. It was simply *him*, and she reveled in it. It seemed to summon up her best memories and diminish her worries. She felt more like herself than ever when she was around him. There was no pretending, no competing to impress. She could just be herself... and if only he would be himself, it would be a lot easier.

She was worried about him. Of course, she'd been worrying about Harry ever since she met him so many years ago, and she wasn't about to stop. She couldn't even put her finger on why. Of course she knew she loved him, that much was clear, but there was always a certain pain in her heart when she imagined what he must have gone through in his life, and what he must still go through. That was why she'd agreed to come here after all, but it didn't make it any easier. She thought that perhaps she could make a difference in some small way, being around to help. Just to see him smile, that was all she wanted. Even though it pierced her heart, she only wanted him to be happy, to have a life he enjoyed... even if it wasn't with her.

With a mix of emotions confusing even to her, she whipped her wet hair quickly up in a pony tail and started toward the stairs. Halfway through the archway into the lounge she stopped with a jerk, as she saw him asleep on the sofa. Something in her cried out to go to him, to watch over him until he woke up, to make sure no one bothered him. But then, as always, she turned away toward the stairs, realizing the best way to help him was to let him be. She was startled then when she heard her name.

"Ginny?" he asked quietly.

She turned back quickly. "Harry?" her voice quivered a little, wondering what might be wrong and what she could possibly do to help. "What do you need?"

He still didn't open his eyes, even when she crossed the room and knelt by his head, resting her hand on the arm of the sofa, even when it cried out to touch his.

"Nothing, I'm fine," he yawned. "I was just wondering if you wanted to join me lying about for a bit. I was trying to go to sleep, but nothing..." he waved his hands aimlessly.

"If you're going to sleep, I'll go upstairs. You need to rest."

He opened his eyes and touched her arm softly. "No, please stay. I'm so tired, I don't even know..." His eyes closed again, but his hand still rested on hers.

"What don't you know?"

"What?"

"You said 'I don't even know' and then just drifted off."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm just so tired, but please don't go." He managed to open his eyes a little and lifted his hand to touch her hair with his fingers. "It's brown when it's wet," he said dreamily, "I've always liked it red. It's so pretty."

Ginny blushed but reminded herself that he wasn't really himself right now, he was probably just speaking nonsense. Still, a small part of her soaked up his words and stored them away in her heart. She moved and sat down in the large, cushy armchair. It was situated at a right angle to the sofa, close to him. She reached out one slender hand and slowly ran it through his hair. After the work and water his hair was a little rough, but it was still more *him* than anything else. Somehow it was suddenly easy to forget herself. Her thoughts were focused only on him and she smiled as she felt him relax.

She continued to run her fingers slowly through his hair, finally settling down and laying her own head on the arm of the chair. It was softly stuffed and just the right fit for someone her size. She stretched out her legs against the other arm and sighed deeply. A warm, contented feeling began to build in her, filling her slowly from head to toe. She knew he was asleep, and somehow, she could also feel that his sleep was devoid of dreams. He seemed more relaxed than she had seen him, even in the last few weeks, and that thought carried her off to sleep.

When Hermione came down a little later, she quietly got some juice from the kitchen and made her way back upstairs, smiling happily to herself. Perhaps she was right after all.

Chapter Seven

Into the Catacombs

Sitting in his spacious office, the Minister of Magic rubbed his hands down the front of his robes, trying to smooth them after a very long day. A bit of lint on one side gave some particular trouble but with some persuasion it, too, fell to the floor.

Having held the job for nearly two years now, the Minister had become accustomed to odd visits from the Headmaster of Hogwarts, though never used to his rather dramatic times and methods of appearance.

Being keen enough of mind to recognize his own limitations, the Minister always appreciated these little visits. It was an opportunity to run things by a wizard much older and wiser than himself. The Ministry was holding together by a thread these days, and though he was generally an optimistic man, the threat of collapse loomed over his head like a dark, ever-present cloud. He tried, however, not to let his mood dampen his greeting.

"Please have a seat, Albus," he said cordially, moving quickly from his own seat to greet the Headmaster. His quick energy belied his outer age, as did his thick white ponytail.

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Minister McFee. I fear these old bones are getting wearier by the day." He smiled broadly as he found the most comfortable seat and took it.

"Brandy, sir?"

"Oh, I suppose it could do no harm."

Two small glasses drifted out of the air and into the Minister's hands, and he held one out to Dumbledore.

Taking his small glass, the aged wizard nodded to the Minister and held it up as a toast.

"To the success of our endeavor, and to the health of those who must fight."

"I'll drink to that," the Minister offered.

They tipped their glasses up and drained the dark liquid from them.

"Now, Minister," continued Dumbledore, "I have some items of business I wish to discuss with you. However, I am perfectly willing to oblige should you have anything to discuss with me first."

The Minister closed his eyes for a moment and tipped his wand to his temple, though whether by habit or on purpose it was difficult to tell.

"Albus," he said, turning slowly in his chair, "I have held this office for nearly two years. I've seen more turnover inside the Ministry than any Minister in History, not counting the Goblin rebellions, of course."

Dumbledore nodded serenely, putting his fingers together and letting his elbows come to rest on the arms of the chair.

"What I'm trying to say is this: I fear for our people. I have put up the strongest front I can. I have replaced those I fear may have other allegiances and I have diverted the vast majority of this government's resources to a conflict I worry that we can't..." he paused, then continued in a more defeated tone. "I fear that we are losing our battle. The list grows longer every day of those we've lost. I believe it may be as many as two hundred now, and that's not even counting Muggles. So many lives..." he sighed and shook his head. "Is there any stone left unturned? Is there any path we have not taken? I am simply at my wit's end."

"Now," he added with a sigh, "I don't mean to say we're giving up. It's merely the frustrations of the office getting to me, Albus. I apologize."

Dumbledore gazed over his glasses at the man in front of him, a compassionate smile on his face.

"Now, Arthur," Dumbledore said, "there's no need to apologize to me. I understand perfectly your frustrations. After all, I am the Headmaster of a school."

The Minister chuckled. "Yes, you are, at that." He seemed deep in thought for a moment. "I'm sorry, what was it you wished to discuss, Albus?"

"Oh, merely a trifle, I believe. You are well aware of the activities of the Order, and I am here only to inform you of my wish to use certain... *resources*. The Order has need of the Floo Network on occasion, and may request the hook-up of additional fireplaces. We also may require Portkeys and I hope to hear that the Ministry will turn a blind eye to their creation."

"Now, Albus –"

"Arthur, we will require these things to effectively continue the battle of which you so eloquently spoke earlier. We do not require any funds, only the small amount of time it may take now and then to complete the necessary papers and to make sure the Portkey Authority does not notice the creation of a few unauthorized devices."

The Minister sighed. "I don't suppose it would do any good for me to argue. Well, it is a small favor anyway. I certainly owe that to you."

Both men stood and shook hands.

"Thank you for your time, Minister."

"Anytime, Albus. Anytime."

He sat down heavily in his chair and watched the old wizard disappear through the door. *Keep fighting, he told himself, just keep fighting. We'll win in the end.*

When Harry entered the Teacher's house the next morning, he found his mentor in his office, reading a small piece of parchment.

"Good morning, Harry. How was your night last night?"

"Er, fine. It's a comfortable house." He hoped his ears hadn't gone red. He had, after all, spent the whole night with Ginny in the lounge.

"Good, good. I've just received the morning mail and there's something here you might be interested in: a letter from Dumbledore."

Harry couldn't refrain from a curious smile and reached out as John handed him the small piece of parchment.

My dear friend,

I hope this letter finds you all in good health. I am doing well myself, aside from the usual aches and pains of old age.

I met last evening with Arthur McFee, the Minister of Magic, and he has given his consent for the hook-up of any fireplace we desire into the Floo Network. He has also given his consent, albeit somewhat unwillingly, for the creation of unauthorized Portkeys, should we find them necessary.

Please inform Harry and his friends of these developments. This should help them a great deal if they wish for a short trip back home.

*Kindest Regards,
Albus Dumbledore*

Harry turned the letter over in his hands a few times, looking at the far wall of the room.

"I don't understand," he said. "How does this help us?"

"Imagine for a moment that you're shopping in Diagon Alley, Harry. Then imagine the utter chaos that would ensue should the Death Eaters choose that moment to attack you. The creation of a Portkey would be of great use then, right? And I'm sure your friends miss their families. I have already arranged for the fireplace in your house to be connected to the Floo Network as an unregistered, hidden address, of course. That is no small task, I can assure you, connecting an international fireplace to the Network."

"So we aren't in Britain anymore. I figured..." Harry smiled a little. "Where are we then?"

"*You* are in the United States, on the shores of one of the Great Lakes, Lake Michigan to be exact. Other than that, you're better off not knowing any more details. Although," he thought for a moment, "it's not like any Death Eaters could find you here anyway. Try as I might, I've never been able to make this house plottable. Oh well. So, are you ready for some work this morning?"

"Yes!" Harry answered, at the same time as several voices behind him.

"Well, then, let's go."

They followed him down the hallway and through the large door at its end. After they had all filed into the room and the door was shut behind them, the Teacher stopped suddenly and turned in his tracks. Harry stumbled and fell into Ron, who didn't trip only because he was holding Hermione's hand. When they regained their balance, it was with some surprise at the intense look on the Teacher's face.

He was standing very close to them, studying each of their faces with a very serious and determined look on his own. He squinted slightly as he looked into their eyes, as if sizing up their abilities in one glance. Finally, having made his decision, he smiled. It was not a smile of happiness, though, and they were all unnerved by his sudden change of character.

"Today," he began quietly, "will be your first trial in the catacombs. You are all very able witches and wizards and you've faced more evil than most your age; however, my goal is to further develop the potential within you. Dumbledore was right, you know, the four of you have a special bond that goes beyond normal friendship. I can see it in your very magic and it *will* help you, perhaps in the most unexpected ways.

"This will be your first experience in the catacombs, a place where your reality will be challenged and warped with each turn you make. What you see down there will seem real, you'll be able to touch it and see it. And you will be fighting. You will also be trying to protect each other. As you progress through the tunnels and challenges, I will be observing you.

"Do not fear for your lives, what you will see is not real. You will not be harmed in any way when you finally return to this room... however long that may take. There is one thing I will do before you begin, and that is to give you a little time to prepare. Though you don't know what you will be battling, you know that you must be prepared to fight. Go and gather what you believe is necessary. I'll give you an hour."

Half-an-hour later, Harry sat on the porch with the others, discussing what to bring with them. They had decided to spend half their time making a list, and half their time actually preparing.

"Okay," said Ron, "everyone will go and change first. Remember, we're wearing light clothes underneath, heavier clothes on top, but nothing that hangs loose. We don't know what we might meet down there. After that, Harry, you get your cloak; Hermione, you gather some small

food, something we can carry in our pockets. Ginny, you get some parchment and the smallest quill you can find. I'm going to try and dig up the Know-It-All book that Hermione gave me. We'll meet back here in fifteen minutes."

Another half-an-hour later, they stood again in the training room with the Teacher. He raised his eyebrows as they entered the room carrying almost nothing.

"I see you're traveling light today. Well, we can talk about that later. Now, let me remind you again, you will not be harmed when you return to this room. What you will see is of your own making, even *I* don't know what's down there because it's all in your minds. Should you give up," he sighed, "simply send up red sparks and I'll bring you back. Any questions?"

They shook their heads grimly, and turned toward the dark opening in the wall.

"Well, get along with you. I'll be right here waiting."

Harry led the way with Ron taking up the rear. They had agreed upon this during their walk to the house.

"Well, here goes," Harry said simply, and stepped through the door.

They descended down the stone steps for what felt like several minutes. Harry continued to lead the way, his wand tip ignited and gleaming brightly. The perfect white light seemed out of place in the dank stone tunnel, its light showing only the steps closest to them as the farther ones curved out of sight.

Upon reaching the bottom of the passage a general feeling of unease swept through them and they stopped for a moment to regroup. The air around them was thick and damp, and though it was cool, Harry had to wipe his forehead on his sleeve.

"Which way do you think?" asked Ginny.

The others looked off in the only two directions.

"I don't know," Ron said, looking left. "This way doesn't feel right to me."

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione, reaching her hand out into the air. "It feels fine to me. In fact, it feels... good, like we *should* go this way."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other and then off down the hall. Harry closed his eyes, while Ginny frowned.

"I don't know," she said, "I don't get much feeling either way. What do you think, Harry?"

He stood for a moment with his eyes closed before answering.

"I agree with Hermione. This way seems to feel right."

She looked very pleased with herself. "Well, come on then."

They set off down the hall but stopped almost immediately.

"Did you feel that?" Harry asked, looking visibly disturbed.

"Feel what?" said Ron, whose voice had gone up at least an octave.

Hermione knelt down and put her hand to the floor. "It feels like something pounding on the floor, but there's no rhythm to it. Sometimes it's a shock, but sometimes it feels more like a vibration."

"And the wall's warm," added Ginny, her eyes going wide.

They all reached out and laid their hands on the wall. It seemed like minutes passed before Ron finally started to get impatient.

"Look, we've got to keep moving. We're sitting ducks just standing here waiting to be found."

"Ron's right," Harry added. "We should keep moving."

They started off again down the hall, which seemed to have a slight downward angle, as if it were leading them on. Occasionally, Harry wiped his brow and surreptitiously glanced behind him at Ginny. His mind wandered in many directions and sometimes he wondered why he had let her come. Surely she was safer at home, away from all of this madness. But then she would flash

a smile at him, foiling his attempt to steal a glance at her, and he would reconsider. Her smile could do amazing things to him, it seemed.

They walked for about ten minutes until they came to a small room with three doors set in the far wall. Ron immediately stepped forward and tried to open one.

“Ron!” cried Hermione, “Don’t! We don’t know what’s behind it.”

“Right,” said Ron, “let’s think for a moment, how are we going to find what’s behind the door? Perhaps we should open it?” His voice had a cutting edge to it and Hermione looked slightly hurt.

“Well, at least put your hand on it first and see if it’s hot.” She crossed her arms and pouted a little.

“Fine,” he said, “but only if you do it, too.”

She glared at him, but stepped up to the door and reached out, only to jump back again when something touched her hand. Discovering that it was Ron’s hand weaving into hers, she relaxed again. His smile seemed to melt her heart and she smiled reluctantly back.

She reached out to the door again and placed her hand on it. There was a strange rumbling sound and before anyone could even react, the two were pulled violently through the door, disappearing from the room.

“Ron!” Harry yelled.

“Hermione!” Ginny screamed.

They both ran at the door and put their hands on it. Harry shook the handle, but the door remained closed. He also tried the ‘*Alohomora*’ charm with no effect. He wished he had Sirius’s knife but remembered it had been destroyed in the Ministry at the end of his fifth year. He cursed.

“What are we going to do?” he asked, trying to control the frustration in his voice.

“Well,” said Ginny, “it’s simple, isn’t it? We have to go through one of the other doors and find them. Remember what the Teacher said? ‘We won’t be hurt, it’s all in our heads?’”

“Yeah, I remember,” he muttered, turning to another door, “but I didn’t like the way he said it. He said we wouldn’t be hurt when we *returned* to the training room. He didn’t say anything about what would happen while we were still down here.”

Ginny’s face lost its remaining color and Harry squeezed his eyes shut, sorry for having made things worse. He reached out and touched her shoulder.

“It’s going to be fine. We can do this – you and I. We can. *Together*.”

Ginny shivered pleasantly at the way he ended his thought and smiled reluctantly, mouthing ‘okay’ to him and allowing him to take her hand in his. He led them to the door on the left and reached out to it.

He tensed as his fingers met the wood, but nothing happened.

He shook the handle and tried the opening charm with the no result again.

“I don’t get it,” he frowned at the door and put his hand to his chin, scratching at it absently.

“Maybe... maybe it needs me to do it,” said Ginny. “After all, the other one only reacted to Hermione. Perhaps it just needs the female touch.” She smiled and arched an eyebrow at him, making him break out in a sweat entirely unrelated to the damp in the air.

“Okay, go ahead,” he offered with his free hand. His other hand remained safely entwined with hers.

She took a deep breath and tentatively reached out, placing her hand on the door. Harry had only a moment to register the deep vibrations he felt in his feet before they were forcibly lifted and jerked through the door into the darkness beyond.

On the other side, Harry leapt up from the floor, wand in hand, searching the area. Ginny was on the floor next to him and he carefully offered her his hand, keeping a wary eye on his surroundings.

They were in a much larger room than the one they had just left. It was quite long but not a towering cavern because Harry could see the ceiling some twenty feet above them. He lit his wand brighter and aimed it in every direction. There wasn't a door in sight. It appeared that they had been deposited directly into the center of the room with no way out. Shaking his head, Harry realized he didn't have time to think about it just now.

The room was divided down the middle by stone columns spaced evenly about every thirty paces. Grabbing Ginny's hand again, Harry set off toward one of the walls.

"Where are we going?" she asked in a whisper.

"Well, we're going to get out of the open for starters. Then we'll just have to make our way around the room, I suppose."

They hurried over to the wall and started walking along it. The silence was broken only by their quick breaths and the eerie rumbling and thumping they felt now and then.

"I hope Ron and Hermione are okay," Ginny whispered, looking very worried.

"I'm sure they're fine," Harry sighed. "They can handle themselves as well as we can."

She smiled at the thought of 'we' being herself and Harry, but then brought her mind back to reality with a quick reprimand. Hadn't the Teacher always taught them to be focused?

They continued on in silence for several minutes, making their way down the entire length of the wall. At the end, a sharp drop-off made Harry break out in a sweat yet again, and he backed away slowly.

"Harry!" cried Ginny in a whisper. "Harry, I've got it! Why don't we just see if we can *find* Ron and Hermione?"

"I thought that's what we were doing," he answered, looking confused.

"No, no. Are you a wizard or not?" She looked like she was trying not to laugh.

His eyes widened as the realization hit him. "Of course! But not right here, we're a little too close to the edge." His eyes raked over the darkness beyond them and he backed up several steps. Ginny continued walking along the edge, balancing with her arms out to her sides and smiling at the horrified look on Harry's face.

"Ginny, you have to help me, okay? Over here." He pointed to the floor where he was standing.

She gave up and walked over to him. "Okay, have it your way."

He squeezed his eyes shut but opened them again immediately looking down in alarm. Ginny had stopped very close to him, wrapping her arms around him and pulling herself into his arms. He suddenly felt so many emotions that he wondered how he would possibly calm down enough to find the others. As if acknowledging his need, her magic began to flow in. It was just as he remembered, calming, reassuring, and if possible, even *more* powerful than before.

He heard her whisper the incantation and felt her sweep into his mind. After a few moments of calming himself, he reached out to Ron. It took some time to find his friend, but he relaxed upon finding both Ron and Hermione to be okay. Without wasting too much energy, he found that they were in a similar situation to himself and Ginny. They talked quickly about how to get back together and Harry was suddenly surprised to hear Ron's voice coming from the darkness beyond them.

He broke the connection and reluctantly pulled away from Ginny. Deciding the risk of drawing attention was worth it, he opened his mouth and yelled out to Ron.

In a few moments they had established that Ron and Hermione seemed to be in a room right next to them, on the other side of a thick wall. It, too, opened to the vast chasm in front of them and their voices carried well out into the darkness before echoing back.

In the middle of his next yell, Harry felt a tug on his sleeve.

"Harry!"

"Hold on," he said, and then yelled out to Ron again. "Ron, what do you think about building a bridge?"

"Harry," Ginny hissed, "something's coming."

He turned immediately to her and strained to listen. The sound didn't seem to be coming from anything walking or running. It seemed to rush at them as if from a violent windstorm... or worse, a flood of water.

"Ginny!" Harry hissed. "Hold on to me! Hold on to me!"

She had stepped slowly away from him toward the approaching water – now just visible toward the other end of the room – and appeared to be studying it carefully. Harry grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him and behind one of the pillars.

"Harry, no!" she cried. "I can handle this."

He was struck for a moment by her calm, but then tugged her arm again. She wrenched free from him, took two steps out and faced the water head-on. The rushing had become a roaring in his ears and he stepped back to her, wrapping his arms around her and holding tight. It was all he could do now. If they were to be washed away, at least he would be with her.

He panicked for a moment wondering what Ron and Hermione were going to do, but his mind was occupied by Ginny again as the first crash of water hit them.

Instinctively holding his breath, he closed his eyes, waiting for the force of the wave to hit, but it never did. Opening one eye, he stared in amazement at the sight before him.

They were standing facing the oncoming water and Harry was astonished to see it rush right past them. Ginny held her wand in front of her with both hands and he could feel the tension in her body as she struggled to hold on. Her hair flew out behind her in the rush of cold air created by the water, and in front of her there appeared a thin, almost transparent wall that diverted the flood past them.

Harry could do nothing but stare as the water – now as high as a mountain troll and well above their heads – rushed violently just inches away. He continued to hold onto Ginny until his arms were sore from the effort. The water seemed to go on forever.

Minutes passed, and finally the sound began to decrease in its intensity. As quickly as it had started, the flood stopped, leaving only a dull trickle running beneath them.

"Ginny, that was amaz- Ginny!" In an instant his face contorted with fear as she collapsed into his arms.

"Ginny! Wake up! Come on..."

He laid her on the floor and held her, a burst of happiness filling him when her eyes fluttered open again.

"Ginny? What happened? Are you okay?"

"Too much... I could hardly hold it back, but... you're here." She reached up and touched his face with her fingertips.

"C'mon Ginny, we've got to keep moving. Can you stand?"

With his help, she got shakily to her feet, keeping an arm around his neck.

They walked tentatively toward the drop off and were shocked to see the vast chasm had filled completely up with water, making it perfectly level with the floor.

"Harry!" a voice yelled from the darkness.

"Ron!" he yelled back. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine. Where did all this water come from?"

"You didn't... It didn't come by you?"

"No. Did you see it?"

Harry didn't answer, instead he was doing some quick thinking.

"Ron, is Hermione over there?"

"I'm here, Harry. What is it?" she asked quickly.

"Do you think you can do a freezing charm on this and get over here?"

"It's a lot of water, but I think... I can try."

He heard them talking loudly together and then the far-off sound of ice crackling met his ears. He pulled Ginny back from the edge so they wouldn't get stuck.

In only a few moments, Ron came skidding gracefully around the corner, chuckling slightly. "Come on, Hermione. You can do it!"

Ginny walked tentatively up to the ice and Harry followed close behind. They strained to look around the corner and saw Hermione, hands pressed up against the wall, creeping cautiously toward them.

When she rounded the corner, she reached out and caught Ron around the neck just as her feet slipped out from under her. Ron burst out laughing as they hit the floor together.

"Hermione, why were you so scared? You did the spell after all, and you never make mistakes."

She smiled slightly and pink spots appeared on her cheeks. Harry came over and offered a hand to them. When they were all standing again, they turned to look out over the ice.

"Well done, Hermione," Harry said.

"Well, shall we?" Ron asked.

"All right. I don't think there's any other way out," Harry answered.

They walked out onto the ice and into the darkness, trying to keep close to the rock wall to their right.

After about ten minutes of careful treading, and a few reapplications of Hermione's freezing spell, they came upon a rock outcropping with a large open archway in the center. It jutted out from the wall a few feet above the ice. With a little scraping and climbing, they made it up safely and dropped to the floor. Harry looked at Ginny with concern, but she smiled back as if acknowledging his fear and telling him she was okay.

"So where did all that water come from?" asked Ron, curiously.

"Where did it come from?" said Harry, with a hysterical laugh. "It came right down on us. If Ginny hadn't... if she hadn't..." He breathed out and turned to look at her. Her eyes were closed and she looked as if she were asleep, but then she spoke very quietly.

"I sensed the water coming. It was like a part of me knew what to do. When it came, I just asked it to go around us. At first it didn't mind, but after a bit it started to fight back and it took more and more of my strength to hold it away. Without Harry's magic I wouldn't have been able to do it."

"Wha- I didn't even know I was using my magic," he said.

Hermione sat for a few moments, her face clearly torn between wanting to believe her friend and confusion about what had just happened.

"So," she began at last, "you just *asked* it to go around you? And it *listened*? How's that possible. It just doesn't make any logical sense."

"I know," said Ginny quickly. "I know, but I just *felt* it. I've never felt anything like that before. I just... I don't know how to explain it. It was just a feeling inside me."

"But how --"

"Leave it for now, Hermione," Harry said. "She needs to rest, she's so tired she can hardly sit up."

Ginny looked up at him questioningly, "Am I that obvious? How'd you know?"

"I d-didn't... I... Well," he said, looking up and closing his eyes, "No, I did know. I can feel it. I can *feel* how tired you are." He picked up her hand and held it between his own, closing his eyes again.

"I feel it. Normally your magic is so strong, so calming, but now... It feels far away. Are you sure you're okay?" His eyes opened suddenly, filled with worry.

"I'm fine, Harry. I just need to rest."

"That's settled, then," said Ron. "We need to rest, then we'll keep moving. Personally, I'd like to get going into that tunnel."

"No!" cried Harry. "There's something in there. We need to rest first. This may be harder than we think."

"Well, I'm not one for sleeping on rock," said Hermione thoughtfully. "How about some mats?"

She lifted her wand into the air and conjured up four thick mats.

"Nice work," commented Ron. "You always know just what to do. Pretty amazing, really. You're so great!" Then he looked slightly embarrassed, as if he hadn't meant to say it out loud. The look disappeared, though, when he saw the smile on her face. He picked up their two mats and offered his hand to her. They moved over to the other side of the outcropping and lay down, cuddling close to each other.

Harry looked at Ginny, feeling his cheeks blush at the thoughts his friends inspired in his head and hoping that she couldn't tell.

He unrolled his mat and laid down next to her, close enough to touch her hand, but far enough away that it didn't feel awkward. At least, not too awkward.

Harry woke sometime later to the quiet sounds of voices. Pulling his wand, he immediately lit it and turned around to get his bearings. They were still on the rock outcropping and nothing but the ice having turned back to water was any different. He wondered how long they had slept and wished he had thought to bring his watch. It had been a gift from Ginny for his last birthday and he wore it everywhere, but for some reason had left it behind for this trip.

Shaking his head, he got up from the softness of his mat and stretched his arms over his head.

"Hi, sleepy," a sweet voice called from nearby. He turned and saw that Ginny was awake and stifling a yawn with one hand while waving at him with the other. He sat down next to her and took her hand in his. Her eyes darted away and he noticed the pink on her cheeks, even under the dim light of his wand. He closed his eyes and let her magic flow through him again. It seemed quite calm and for a moment he thought it tried to wrap around him in some sort of ethereal embrace.

He smiled and opened his eyes just in time to drop her hand as Ron and Hermione appeared next to them. Hermione vanished their mats as they stood up and Ron turned toward the tunnel opening in the wall.

"What do you reckon?" he asked.

"Harry said he felt something earlier," said Ginny. "Harry, do you still feel it?"

He nodded and walked forward toward the opening. As he approached it, the air suddenly shifted and blew in his face, as if the cave could sense he wanted to enter.

He held out one hand, raking it through the air as if stirring something.

"It's still there," he said seriously. "I can't tell what it is, but it's not friendly."

Hermione clung to Ron, although whether out of fear or for other reasons, Harry couldn't tell. In a small way he wished that Ginny was clinging to him like that.

Banishing that thought from his head – but promising to consider it again later – he gestured for the others to follow him as he lit his wand brightly.

Again, as before, the very air around them seemed charged with sensations and it blew against them as if trying to deny them entry. Harry led them into the darkness, feeling his unease grow with every step. As they progressed into the cave, the air slowed and eventually became still again. The only sound was their breathing and the scrape of their shoes on the stony floor. All else was deathly still. The air seemed very close around them.

After walking another hundred feet in they came to an opening. Harry peered around the corner, shining his light into the expansive room beyond. His heart was thumping so hard in his chest that he wasn't sure he'd be able to hear anything, if there *were* anything to hear.

While he paused on what seemed like a mental precipice, Ginny slid her hand into his and gave him a reassuring nod. He nodded back and took a wary step into the cavern.

When nothing happened, he took another step, and then two. The others followed behind him and just as Ron took the final step out of the tunnel, Harry whipped around to stop him. It was too late though, and they all watched as the door disappeared into the wall, closing them in.

Harry wiped his hand on his shirt and held his wand out in front of him again. Their light was very bright all combined and he squinted a little trying to get his bearings.

His ears perked up suddenly as a strange sound emerged from the darkness. A sound he was growing to know all too well.

"What's that?" Ginny asked quietly, her voice quivering.

"It sounds like... cloaks," Hermione whispered.

"Too right, it does," Harry said loudly, his wand raising higher and his eyes staring fiercely into the room beyond as hooded figures, appearing as if from nowhere, gathered in front of them.

"Well, if it isn't Harry Potter and his worthless friends," a voice hissed from somewhere in the group. Harry thought it sounded like Lucius Malfoy. "Haven't you learned by now not to venture into the Dark Lord's territory? Or perhaps you're simply too arrogant? It's time you were taught a lesson, Mr. Potter. You *will* learn to fear, through your own pain or... perhaps through the pain of your *friends*?"

Harry could hear the cruel enjoyment in his tormenter's voice. "Well, why don't you show me?" was all he said.

"Kill them!" the voice cried with glee. The figures moved as one, raising their wands at Harry and the others, preparing to kill.

Harry stood his ground, stealing one quick glance backward to make sure Ginny was okay. Her wand was drawn and leveled at the nearest figure. She met Harry's eyes and he thought he detected a trace of fear in them but the next moment it was gone. A strange thought flew through his mind: had she been afraid of *him*?

Turning back to his attackers, his face hardened and he opened his mouth to speak, only to find the voice wasn't his. The deep, raspy sound of it filled the chamber and brought his foes to an immediate halt. A few even backed away slightly.

"You shall *not* harm us!" he cried out.

He felt as if something other than his own mind was controlling him. Time seemed to slow as he raised his wand.

The air in the room was suddenly charged with a powerful, almost palpable, magic. A crackling sound like sparks seemed to emanate off of Harry. In a great sweeping motion with his wand, a line of fire leapt across in front of them, catching several of the Death Eaters' cloaks and causing a general pandemonium among them. Then, in a flash through the searing flames, Harry fired spell after spell. He gasped for breath while time seemed to go on for minutes. Beads of sweat stung his eyes and his wand seemed to be growing immensely heavy. But still, he wouldn't stop... couldn't stop, not until his friends were safe from harm.

The Death Eaters seemed to be getting frantic, shouting to each other and trying every possible method to pass through the fire or find another way out. Harry felt no remorse for them. In his mind, any privilege they had to survival, independence, or their very happiness had been revoked the moment they joined league with Voldemort. He wasn't about to give in now.

Harry didn't move from his place, even as the fire eventually died down and disappeared. Only when the Death Eaters were gone and the tension in the air suddenly relaxed did he move. His wand dropped involuntarily from his sweaty hand and he turned, gasping for breath, before

collapsing wide-eyed to his knees. The crunch of his knees hitting the floor brought his friends running, the gut-wrenching sound drawing them instantly to him.

"Harry! Harry! Are you okay?" Ginny knelt down beside him, lifting his arm over her shoulder and propping him up. Ron and Hermione were at his side in an instant.

Ginny put her hand to his face and looked into his eyes, willing him to stay alert.

"Harry, what *was* that? What did you do?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," he replied with some effort, "I don't know what happened. Are you okay?" His eyes searched their faces until he was satisfied that they were all in one piece, then he let himself relax into Ginny's arms as his eyes closed, succumbing to the darkness.

When he woke sometime later, he found himself lying on one of Hermione's thick, soft mats. Looking around, he was surprised to see three backs turned toward him. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were sitting around him, facing warily out into the room with wands in hand.

"Wha- What happened?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

"Harry!" Hermione cried, turning to give him a hug.

"Okay, okay," said Ron, pulling her away from Harry and toward himself, though with a smile. After Hermione had vacated the space, Ginny leaned in and squeezed Harry in a tight Weasley hug.

"Ginny, I can't breathe!" he whispered.

"Oh, so sorry," she said and let go, looking quite not-sorry. "I'm just so happy you're okay. You gave us a fright, Harry."

"So you..." He looked at the floor. "You all just... stayed awake?"

"Well, yeah," Ron said. "We couldn't very well risk them coming back, and after what you did..."

"Sorry," Harry said, getting shakily to his feet and rubbing his knees, "I don't know why I was so tired, but... thanks." He stretched his arms over his head and looked around the room.

"So, what d'you think's going to happen next in this *great* adventure? Voldemort himself, perhaps?"

"D-don't say that, Harry," Ron gulped. "That's not funny." He turned to glare at Ginny, who apparently thought it *was* rather funny.

"Well, I bet we're going to find out soon enough," he muttered.

With wands drawn they set off slowly toward the unseen end of the room. No one spoke a word as they walked, and the quiet was very unsettling.

When they finally reached the far wall, a door appeared in it, very much like the one they had entered through earlier.

"Well, I guess we could sit here and stare at it all day, but we're not going to know until we go through, right?" Harry tried to keep his voice as light as possible, not wanting to betray his fear.

They all responded with equally lighthearted laughs and Harry stepped into the tunnel ahead.

After a few minutes of walking in what seemed like an uphill direction, Ron observed aloud what Harry had begun to wonder in his head.

"Hey," he said, "I wonder if this is the same tunnel we came down earlier."

"You know," answered Hermione, "I think it might be. It's probably just the other way – if we had turned to the right, I mean." She paused for a moment and they continued walking.

"Does anyone hear that thumping again?" she asked after a dozen or so steps.

They all stopped in their tracks and put their hands to the wall or floor.

"I – I don't hear anything," Ron said unconvincingly.

Indeed, they did all hear it again. The very floor beneath them was vibrating and resonating from an unknown source, although they didn't seem to think it would be unknown for very much longer.

Another five minutes up the tunnel and the air started to grow warmer. Once or twice, Harry – being in the front – thought he saw blasts of something like fire in the distance. He always put it aside as his imagination because every time he tried to look closer, there was nothing but inky blackness.

Eventually they came to another enormous room. This was certainly the largest yet as the ceiling was so far above them that they couldn't even see it. Harry gripped his wand tighter.

"Does anybody smell smoke?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry tried to control his breathing as a thought occurred to him.

"Dragons!" he said. "I bet there's a dragon in here. I thought I saw fire down the end of the tunnel earlier and I bet that's what it was from."

"Does... anybody know how to get *by* a dragon?" Ginny asked, with her best effort at nonchalance.

"Er, well we could try the freezing charm again," said Ron. "Or we could just get to the other end of this room as quickly as possible."

Even as he finished his thought, the hairs on the back of their necks began to rise.

"It's coming!" whispered Hermione. "Quick, run!"

It wasn't an easy thing to run and be quiet at the same time. To their ears, every step seemed to beckon the would-be predator to them, telling it their exact location.

At last the far wall came into sight, and just as Harry was breaking into a smile, the giant, scaled beast dropped to the floor in front of them sending a violent tremor through the room.

"Apparate!" Harry yelled as they all scattered. "Apparate to the door and get down the tunnel as fast as you can."

As he ran off in whatever direction seemed to get him out of the way. He could see the many colors of hexes and curses flying toward the dragon from their wands. As it started to turn away from him, he skidded to a halt and launched the best *Avi*s spell he could muster right at the Dragon's head. For a moment he was worried that he had only succeeded in severely annoying a large, fire-breathing monster, but as the small flock of birds approached its head, the dragon was distracted long enough for him to Apparate to the tunnel entrance.

When he arrived, he found Ron and Ginny both waiting for him, but no sign of Hermione.

"Where's Hermione?" cried Ron.

"I don't know," said Ginny. "She was right next to me but we must have gotten separated."

Suddenly, as if drawn by forces unknown, Harry's eyes found her – at the same moment as the dragon's. Before he could even move, Ron was flying out of the hole, running as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Hermione, Apparate!" he yelled. "Oi, you, dragon! Look at me, don't I look a lot tastier than she does?"

It's massive yellow eyes turned slowly onto him while Hermione seemed to have been frozen to the floor.

"Hermione, move!" he yelled again. Then, as if waking up to reality again, she lifted her wand above her head and spun in a tight circle, disappearing into the air.

Ron allowed himself a quick smile knowing she was safe now, but was distracted almost immediately by his own dire predicament.

The dragon was advancing on him, lowering its head and opening its mouth for a full, deep breath. As the smoke started to pour from its nose, Ron closed his eyes tightly and pictured the doorway where his friends stood waiting for him to come to safety.

Just as the fire rushed forth from the dragon's mouth, Ron disappeared, reappearing again in the safety of the tunnel entrance. Hermione swept over to him and threw her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder.

"Oh, Ron," she cried. "You saved my life!"

"I hate to break up this party," said Ginny, "but there's still an angry dragon out there that's just been deprived of four meaty snacks. So, I think we should be going before it figures out where we went."

As if to answer her words, a mighty roar filled the air, resonating off the walls and shaking their very bones.

Hermione let go of Ron and wiped at her eyes, smiling brilliantly. Ron took her hand and together they set off at a run. Ginny turned to follow but stopped short, realizing that Harry was still standing in the doorway.

"Oi, Harry! Come on! Are you *trying* to let it see you?"

He continued to stare in odd curiosity.

"Harry!" she cried again.

"What? Oh. Oh!" He reached out and grasped her hand in his, taking off at a run just as the first tongues of fire reached the tunnel's entrance.

"Thanks," he said in between breaths. "I don't know what happened. I just felt like I was watching an animal at the zoo or something, like it wouldn't hurt me."

"Well," she said, "I think it was going to have you for dinner if you waited much longer. Best meat of the pack, it was probably thinking."

He cast her an odd glance and she blinked quickly, realizing exactly what she had said. When she looked up again, he was smiling slightly.

"I don't know," he said, "It was probably after you, the cutest one in the pack."

She felt her face grow hot and she struggled to draw breaths properly. It seemed as if her insides had just taken shape after a long absence. Had *Harry* really just said that?

She was left to ponder it on her own as they continued their dash up the tunnel, trying to catch up to Ron and Hermione.

When they finally reached their friends, Harry yelled "stop!" as loud as his voice would let him between gasps. Ron and Hermione stopped quite willingly, leaning against the wall to catch their breath.

Harry collapsed to the floor, holding a stitch in his side that hurt so much he thought the dragon may have gotten a piece of him after all.

Ginny stood bent-over against the opposite wall, her hair falling around her face, obscuring it from view. Harry let his eyes be drawn to her, and when she finally turned around, their eyes met and each blushed deeply, turning away again.

Fortunately for them, neither Ron nor Hermione noticed. Ron was too tired to notice much of anything, and Hermione was still ogling Ron with the deepest affection. In fact, just as soon as she was confident he had caught his breath, she put her arms around his neck and planted a large, wet kiss on his lips.

Ginny just smiled but Harry felt the need to have at least a little fun.

"Oi, no snogging until after we've reached the surface again. And even then, at least out of sight of Harry." Referring to himself in the third-person was a little unusual he thought, but the effect was well worth it. The two split apart instantly and turned away, faces as scarlet as the setting sun.

Having had his laugh, Harry took a deep breath and started slowly up the tunnel again. The others shrugged and followed behind him.

In what seemed like only a few minutes, they reached the familiar point from which they had started from. Harry motioned for the others to go up ahead of him, and turned to glance back one last time. Ginny stayed with him, threading her arm through his.

"What do you see?" she asked quietly.

“Nothing... nothing. I was just wondering if any of it was real, or if it all really was just our imagination.” He sighed deeply.

“I don’t know, Harry. I don’t know. But I think we’re about to find out.”

She pulled him toward the rising stone steps and together they made their way back up to the light of day.

Chapter Eight

Gardening and Dueling

Ginny and Hermione sat on the front porch long after the sunlight had faded into darkness that night. They had bade the boys goodnight several hours before and made their way quietly out into the cool night air. They each sensed the other's need to talk about what had happened earlier, but without Harry or Ron present.

There was a light breeze, light enough to tickle the skin but not make it cold, and the girls stretched luxuriously in their comfortable chairs, enjoying the privacy of the night.

"I- I don't know why he'd find me any easier than you," Ginny was saying. They'd been talking about Harry's ability to magically speak to them during his trials a few weeks earlier.

Hermione smiled at her in a knowing way and set her juice down on the small table, turning to face her friend. "You *know* why he found you easier than us."

The younger witch blushed slightly and ducked her head. "It's... it's not like that, honestly."

"Well, he obviously likes you," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I mean, he holds your hand all the time, he stares at you constantly, and you should have seen how he looked at you in the caves when he thought you were hurt. He's smitten. Not to mention, *he* can feel *your* magic. That's not something just anyone can do."

Ginny picked up her own glass, sipping her drink through a bright green straw. She allowed herself a fragment of a smile. Just the possibility of him liking her, after all these years, made her eyes shine with a rare brightness.

Hermione could see the change in her friend and smiled her own happy smile. After all, *she* had gotten *her* 'Harry', and the thought of Ron's eyes caught in hers was enough to make her blush even now.

Ginny giggled beside her.

"What?" laughed Hermione, knowing full well what the other girl found so funny.

"I don't want to know what you're thinking about," said Ginny.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Hermione said airily. "Still," she added, going back to their previous conversation, "I hope we work on this magic some more. If Harry's the only one who can do it, then it doesn't really help us that much, does it?"

"Right," said Ginny, "but didn't you hear his thoughts once?" She shivered, remembering what Harry's *thoughts* had been.

Hermione, too, remembered what she had heard. "I did, at that. But then the other day he heard what *you* were thinking."

Ginny crinkled her forehead up in thought. "But if we can do this, then we should be able to do it... right now." Her eyes met Hermione's and they both nodded slightly.

"When Harry and I did this before," Hermione said, sitting up, "he concentrated so hard... I don't know if I can do it like he did."

Ginny burst out laughing. "Have you ever seen *you* studying? I swear if I ever looked that intense, my brain would melt."

"You mean like when you're chasing the Snitch on your broom?" Hermione said with a crooked smile.

"Fair enough," Ginny laughed. "Let's try it. Er, you do it."

"All right," she said, closing her eyes. "Just give me a minute to relax."

Ginny closed her own eyes, doing her best to keep her focus on Hermione. They sat still and silent for several minutes. The lake breeze continued to move past them and around them, tossing fallen leaves about and tickling their bare feet. With it came peace and comfort and Ginny found herself drawn to thoughts of Harry. She wished there were some way, any way, that he could just stay here forever, away from evil and insane Dark Lords. She would even stay with him... forever, if he wanted her to.

She knew her ears were turning pink and was happy that Hermione's eyes were closed. Suddenly a short laugh came from the other chair, and Ginny felt as if a presence were next to her and a hand were on her shoulder. A voice spoke softly in her mind.

"Ginny?" it asked.

She kept her eyes squeezed tightly shut and concentrated on that voice. *"I'm here, Hermione."*

"Wow," Hermione thought in quiet awe. *"This is incredible... just incredible. I can see you sitting there with your eyes closed, and... you were thinking of Harry, weren't you?"*

Ginny felt herself turning more red than pink, recalling her exact thoughts about Harry, and she smiled. *"I was, I admit it."*

"Oh no!" thought Hermione. *"I'm already losing you."* Ginny felt her presence leaving, and Hermione's next words were from her mouth. "Ginny, I can't do it any longer. I'm so tired... exhausted."

"But that was so short," Ginny said, opening her eyes in astonishment.

"I don't know how Harry kept it up for so long. I can't imagine. No wonder he was so tired."

Hermione was slouched in her chair, clearly exhausted from the effort, but her face held a strange look of respect and a hint of intimidation. "That was only... only a few seconds and I could hardly hold it. Harry did it for about five minutes when we were looking for Ron. How's that possible?"

Ginny smiled and a warm, proud feeling spread through her. Not because he had clearly bested Hermione – the girl had hardly had any practice – but because she knew how powerful he could be sometimes.

"Hermione," she said quietly, "Harry's becoming a really powerful Wizard. Did you see the look on his face when he was facing down those Death Eaters? It was scary." Ginny had closed her eyes again, getting lost in the memory. "I could feel the power just... radiating off of him. I- I was actually scared for a second."

She opened her eyes again and looked over at Hermione. "Sometimes I'm a little afraid of him when he gets like that. He can be really scary. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that."

Hermione nodded, leaning her head back against the chair and looking sleepy. "I'm sure he'd never want us to be scared of him." Suddenly she jerked forward, opening her eyes and turning to Ginny. "I remember another time when he did that," she said, and began to smile. "You're going to like this. Remember when Malfoy had you cornered at school?"

Ginny nodded and blinked.

"When I first heard you scream, I stopped Ron and Harry so we could listen. When Harry heard you scream again, it... it was... he did the same thing. I remember looking at Ron and he had the same shocked look on his face as I did. Harry just looked so... scary, like he was going to attack and really hurt someone. And just like you said, I could almost feel the power radiating off of him."

Ginny sat for a moment, absorbing this new information. Harry had looked like that because he was trying to protect *her*? There had to be some other reason.

“Yeah, Harry really hates Malfoy.”

“We’ve been over that many times,” Hermione said, giving her a significant look, “but he’s never done that before, not until it was *you* in trouble.”

For the umpteenth time that night, Ginny blushed. “Why do you so enjoy doing that to me?” she asked loudly.

Hermione might have been concerned except for the wide smile on her friend’s face.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We don’t have to talk about Harry anymore. So, the other night Ron and I were on the sofa – “

“No!” Ginny screamed, getting up from her seat and running toward the door with her hands over her ears.

“Oh, come back,” laughed Hermione. “You’re just too easy! I can see why Ron enjoys it so much.”

Ginny looked at Hermione in wonder as she came back to her chair. “When did you get so laid-back?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

Hermione continued to smile. “I don’t know, really. It’s this place, I think. Or maybe it’s Ron starting to rub off on me.”

“Heaven forbid! The last thing we need is another Weasley around here. I had rather hoped that you might rub off on him.”

Hermione nodded lightly, looking out into the night. “Well, their hearts are in the right places, even if they’re so thick it takes them seven years to notice what’s right in front of them.”

Ginny tried to smile, but could only manage a weak sort of grin. Seeing her discomfort, Hermione put a hand on her arm and gave her a reassuring look.

“He’ll come around, I promise. And if he doesn’t, you have my permission to hex him.”

Ginny picked up her wand, looking at it lovingly. “Oh, may I please?”

Hermione laughed, “Okay, but you have to promise to let me watch.”

Ginny nodded, settling back into her comfortable chair. The two girls were silent for some time, lost in their thoughts or just looking out into the night. The chirp of frogs and crickets surrounded them and the wash of waves from the distant shore drifted through the quiet night air.

“Hermione,” said Ginny, “I wonder if you’d let me take care of Harry’s birthday. I’m sure you already got him something, and I’m sure he’ll love it, but... can I have the day? I kind of had something special in mind for him. Would you mind?”

“No,” she smiled, “I don’t mind. Since it’s on Friday, John might let us have the day off and Ron and I can just stay out of your way. Although, I think we’ll still have to have dinner with him.”

Ginny thanked her and made to get up. It was getting late and she was having trouble controlling her yawns.

“Er, Ginny? Do you... can I ask what you’re going to do for his birthday?” Hermione asked.

Ginny smiled self-consciously. Her voice was surprisingly timid when she spoke, as if she were worried about what Hermione would think of her plan.

“Well... I was going to do everything for him for a day, see? When I was growing up, on our birthdays my Mum would let us choose what we wanted to eat that day and what we wanted to do. We didn’t have to clean up after ourselves, or wash the dishes, or anything.” She paused and then continued in a quieter voice. “It just... it always made me feel special, and I want him to feel special.”

She looked up at Hermione, caught between embarrassment and defiance.

“Ginny, I think that might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for him. If there’s anything I can do, or Ron can do to help, please tell us. He deserves some happiness in his life and I hope you can bring it to him.” She paused and her look became more serious.

"Can I just tell you one thing?"

"Sure, anything," Ginny answered, taking her seat again.

"Ugh, it's so late my brain's starting to have trouble connecting two words together. Bear with me." She sighed deeply and began to speak.

"Harry's been my friend for a long time. There have been times when he was my best friend, even my only friend. I love him like family and I know you do, too. I know you worry about him, probably even more than I do. I'm just... *concerned* about how he handles relationships. You've seen how many times at school he pushed us away. You've seen how he holds everything inside and how he keeps his emotions in check.

"He grew up with those horrible Muggles treating him like dirt. Every time he did something incredibly honorable during the year I would always ask him if they would be proud of him when he got home. Do you remember the look on his face? His answer was always the same, 'With all those chances to die and I avoided them, they'll be so disappointed.' The sad thing is he laughed when he said it, and the rest of us laughed, too, but in my heart I knew he was telling the truth.

"What I'm trying to say is that when he was growing up, he wasn't loved like you and I were. I'm sure that's part of why it took him so long to notice you. He doesn't know what to do with someone treating him like he's special. He might just take it as a joke, or worse, he might get defensive and think you're up to something. Just please take it slow with him, let him know you're not going anywhere. I think that's his biggest concern. He's lost so many people he loved and I think he worries all the time about losing us, too. Especially you. If he cares for you, he'll be worried that he'll lose you like he's lost everyone else. I don't know how Ron and I managed to get by it. Really I'm not sure we did, because I can still see the fear in his eyes sometimes.

"So, that's it. I think it'll be just the thing he needs, and you never know, maybe he'll get something else special out of it."

Ginny couldn't miss the mischievous grin on Hermione's face and she rolled her eyes.

"Goodnight, Hermione."

"Night, Ginny."

Ginny went upstairs to her bed and flopped down on it. Even with so many thoughts swirling around in her head, she managed to fall asleep in only a few minutes. Hermione stayed outside a little longer, enjoying the night air, and then she, too, went up to her bed and fell quickly asleep.

Sweat. That was what it was called and Harry had plenty of it. It was now mid-morning the next day and he was engaged in a fierce mock-battle with the Teacher. It had been raging on for more than an hour now and he was both tired and hot, though not sure which feeling was strongest.

The spells and jinxes were flying everywhere, meaning that Harry had to be both aggressive and also make sure he didn't hit his friends who were observing from the side of the room. Dodging a leg-locker jinx, he spun around, disappeared and then reappeared on the opposite side of the room. As if anticipating this tactic, the Teacher already had his wand trained on Harry, who barely got his shield charm up in time to block a babbling curse. He watched as it ricocheted off his shield and blasted a hole in the ceiling, which mended itself in an instant.

Diving to his knees and rolling to one side, he kept his wand low and took aim with a knee-reversing hex. It hit true and he watched in strange astonishment as his mentor tipped over forward, caught himself and rolled onto his side. In the blink of an eye, the older man had performed the counter-spell and was back on his feet.

"I thought I had you with that one!" Harry yelled, trying not to laugh.

As it turned out, John was laughing, too. "Where'd you learn that, anyway?" he asked.

Harry leapt in the air, avoiding an impediment jinx. "I think I learned that one in a DA meeting once, probably from one of Hermione's books." He spun around again, his smile showing for an instant before he disappeared. He was still smiling when he reappeared in exactly the same place and fired off a quick tickling charm. It caught the Teacher around the legs and he doubled over laughing.

Harry grinned. "Are you ready to quit yet? 'Cause I've still got one more trick up my sleeve."

Using *finite incantatem* the Teacher was back to normal in a moment. He stood looking at Harry with an inscrutable look on his face.

"Okay, let's see it," he said finally.

Harry disappeared again, this time showing up behind his friends against the wall.

"Come out and help me," he said. "There aren't any rules in war."

They split off in four directions, each of their wands blazing with spells. For a moment before his mentor fell to the ground, Harry almost felt sorry for him. The feeling lasted but a second before a well-aimed stinging hex caught Harry's right arm, causing him to drop his wand.

The battle was over in a moment and before Harry could even ask for help, Ginny was at his side performing the counter-spell. He smiled thankfully at her when she was finished and picked up his wand. He jogged to the center of the room and helped the Teacher up off the floor, smiling brilliantly.

"Well, Harry, you did a fine job on that one. I don't have too many critiques, only I wonder why you didn't ask your friends to help sooner?" He studied Harry's face as if already understanding his answer. "Don't be afraid to ask for help. You may feel like you have everything under control and then the next moment you're being attacked from all sides with no one to turn to."

He turned to the others. "How did you find Harry's fighting?"

They thought for a moment and Ron was the first to speak.

"Well, I can't deny that an effective attack *can* involve hiding some of your force initially, but the key is to judge when to bring them out. In this case, Harry was doing well one-on-one, but if you were suddenly joined by a whole host of Death Eaters, he would have needed help. I think he made the right move in keeping us hidden."

"I agree," said Hermione. "It also lets us be fresh when we come out. The problem is, I don't think Voldemort will spare any Death Eaters from the final battle. If that's the case, our side won't have anyone left to hide on the sidelines. We'll be outnumbered and need everyone we can get."

"Ginny, any thoughts?" John asked, turning to her.

"Well... I do agree with Ron and Hermione, but I think Harry may have waited too long. Sometimes he has a tendency to take too much on himself... even when help is right in front of him."

Trying fiercely not to blush, she cast her eyes in his direction for a moment and was surprised at the look on his face. She'd been expecting to see anger or pain or even embarrassment, but instead he looked thoughtful.

"You're all right, I think," Harry began, giving them a warm, shy smile. "It's definitely a good idea to have some reserves for when your energy runs out, but at the same time, I agree that Voldemort won't hold back. He'll send everything he's got at us and it'll take everything we've got to fight back, and more." He pinned Ginny with his eyes, searching her face for something indefinable. "And I agree with Ginny. I should have asked for help sooner. I was getting too

tired and if you had gotten a few good hits in, I might not have *had* the opportunity to ask for help.”

With determination, she held out under his intense gaze until he looked away. She closed her eyes and breathed out through her nose, feeling her body relax. Suddenly she found herself smiling. Not only had he not been angry with her, he had actually agreed with her!

A touch on her arm brought her back to reality and she looked up to see his brilliant green eyes searching for something in the brown of her own. If only she were sure of what he was searching for. If it were... what she was hoping for, then she was ready to offer it to him forever, starting right now. His look, however, remained questioning as he turned away to follow the Teacher out of the room.

After lunch they were tasked with working in the garden again. Harry was beginning to find he actually enjoyed the dirty work. At the Dursleys it had always been a chore, something to despise and get done as quickly as possible with as little notice as possible. In this magnificent garden, though, he began to feel a sort of pride in his work and a strange attachment to the dark, damp earth.

As they strolled from their house back toward the garden, John – who had joined them for lunch – studied the sky above them and off to the West. It was a cloudy afternoon, with just a hint of rain in the air. He confirmed it by telling them he suspected it was going to rain for the next few days.

“But not for Harry’s birthday on Friday, right?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know,” John replied. “If this passes in two days, you’re in good shape. For now, ask me again tomorrow. I suppose you’ve got something planned for your birthday?” he asked Harry.

“Er, no,” he replied, looking at the ground.

“But perhaps your friends do?” John continued.

“Perhaps... if you’ll give us the day off,” said Hermione with a mischievous smile. Ginny gave her a thankful look for not having to give away her plans.

John nodded knowingly at them and continued on ahead.

As they reached the newest planting beds, Harry was pleasantly surprised to find himself working next to a short, beautiful redhead. He was mesmerized watching her pull her smooth hair back into a ponytail as she started to work.

After a minute she looked up, grinning. “Harry?” she asked. “How deep are you planning to dig that hole?”

He looked down at the gaping pit in front of him. It had to be nearly a foot deep now. He felt his ears turn red as he mentally kicked himself.

“It only needs to be a few inches deep, Harry.” She gave him a brilliant smile and let her eyes dissolve into his for a moment before going back to her work, humming slightly to herself and flipping her hair over her shoulder. Harry continued to dig, but his eyes remained fixed on her.

“Harry?” Ron’s voice sounded from above him. “Is this where the new tree is going?”

Once again Harry looked down at his hole. Not only had he recognized it was too large earlier, he had then proceeded to continue digging.

“Er,” he said, his face turning bright red, “No. I just... got carried away. Distracted or something,” he muttered, giving Ginny a disgruntled look. She was working quite studiously and didn’t even notice their conversation.

Well, Ginny Weasley, he thought, two can play at this game.

Using his trowel, he began to flip dirt back into the over-large hole, paying very little attention to where it was actually landing. In a few moments, a bit landed on Ginny’s arm, just above her elbow. She looked up from her work.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Here, let me get that," he said. He slowly pulled off his dirty glove and knocked the fleck of dirt off her, letting his hand pause against her bare skin as he did so.

"It's all gone now," she said faintly, her eyes wide and her ears tomato red.

"Oh, I guess it is," he smiled, his eyes never leaving hers until he turned back to his work as if nothing had happened. She sat perfectly still for a few moments and then shook her head slightly before looking down at her flowers.

"... need some water," she breathed, standing up quickly and disappearing around the corner. Harry smiled to himself.

When she came back, Harry stood brushing his hands off on his shirt, paying no attention to how dirty it was getting. She tipped the full watering can forward and began to sprinkle water over her perfectly straight line of geraniums. Harry grinned wickedly for a split second and leaned in close behind her with a devilish look.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," he whispered into her ear. He could hear her sharp intake of breath and he grinned again, watching her watering her shoes.

"Er, I don't think your feet need any water, *Ginny*," he breathed.

She turned to him, setting down the can and punching him in the arm.

"You did that on purpose!" she said with a smile so large it crinkled the corners of her eyes. But then suddenly her face went serious.

"Harry, you've got some dirt on your neck."

He reached up to rub it off.

"No, it's on this side," she said gently, running her fingers down the opposite side of his neck and then letting them brush across his chin. He closed his eyes in happiness only to find that her touch had disappeared. When he opened them again it was only to find her covering her mouth in a fit of laughter.

"Hey!" he said as she turned and ran off, her hair dancing merrily across her back, catching and reflecting the cloudy afternoon light in surprisingly bright crimson shimmers. He took chase and found her hiding behind one of the larger trees. He attacked her, tickling her sides until there were tears running down her face and she fell to the ground. He fell down next to her. Her eyes met his and she found it impossible to look away. He had the most amazing powers over her. Her breath caught in her chest as he moved closer to her. He was beginning to lean down...

"Hey! There you two are! I've been looking all over for you. John wants some help with those new birch trees and he was looking for you, Harry."

"Hi, Ron," Harry said, getting to his feet dispassionately. He stole one last look at Ginny before the tree obscured her, unsure whether he saw a tremble in her hand as she pushed herself up from the ground.

Harry followed Ron to where John was standing, wiping his brow next to several large, unplanted birch trees. Harry hitched a smile on his face, determined not to let whatever had just happened bother him.

"These need to go to the other side of the garden where we're building the gazebo. They're going to go randomly around it on either side of the path. Feel free to be creative."

Harry pulled out his wand and began to levitate one of the larger trees, when he was stopped by a raised hand.

"Sorry," John said with a smile, "but as part of your workout, these get to be moved by hand."

Both Harry and Ron groaned but nodded in acceptance. Harry bent down to pick up the first tree with Ron, but Ron wasn't there. He straightened back up and saw that his friend had sat down and was pulling his gloves off. Ron looked up when Harry turned.

“What? I’m hot.” He proceeded to pull his shirt off. Harry tilted his head for a moment and then pulled his gloves off, agreeing with Ron. A few moments later they were huffing and puffing their way across the garden, trees in tow behind them and shirts left on the bench.

Hermione had been watching the progressing situation between Harry and Ginny with happy interest. When the two ran off, she moved her planting to a bed nearer where they were lying and was pleasantly surprised at what she saw. After Ron’s rude interruption, she waited for a few minutes and then dropped her tools, making a bee-line for Ginny.

“So, how’re things?” she asked, dropping down beside the younger girl and smiling widely.

Ginny just stared straight ahead. “I- I don’t know. He was going to... he was going to kiss me, Hermione. At least I thought he was going to. And then Ron, the great big git, had to come and ruin everything. Oh, Merlin, what’s going on? Is this really happening?” She closed her eyes and scrubbed her hands on her face.

“Is that really how you wanted your first kiss to be?” asked Hermione. “Harry tackling you to the ground and kissing you, getting dirt and sweat all over you, running his muddy hands up and down your back.”

Ginny had to laugh. “No, I’m not sure how I imagined it, but I guess that wasn’t it.”

Hermione shook her head.

“Well,” continued Ginny, “it was fun, at least. Now I just have to wait for him to build up the courage again. It’ll probably be a few years, so I’d better prepare myself to – “ Her voice caught in her throat and she stared through the trees. “Is that... Harry?”

Hermione turned to look and her eyes went wide, while at the same time bright pink spots appeared on her cheeks.

“Yes,” she squeaked, “It’s Harry *and* Ron.”

The two girls watched in stupefied silence as the two shirtless boys hauled their trees right by them.

Happening to glance up from the ground as he approached the thicker trees, Harry stopped dead in his tracks when he spotted the girls.

“Ron,” he gulped.

Ron stopped and turned his head a fraction to the side before he, too, froze.

“Hermione. Ginny,” Ron said nervously. “Fancy seeing you here. Uh, we were hot and...” his voice trailed away. His shocked expression was soon replaced by a smile as his eyes and Hermione’s met. Ginny, on the other hand, stood and walked over to Harry, barely trying to hide the smile on her face.

“You can still get sunburned through the clouds, you know. Maybe I should do the charm on you?” Harry nodded, closing his eyes.

“*Scourgify*,” she said and giggled. “Well, now that that’s done... *Umbra*.”

Harry felt the oily feeling across his back as she moved her hands smoothly over him. He allowed himself a small smile, even knowing that she could see it, but it felt *good*. A few minutes later, after Hermione had done the same for Ron, the two girls watched as the trees continued their trek across the garden with the boys in tow.

Hermione’s face was positively glowing. “Wow... they’re... “

“Yes, they are,” added Ginny, and with that they went back to their planting.

By late afternoon the rain had started to fall and for a while Harry and Ron continued to work. It was a cool rain and it felt good on their hot skin. The problem, however, was that the new dirt paths were soon too muddy to walk through without slipping. When Harry fell in an exceptionally deep pile of mud, ending up covered in it head-to-foot, they finally gave up and returned to their house to get cleaned up before dinner.

To his dismay, when Harry came out of the shower, he realized he hadn’t even thought to bring clothes with him. To his additional horror he discovered that he hadn’t even brought up his

clean laundry from down stairs. He shook his head and considered his options, finally deciding to try summoning his clothes from his room. The problem soon became obvious that he couldn't specify well enough *which* of his clothes he was summoning. Drawing a deep breath, he settled on his last option. He drew his towel tight about his waist and crept silently down the stairs, his eyes trained for any sign of movement.

Both rooms at the bottom seemed empty and he chose the route through the lounge back to the kitchen. All was quiet as he slipped into the tiny laundry room by the back door. He grabbed some clothes off the top of his pile and walked back into the kitchen. He began to smile with success as he stepped boldly into the lounge, only to find Hermione and Ginny entering at the same time from the other end. He squeezed his eyes shut and forced them back open, hoping he wasn't really seeing properly.

At the other end of the room, the two girls stopped suddenly and Hermione turned away, covering her mouth to hide a snicker. Ginny just continued to stare. Seeing Harry at the beach in his swimsuit was one thing but this was something else altogether. She remembered when she first met him so many years ago, how small he had seemed. They were nearly the same height then, but now... he was about a head taller than she, and his shoulders and chest were so... She knew her face must be blazing by now but she still couldn't tear her eyes away from him.

Harry opened his eyes and saw the two girls still standing there. Hermione looked like she was about to burst and Ginny... well, he couldn't quite place the look in her eyes, and it made the blood rush to his face.

"I, er... ex- excuse me," he stuttered as he rushed past them.

Hermione waited until he was gone and turned to Ginny. "My, you two always seem to wear the same shade of red whenever you meet." She burst out laughing and skirted away from Ginny before the other girl could hex her.

Closing himself in his room, Harry wondered if he would ever get over this moment. *Probably not*, he thought, *Ginny will let it go easy enough, but Hermione... she'll milk it for all it's worth. I'll have to have a chat with Ron about her later.*

He put on his clean clothes – a pair of jeans and a plain green t-shirt – and Apparated directly from his room to the main house. Ron and Hermione were already talking with the Teacher when he arrived and he heard them laughing as he walked into the kitchen.

"What're we having for dinner tonight?" he asked, instead of *Where's Ginny?*

"Looks like ham and sweet potatoes," said Ron. "Oh, and rolls."

"Sounds good," Harry replied absently, picking up a carrot from the counter and biting off the end.

"Eh, what's up doc?" he said nasally, gnashing his teeth and looking across the room.

Hermione looked over at him and burst out laughing while Ron looked at Harry as if he'd lost his mind.

"What's wrong with Harry?" a new voice asked from the doorway.

Harry immediately went beet red and blinked several times trying to find a place to rest his eyes besides her.

"He's... he's doing a voice from a cartoon," choked Hermione, clenching her stomach and wiping a tear from her eye. "It was Bugs Bunny!"

"Bugs *who?*" asked the two Weasleys.

"Never mind," she said. "It's a Muggle thing."

Ron continued to look nervously at Hermione, while Ginny moved to stand by Harry.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," he answered.

"You're looking... *more comfortable* than when I last saw you."

“Yeah,” he said, blushing, “my clothes were really dirty... On the other hand we did get all the trees planted.” He winked at her and patted his pocket, the tip of his wand just poking out the top.

She smiled a bright smile and her eyes sparkled as she giggled. He felt his knees getting a little weak and was surprised because he always thought that was just a saying.

In a moment, John called them to dinner and they all sat down together. When the weather was nice they usually ate together outside on the patio, but tonight the wind blew and the rain lashed at the windows. Harry began to worry that he might not have closed his bedroom windows all the way. *Oh well*, he thought, *that's what drying charms are for*.

They talked of the work they had accomplished that day and how beautiful the garden was. John told them how proud he was of their effort and suggested that they were learning a skill they could use when they got houses of their own.

Harry's mind was suddenly filled with thoughts of having his own house and of working on it and around it in a beautiful garden. He let the image of a red-haired girl appear sitting in a tire-swing, gliding back and forth while reading a book and then glancing up, her eyes meeting his with a smile. Thoughts like that had been appearing often lately and he had to admit they were entirely contrary to what he had promised himself a month or two ago. He recalled forcing thoughts of her *out* of his mind right up to the last day at school. He tried to trace the exact date that he'd stopped blocking her out, but couldn't put his finger on it. He supposed it started when they had all gone to the Weasley's after rescuing Ron, though when he'd officially given up, he wasn't sure.

Whether or not anything would become of the serene pictures in his mind, he had finally decided to let them come as they would. In a small way they gave him some much-needed peace. His heart always felt lighter after day-dreaming about her. He could picture the way she looked when she was concentrating intently on her work and he could see how her hair matted against her neck after she showered in the morning and didn't bother to dry it. It was more of a reddish-brown color when it was wet, rather than the usual burnt orange. He had to admit he found it quite attractive either way.

His eyes drifted repeatedly to hers across the table and he was surprised at the level of emotion he saw in them with every look. Hurrying to finish his food, he wondered if she might be willing to sit a while and talk this evening... about things.

After dinner was finished and the dishes whisked away by the flick of a wand, Harry found himself drawn into a conversation with the Teacher. Several minutes later he realized he'd been left by the others, and with a hasty 'goodnight' he Disapparated.

He chose once again to Apparate directly into his room. He found it easier than worrying about whether someone might happen to be standing exactly where he was about to appear in the lounge or the study.

As it turned out, he had in fact left his window wide open and the rain was now soaking everything within three feet of the opening. He placed his wand gently on the desk and peered intently at the glass from across the room. Raising his hand, he pulled it to himself and was rewarded with the thud of the pane against the frame. He breathed out a sigh and smiled; wandless magic was difficult, but always rewarding when it worked.

After using a quick drying charm on the carpet, he pulled off his shoes and trod down the stairs to look for the others. He found Ron in the study with a current issue of Quidditch Weekly.

“Where're Hermione and Ginny?” he asked.

“I think they're cleaning the kitchen,” Ron said without lifting his gaze from the page. “They said something about how filthy it was and how we should do a better job of cleaning up and how it was most likely the *blokes* not doing their job.” He waved his hand disinterestedly and continued to read. Harry smiled, that was just like Ron.

He left through the sunroom and went in search of the girls. Just as the kitchen became visible through the far door, he paused. Unsure of why his feet had stopped, he strained his neck to see into the kitchen. He could hear the giggles of the girls as they worked and he wondered what could possibly be fun about cleaning. He moved a step closer.

A smile crept across his face as he could finally see the girls' chosen activity. It appeared that they had discovered an old container of eggs in the refrigerator and were now disposing of them by lobbing them across the room into the sink. Harry quietly put his hands behind his back and stood to enjoy the entertainment. They were taking turns and he couldn't help but chuckle as he noticed how Ginny's aim was quite true. Hermione, on the other hand... he was thankful she knew some quick spells for cleaning up messes.

As the last oblong projectile took flight, he grinned, watching it fly through the air to land with a satisfying *splat* in the sink. Hermione drew her wand and waved it over the mess, smiling and watching it disappear in an instant. Just as she finished, she happened to glance into the sunroom and her eyes caught Harry's. She smiled wider and with a subtle wave of her hand told him to stay put.

"Ginny," he heard her say. "Would you mind doing the countertops? I need to use the loo."

"Sure," Ginny's sweet voice carried into the sunroom. "Go ahead, I'll finish up here."

Harry inched forward for a better view and stood perfectly still. Ginny pulled a cloth from the drawer and dampened it under the faucet. He was surprised she didn't just magic the crumbs and other bits away, but he recalled her saying once or twice that sometimes she enjoyed the simplicity of Muggle activities. She flicked her wand at the WWN radio and it came to life across the room. Harry suppressed his laugh as she jammed her wand in her back pocket.

She maneuvered her way around the kitchen, wiping down the counters and cabinets as she went. She swayed her body to the music and Harry thought she'd never looked more beautiful. Suddenly she looked up, then smiled at him.

He felt his cheeks get warm, but stepped into the room anyway.

"Careful," he said, "you could lose a buttock keeping your wand there." He pointed to her back pocket, letting his eyes linger there for a moment before forcing them back to her face and swallowing thickly. His blood continued to increase in flow, causing a mild pounding in his ears. She appeared to be grinning at him.

"S- sorry, don't let me bother you," he muttered.

"You're not bothering me, Harry," she said, smiling. Then she went back to her work, brushing past him as she moved to the other end of the counter. He held his breath for a moment and stared. *What was she doing to him?*

When she finished cleaning up, she tucked her hair behind her ears – much to Harry's enjoyment – and looked at him nervously. There was a sparkle of something special in her eyes, and Harry found his legs getting weak again. In the back of his mind a voice was asking why he picked the shirt he did – it probably looked dumb on him – and why couldn't he say something funny? After a moment his mind started to scream at him to say anything at all.

Green eyes caught brown and danced together a moment before breaking apart. The silence in the room was thick.

"Youwannasitinthesunroom?" he asked quickly. She laughed and smiled, nodding.

Harry's mind was in chaos as they stepped into the next room. Should he let her sit first? Should he sit first? Should they sit on the larger sofa together? How close should he sit to her?

He hesitated for a moment before choosing one end of the most comfortable, squashy sofa, even if it wasn't the largest. Ginny stopped and looked around the room, biting her bottom lip in a way he found strangely adorable.

"Sit by me?" he asked quietly.

Her face flushed and she nodded slightly before sitting carefully down next to him. Summoning up his Gryffindor bravery, he turned a little bit and boldly lifted his arm, shaping it perfectly to fit around her. Without a second thought she leaned into his side, resting her head against his chest and sighing contentedly. Thinking that they could use a little light, he pulled his wand out with his free hand and shot sparks around the room, lighting all the candles. He winced as he laid his arm back down and he couldn't help but be disappointed as Ginny moved quickly away from his grasp.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's just my whole body aches from carrying those trees today."

She gave him a sly look. "I thought you levitated them."

He grinned. "Only the last couple, after John left."

"Well, Harry, it's your lucky night. I'm going to give you a back rub."

"Really?" he asked skeptically. "Are you good at it?"

"Sure," she said, "I used to do it for my mum and dad all the time."

Harry acknowledged her with a slow nod and turned away. Immediately her fingers went to work and he cringed and hissed as she came to the first large knot.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she cried, pulling her hands quickly away.

"No," he said somberly, "it hurts, but it's a good hurt. Please keep going."

She put her hands on his back again and started to knead, working her way up and down, sensing rather than feeling where he hurt. Occasionally he gasped in pain as she started on a new sore spot, but she never let up. He needed this.

Harry closed his eyes, letting his whole body relax. In some ways the pain felt good. It was helping loosen some of the tension that he'd been building up inside for so long. Her hands were warm but firm and her touch felt so... *something*. It wasn't long before a strange lump started to build in his throat. She was being awfully nice to him. Even if she still liked him, this was more than he deserved, wasn't it?

He tried to force those thoughts away but they just kept coming back. The knot in his throat grew larger and soon he felt a slight stinging in his eyes. Her hands continued to work, now on his shoulders and upper arms, where the pain was the worst.

Suddenly two events coincided so closely that they just had to be related: a sniff and a pause, the sniff from him and the pause by her. It wasn't a moment before she went back to work, but suddenly he was afraid of what she was thinking. He was struggling to draw breath at a normal rate and he lifted one hand to wipe away a bit of saltwater from his eye.

She continued to rub out his tensions and eventually he held a hand over his eyes, trying to hide his tears from her.

"I don't deserve this," he said quietly. "Not after..."

"After what?" she asked gently. "After what you've done?"

He nodded.

"Harry," she said tenderly, "you've done nothing but fight to save the lives of people you love for almost seven years now. You've protected your friends, you've taught countless students how to properly defend themselves and you've been a model of honesty and strength. Tell me, why don't you deserve this?" She stopped kneading, but continued rubbing her hand gently up and down his back. "Least of all from me?" she added quietly. There was a hint of sadness in her voice that caught him off guard.

"You? Well, because... because you're..."

She tensed suddenly, fearing the worst: *because you're Ron's little sister*.

"Because you're so much better than I am. You're out of my league. I don't even deserve your notice."

"You saved my life," she whispered, letting her hand fall. "I would do anything for you."

He shifted uncomfortably. “Is that what this is about? You *owe* me? No, never mind, I don’t want to know. I’m going to bed. See you in the morning.”

“Harry!” she cried, but he left the room without a backward glance. With his shoulders slumped and dejected, he looked like the boy she remembered from school.

She buried her face in a pillow and cried. *What* had just happened? She finally understood what Hermione had been talking about. He was afraid of getting close to anyone.

The next two days the wind and rain continued relentlessly, sometimes pouring, sometimes in a mist so fine it was like flying through a cloud. Because the Teacher had allowed them to take Harry’s birthday off, he had decided to punish them severely the two days before – or that’s how it appeared to the foursome, anyway. With just an afternoon left until their day off, they were hardly putting in their best effort. Emotions ran high from the strain of the training and the long hours.

They were practicing a powerful disarming spell, yet even after nearly four hours of work, none of them had mastered it. Naturally, Harry had come the closest – he had once managed to disarm everyone in one shot – but not surprisingly Hermione wasn’t far behind. At the moment though, Ron and Ginny sat red-faced at the side of the room, watching Harry and Hermione alternating the spell between them. The Teacher was starting to get frustrated.

“No, no. You have to concentrate harder. I’ve seen wizards disarm a hundred people with this spell. At this rate you’ll barely disarm each other by the day’s end, and you can already do that!”

“I’m sorry!” Harry lashed out. “We’re tired. We’ve been practicing this for hours and haven’t gotten any further along than when we started. Perhaps it’s time to move on to something else.” The thought that completed his speech was spoken not so much as a question but as a veiled command.

“Harry, you can’t give up on it now—“

“I’m not giving up!” he shouted. “I’m just saying we should try something else for a while and come back to this.”

The older wizard looked struck for a moment by Harry’s outburst, but then, to everyone’s astonishment, he started laughing. Harry glared at him in thinly disguised fury.

“I guess you’re right, Harry. Let’s go have some lunch. I’m starving, how about you?”

Harry’s look turned instantly from rage to disbelief.

“But... you’re not going to make us keep going?”

“No, I’ve changed my mind. I think you’re right. Perhaps we should work on something else for a while. Maybe it’ll help you shift your focus.”

“There’s only one thing I want to focus on right now,” he muttered under his breath, “and she’s only being nice to me because I saved her life.”

John looked back over his shoulder. “What’s that, Harry?”

He put on a fake smile. “Nothing, just talking to myself.”

He started to walk toward the door and glanced across the room, his eyes searching for her unwillingly. When they finally found her, his body gave a start that nearly made him fall over his shoes. Her eyes were trained on him in the deepest expression of pain and sorrow. He felt beads of sweat form on his forehead, but resolutely turned and continued out the door.

Lunch was as pleasant as it could be when two of their number weren’t speaking to each other. They all seemed to eat rather quickly, almost as if the sudden shift in energy had actually spurred them on to try the difficult magic again, this time with full gusto.

In what felt like only minutes, they were back in the training room. This time Harry and Hermione were watching from the sidelines as Ron and Ginny, red-headed and red-faced, challenged each other. Harry smirked at the intensity of Ron’s concentration. He rarely saw his friend looking so determined, and – apparently lunch having done him some good – so ready for a fight.

They dueled for a few minutes until John's signal when they both summoned up all their energy and leveled the powerful *expelliarmus totus* spell. Harry jerked backward a few inches in surprise as he felt his wand pulled from his hand with tremendous force. He smiled as he watched four wooden missiles land squarely in Ginny's outstretched hand. His grin widened as he caught sight of her victorious smile. Ron scowled at the floor, but after a moment walked over to his sister and held out his hand. Ginny looked up at him, clearly at least a foot shorter than he was, but looking larger than life.

"Say the magic word!" she sang.

Ron studied her intently for a moment and to her surprise, reached out his other hand as well and pulled her into a quick hug.

"Well done, Sis," he said quietly into her ear. "Well done, and not just with this."

When he pulled away, Harry thought perhaps he'd performed a stunning spell on her she stood so still. Slowly she held out his wand and he picked it up and strolled over to see Hermione.

Harry watched for a moment, dumbfounded, and then walked out into the room with the determined air of one incapable of knowing defeat. He caught Ginny's eyes and held up his wand, indicating he wished to duel with her. Out of the corner of his eye he felt John's gaze, but waved a hand at him to let him do this.

After a moment of stiffness in the air, Harry and Ginny began circling the room, holding each other's eyes like leopards ready to pounce. On the sidelines, Ron and Hermione watched with bated breath, knowing full well that this was a bad situation. Ron kept his wand in his hand, ready to jump into the fray at the slightest sign of real anger, and Hermione was doing the same.

It was only a few moments before the spells began to rain down on them. Harry and Ginny were leaving no hex or charm unused. They were Apparating and Disapparating so fast that Ron was having trouble following them around the room. One moment Harry had knocked Ginny down and the next she had tripped him up with a leg-locker. The battle only gained intensity as the minutes wore on. The eyes of both competitors took on a strange fierceness and Ron felt his anxiety grow.

Then, in a single moment it was over. Harry Apparated behind Ginny within feet of her and after his quick banishing charm, she skidded across the floor and came to a halt on her side. She pushed herself up with both hands, her hair tumbling messily down across her face nearly hiding it from view but for her big brown eyes. She made no effort to move and uncurled her hand from her wand, leaving it to sit untouched on the floor in defeat.

Harry looked down at her – from no farther than ten feet away – as she slowly lifted her gaze to his. He felt a sudden jolt through his body as if he'd been kicked in the stomach, but he couldn't pull his eyes away. She was in so much pain and he found he was quite aware that only a very small part of it was physical. She was in so much *emotional* pain that he felt sick.

In the midst of the silence, a small voice broke into his mind. It was a voice he knew and respected. A voice that normally gave him comfort and strength. It was quiet and resigned now and her words stung his heart like nothing he'd ever heard before. Her words sounded so clearly in his head...

I love you, Harry.

Filled with the pain of guilt and self-loathing that was all too familiar to him, he began to back away from her, his eyes going wide and his mouth gaping open like a fish out of water. He stumbled once over his own feet but continued moving backward as if on an invisible track. In a moment, his mind broke completely, and feeling the tears welling up inside, he shook his head slowly in fear and turned to flee the room, his wand falling to the floor with a small clatter.

Chapter Nine

Ginny's Present

Harry woke the next morning to a dull yellowish light shining through his curtains. He flipped his blankets over his face and rolled over. Happily victorious, he smiled and drifted back to sleep in darkness once again. Of course the sun wasn't one to be bested and so it brightened more and more until not even the blankets could block it out. Harry marveled for a moment at the deep red he saw behind closed eyelids and wondered if there was a charm for blocking out annoying light.

About then a thought occurred to him. He flicked his eyes open and looked at the clock, it was half-past nine in the morning. It was July the thirty-first. It was his birthday.

Not that eighteen was so important in the Wizarding world. His seventeenth birthday had been so incredibly liberating he didn't see how this could possibly live up. As a matter of fact, he rather wished to forget the last few days.

After the events of the previous afternoon, Harry had disappeared into the nearby forest for the rest of the day. Forsaking food, comfort, and his friends, he'd sat by himself looking out over the lake from the highest cliff.

He remembered when he had found that special place among the oaks and maples. All around were trees with trunks so thick it would take two people to reach around them. The light of day was blocked so completely that the underbrush was very scarce and small. The nearest path was probably hundreds of feet back into the trees, well hidden from view and from prying eyes. In the midst of the darkness this opening spread out at the peak of a rocky cliff, allowing some of the most breathtaking views Harry had ever seen.

By himself he had sat against a tree, lonely and worried. A singular thought stuck in his head like the Black family tree on the wall at Grimmauld Place.

She loves me?

He repeated the words over and over until they began to lose their sense and so he shifted his focus to what they meant. He turned it over in his head many times. It seemed so complicated, at least the future did. What he had already done only needed one thing: an apology, if she would accept it.

Before he knew what had happened, that old familiar guilt had crept over him. It always made him wonder why his friends stayed with him. For seven years now they had endured not only the danger of being associated with him, but worse, his refusal to outwardly acknowledge their love and loyalty.

And so he sat, wondering about what he had done and trying to reason out ways he could fix it. When he finally Apparated back to his room late the previous evening he still had no idea. How could he fix something that had been wrong for so long?

Now it was the morning of his birthday and his lie-in was officially over. The same worries that always plagued his mind were back and he wondered how he could possibly face his friends. He was ashamed of how he had acted and couldn't imagine the looks of disgust he was about to face.

With that feeling dragging on his heart, he forced himself to get up and take a shower. Thankfully he had clothes this time and he dressed in silence, worrying continuously about his reception when he appeared downstairs.

The journey down the steps seemed to take an eternity. His mind was racing and he could feel his face already turning red. He even considered going back once or twice but fought it and continued his march. At the bottom of the stairs he took a deep breath, closed his eyes and prepared himself for... a hug?

Even before he opened his eyes, he knew. There was only one person with that much compassion in his life. Opening his eyes all he could see was red, a red rather like that he'd seen through closed eyelids earlier in his bed.

Ginny released him quickly and stepped back looking slightly abashed. Recovering quickly, she smiled and her eyes sparkled in a way he'd missed so much. Harry felt his heart melt and he tried to sputter out an apology.

"Ginny, I'm sorry. I- I was a stupid prat yesterday and- "

"Harry," she said firmly, "it's okay. I know you have hard days sometimes and I'm just happy I can be around to help."

He frowned a little and looked at the floor. "You shouldn't let me off that easy. I realized yesterday that I've been... thoughtless about you and you shouldn't have to put up with a bloke who's got issues like mine."

She gazed at him until he looked up. He saw an understanding in her eyes that was unfathomable to him. It was as if she could see into his heart and know all of his pains but love him anyway. He wondered if he would ever really understand her. As the seconds began to stretch out he noticed the way the early morning sun shone on her soft hair as it cascaded down around her shoulders. She wore it down today and he wondered if it was on purpose. It even looked like she had put a gentle curl in it here and there.

He reached out a tentative hand and touched a few strands near her neck.

"Did you..." He paused and his smile widened as his embarrassment spread to his ears. "Did you wear you hair down for *me*?"

"I did," she said and her smile lit up her whole face. She seemed to radiate beauty both on the outside and from within. Harry knew his heart was in trouble but found he didn't care anymore. He would go to the ends of the earth for her.

"Come on," she said excitedly. "I've made you breakfast."

She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the kitchen where he stood in awe at the food laid out around the room. There were eggs and sausage and bacon and every kind of meat. A large platter held fresh fruits of all sorts, even some he didn't recognize. Next to the platter sat stacks of cakes and biscuits. There were jugs of orange juice, apple juice and pumpkin juice, as well as milk and tea.

He took in the scene in wonder.

"You- you did all this... for *me*?" he asked faintly.

She nodded happily.

Harry turned around and hugged her. "You're the best," he mumbled into her hair.

Together they heaped food onto their plates and sat down in the sunroom at a small table. Harry felt strangely at peace compared to the turmoil he was in earlier. Ginny had not only forgiven him but she'd actually cooked breakfast for him, too!

They ate in comfortable silence for a while. She told him that Ron and Hermione had left already for the day. They were going to visit her family and planned to be back around dinner. Harry was surprised to hear it and said so.

"How'd you get Hermione to leave on my birthday?" he asked, swallowing a bite of bacon. He knew he'd hit on something as her ears reddened.

"Well," she said, not meeting his eyes, "I just asked."

He figured there must be more to it but decided to let it go. They continued to eat in silence until their plates were empty. Harry sat back in his chair to admire the beginnings of a beautiful day.

"Thanks," he said. "I mean, thanks for making breakfast. This is a great present. Just you being nice to me is a great present after what I did."

"Really, it's not a big deal," she said shyly. "In fact, I don't want you to think about it the rest of the day. Promise me, okay?"

"All right. I'll promise to *try*."

"Well, in that case, I can tell you about the *rest* of your present."

"There's more?" he asked in surprise.

"Well, since it's your birthday I decided to let you do whatever you want today. You won't have to do any cooking or cleaning because I will, and you can choose to do whatever *you* want to do. Mum used to do this for our birthdays and I always thought it was fun. I'll do everything for you. Just think of me as your little house-elf."

Harry laughed out loud. "Don't let Hermione hear you say that!"

"I won't," she laughed. "So we've got the whole day togeth-... er, I mean, if you want me..."

He looked her in the eye. "You couldn't give me a better present than to spend the day with you."

She blushed for a moment and then jumped out of her chair, gathering their plates as she stood.

"What do you want to do?" she asked quickly.

He looked around quizzically. "I don't know. I've never really done this before. No one's ever..." He stopped and clamped his mouth shut.

"That's okay," she said gently, "I've got some ideas if you'd like to hear."

He stood and followed her into the kitchen where she dumped the plates into the sink. He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"What?" she asked. "I thought I'd leave them for Ron to do later."

Seeing the expression on his face, she laughed. "I'm only kidding. I'm just going to clean them later. Now, I thought of a few things we could do, but it's your day, so you should get to choose."

"Can I hear yours first?" he asked.

"Well... I thought we could go on a picnic for lunch. We could ride out along the shore on our brooms or we could go explore the forest. If you're feeling really adventurous we could go into town and visit the shops. We could go down to the beach and swim, or we could even just sit here and relax all day. If you like, I could cut your hair, maybe."

The last bit surprised him a little and before he knew it, he'd agreed. In a flash, she disappeared upstairs to get her scissors.

"Right," she said, summoning a chair from the table and a towel from the laundry. "Just relax and close your eyes. I've never done this before but it can't be that hard."

"Wait! You've never done this before?"

"Well... no. But it can't be that hard, right?"

He looked at her cautiously and closed his eyes again. "Okay, but don't cut the fringe too short. I like to hide my scar as much as possible."

Ginny waved her wand over his head and a fine mist sprayed from the end. After his hair was wet she ran her fingers through it, massaging his scalp gently. She felt his neck and shoulders begin to relax and smiled to herself. After several minutes she picked up her scissors and began to snip off some of the more straggly ends. She worked her way around his head, evening up here and there and periodically stopping to inspect her work. She trimmed his fringe just enough to

keep it off his eyebrows and then set to work combing. After seeing what he usually looked like and hearing his complaints about the behavior of his hair, she didn't have any trouble at all getting it to lie flat and part down one side. She left the front to cover his forehead slightly but parted it a bit along with the rest.

Finally she backed up a few steps to check her work and smiled in a satisfied way.

"Harry you can open your eyes now," she said.

His eyes stayed shut but he opened his mouth to speak.

"No, this feels too good. I don't want to ruin it."

She laughed. "Come on, Harry, I want you to tell me how I did."

He opened his eyes and she presented him with a mirror. He held it at all angles around his head and lifted his hand to touch a few places.

"How'd you do it? I mean how'd you get it to lie flat?" he asked in awe.

"I guess it just likes me," she giggled. "You look very handsome. Do you like it?"

"Yeah. You did a good job. Maybe you should do it more often."

"I'd like that," she said, unwrapping the towel from his neck and shaking it out. She pointed her wand at the floor and said "*scourgify!*" The clippings disappeared in an instant and she banished the towel back to the laundry.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked as he stood up and stretched.

"Sure. But remember *I'm* supposed to get it for you?"

"Oh. Right. Er, would you mind getting me some pumpkin juice?"

"Sure. Meet you on the porch?"

Harry nodded and made his way out of the kitchen. Ginny pushed open the front door holding two glasses of pumpkin juice and found him sitting in the same comfortable chairs she and Hermione had shared a few nights earlier. She set the glasses down and took the seat next to him. He seemed to have a strange look on his face and she wondered what was on his mind.

"Knut for your thoughts?" she asked, taking a sip of her juice.

He smiled and chuckled. "Are they worth that much?"

"I don't know," she answered cheekily. "Are they?"

He shook his head and looked out toward the water. "I was just wondering what it was like... when Tom was in your head. But we don't have to talk about that right now. This is supposed to be a fun day. What do you want to do next?"

He turned to look at her and was surprised that she didn't seem angry or hurt, instead she seemed to be concentrating very hard.

"It's okay, Harry." She paused for a few seconds, a very far-away look on her face.

"I guess it was... scary. I mean, at first I hardly noticed. I'd wake up in my bed and think I'd just taken a long nap. After a while it started to get worse, though. I'd find myself walking down a corridor not knowing how I got there. After I... after *he* made me paint messages on the wall I'd wake up and have no idea why my hands were red."

Harry saw the look in her eyes becoming very far away and he took her hand in his, intertwining his fingers into hers.

"I started putting things together finally," she continued. "That's when I threw the diary in the toilet. That's when you found it."

She turned to face him and he saw a tinge of red in her pretty cheeks. "I was horrified when I saw you with it. I was so worried that you might find out what I'd written about –"

"About me?" he asked gently.

She nodded. "I told him *everything*. Like how I was so nervous just to be in the same room with you and how I never thought you'd notice *Ron's little sister*." Her voice was full of bitterness and she looked away again.

"I hardly knew what I was doing when I stole it back from you. Even without the diary I think he was beginning to get a hold of my mind. You probably never noticed but I was having trouble eating and sleeping. There *was* one day when I woke up a little clearer than normal. That was the day I got up the courage to tell you I thought it was *me* doing everything. Then Percy had to come along and say it was just because I saw him kissing Penelope."

"Ginny, I *did* notice," Harry said, "and I hardly have an excuse for not trying to help." He dropped his head a little. "We all thought you were just having a rough year."

"That's an understatement," she said wryly. "Anyway, after that I don't really remember much until I woke up and you were in the Chamber with me. I remember how nice you were. You even tried to explain the whole thing without saying it was my fault. Professor Dumbledore saw through that but he never punished me. I was so worried I was going to get expelled. That would have been awful. Mum and Dad were really nice about it but I think it made them see me even more as a helpless little girl. I think they still see me like that sometimes."

"Yeah, well, that's because they haven't been on the receiving end of one of your Bat-Bogey hexes."

"Well," she smiled, "that's true. Do you know what I worried about the *most* during it all? Even more than being expelled?"

He shook his head, keeping his undivided attention focused on her.

"I was worried that you would think I was just a stupid little girl."

He took a moment to absorb that profound thought.

"That's not what I thought at all," he said, surprised. "I thought of you as another person that Voldemort had hurt because of me. I didn't think you were weak. You *had* to be strong to last as long as you did, for crying out loud! I mean, I don't think I could have lasted that long against him. I felt a little sorry for you, having to deal with the way everyone treated you, but then I figured '*she's cute, they won't be upset with her for long*'. I know how worried Ron was. He was the only one that came with me down to the Chamber other than Lockhart, who was completely useless."

"Wait. What did you just say?" she grinned.

"That Lockhart was useless. He tried to..." He paused and the wheels reversed in his head. His face reddened. "Or maybe you meant what I said *before* that. I thought you were cute the first time I saw you. I think you got most of the good looks in the family."

She blushed and turned away to hide it. After a moment to recover, during which she tried to cover up by taking a drink of her juice, she turned back to him.

"Did I ever really say thank you for saving me?"

"You didn't need to. That's what friends do, right?"

"Well then, thank you for being that kind of friend. You're the only friend I've ever talked to about this, you know. It's just... you've been there before and you know what it's like. I trust you more than anyone."

Harry was startled by her revelation but tried not to show it. In truth, he was grateful he could be that kind of a friend for her, but there was still something more he was hoping for. Something he had only just started letting himself hope for.

"Well maybe I was only doing it to rescue the damsel in distress. You know, I save your life and in return I get a kiss." He almost winced at his words, deciding that he was so bad at flirting he just shouldn't even try.

She laughed. *Maybe just a kiss on the cheek*, she thought, and leaned toward him.

He frowned. *That was a stupid thing to say*. He turned to apologize.

Instead of his cheek, his lips.

Instead of an apology, a kiss.

Eyes grew wide as lips engaged in their accidental encounter. For a moment in time their sweet touch remained before reality came crashing back down on them.

They pulled away quickly but held each other's gaze, their eyes almost as intent as their lips had been. Like twin setting suns their faces lit up with a high blush. Breaths caught in throats and palms sweated with nervousness.

Ginny let out the smallest of giggles and her hand flew to her mouth to cover it. She tried to look somber again. Harry smiled. Ginny smiled. In a moment they were both laughing.

"I was trying to kiss you on the cheek!" she cried.

"I was going to apologize for the stupid remark," he said.

"Well, at least it wasn't your nose."

"Yeah, or the back of my head!"

They laughed and settled back into their chairs, stealing quick glances at each other.

"So," Harry asked nervously, "what d'you think we should do next?"

"Well, I could pack us a picnic lunch and we could go for a walk in the woods. How does that sound?"

Harry warmed at the thought. "That sounds great. And, er, Ginny? Thanks. Thanks for giving me the best birthday present I've ever gotten."

She smiled broadly and the sparkle came back to her eyes. "You're welcome. I just want you to know how special you are. I wanted to do this for you." She took his empty glass and went inside to prepare their lunch.

Harry watched her go with a strange sadness. Was he really going to *miss* her? She was only going to be gone for a few minutes. He sighed deeply. That kiss had been excruciatingly wonderful, even if rather brief. Suddenly Hermione's words came back to him. *Think about what you feel when you're around her and what her magic feels like in the air around you.*

He hadn't been paying much attention so far but perhaps the rest of the day could give him some clues. If he was honest with himself, he was actually a little nervous. Ginny had admitted more than once that she still held special feelings for him, but he never saw any outward sign of them. If he could just get some idea that she really, truly felt the same way he did, then perhaps something could happen.

He was nervous not only because it would be a big step for them but also because he had no idea how to find out how she felt. He finally decided just to try and sense her magic when she was near and see what he could glean from it. Hadn't he once felt it give him a hug?

His reverie was interrupted by the opening of the screen door. Ginny stood in front of him with a large wicker basket and wore a light jumper that fit her rather well. Her hair was still down and it rippled gently in the breeze. He felt his cheeks blush for the umpteenth time that day and reached out to take the basket from her.

"No protests," he said. "I'm going to carry the basket for us."

She smiled and gave it to him. As they began to walk away from the house he felt a cool, soft hand slip into his. He didn't want to look down for fear it would all be a dream so he contented himself with a smile. Hand-in-hand they walked into the trees.

They followed the path for several minutes until Harry nudged Ginny off into the woods. Thinking she might like to see the view from the cliff, he started off in that direction. The sky was clear and bright but only a few columns of light reached the ground through the thick canopy above. They crunched their way through the leaves until the trees parted grandly before them.

Ginny's deep breath and searching eyes told him everything he needed to know. He set the basket on the ground but continued to hold her hand as they gazed out across the water. The noon-day sun reflected in a thousand lights on the water while a stiff breeze blew up the cliffs and whipped around their faces.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"It's breathtaking, and beautiful. I could look at it forever. I feel peaceful just being here."
His eyes never left her face. "I feel the same way."

She glanced sideways at him and blushed under his gaze. His subtle meaning was not lost on her. It warmed her insides and made them flutter with butterflies. Had Harry really just said those words? Did he really mean what it sounded like? The thought was enough to make her lightheaded and plaster a silly smile on her face. She would just keep an eye on him the rest of the day, that would be enough. He couldn't really feel that way about her, could he?

She felt like a little girl again as he gently sat her down and joined her. Together they leaned back against a fallen tree and enjoyed the view in silence for quite some time. She didn't dare turn her head or glance at him for fear of restarting the Weasley blush machine. Inwardly she cursed her family's ability to turn tomato red just at a hint of embarrassment. She hadn't blushed so much since her first year at Hogwarts and her Harry Potter Fan Club.

Pushing those thoughts from her mind, she got to her feet and opened up the basket. Perhaps lunch would help lessen her intense desire to know his feelings. She spread a thick blanket on the ground and began pulling all sorts of food out of the basket.

Harry watched in fascination. Apparently one side of the basket was charmed to stay cold, while the other stayed hot. Ginny began setting food out on the blanket. There was hot roasted turkey, soft warmed rolls, a large bowl of boiled potatoes, fresh strawberries, apple pie and even a few chocolate frogs. She then pulled out two large bottles of chilled pumpkin juice.

"You're amazing," he said in awe, accepting a bottle from her.

"Well," she replied, "I figure once in a while you deserve something special like this. After all, you can't stay at the Burrow forever and eat Mum's cooking. Besides, looking like your cousin Dudley, eventually you'd have to get your own place to live." She held her eyes resolutely on the ground as she spoke.

He chuckled quietly. In fact, Harry wished he *could* stay at the Burrow forever, but for different reasons entirely.

"I'll probably end up living with Ron for a while until things get sorted out. In fact," he raised his eyes to her, "I promise I'll *never* be far from you. I've been thinking about it for a while and I'd like to find a flat in Hogsmeade this year. That way I can be close to Hogwarts and Dumbledore and I'll be able to see you all the time."

Her eyes lit up hopefully.

"You know," he continued, "at Quidditch matches and free weekends and... What?" She was looking at him with something that seemed like concern.

"You... you would only want to come around for occasions like those? Sometimes maybe I could visit *you*. We could meet at the Three Broomsticks or somewhere. Not that I wouldn't be happy just to see you at our matches. I guess you'll probably miss playing on the team and come out to watch everyone."

"No," he said calmly. "I want to come and watch *you* play. As for visiting, I'd see you every day if they'd let me in the school."

She smiled widely and went back to eating her lunch. They ate in silence until the last chocolate frog was gone (Harry swore he could feel it hopping in his stomach) and then he leaned back against the log, full and happy.

They chatted for a while about the Teacher and their training. It seemed that lately his hope for defeating Voldemort seemed to rest on something just out of grasp. It irritated him to no end that whatever it was continued to elude his keen search.

After about an hour Ginny stood and insisted on cleaning up their picnic by herself. Harry watched as she stowed their leftover food and folded their blanket. They made their way slowly back to the house. Once again Harry demanded that he at least be allowed to carry the basket.

Ginny reluctantly agreed, but smiled as he shyly took her hand in his. He'd been doing that a lot lately and he marveled at how it caused his nerves to go wild.

When they reached the house, Ginny left the picnic basket in the kitchen and turned to face Harry.

"Now what would you like to do, Harry?"

"I wanted to go for a swim, but it's too cold. Let me think for a minute."

"We could walk on the beach," she said without pause.

He smiled. "Yeah, I'd like that."

They walked the well-known path down to the water and left their shoes behind them. The air was cool but the sun kept the sand warm on their feet as they walked. Harry was quietly amused by the way the wind toyed with Ginny's hair. It streamed out behind her as they walked into it and blew into her freckled face as they turned back.

They talked of nothing and everything. Harry told her again how much he enjoyed spending the day with her and how special her gift really was to him. She thanked him and told him she was happy to do it.

In the quiet moments, Harry reflected on his feelings for Ginny and on their changing relationship. He recalled a time not long ago when he barely spoke to her, fearful of the danger to both of them. Now, though, something had happened that he couldn't explain. He knew she would be in danger if their friendship turned into something deeper, but he was beginning to understand that it was outside of his control. Hadn't she told him time and again that it was her decision to help him anyway? He certainly couldn't deny that he enjoyed having her around. And she wasn't bad at defending herself either.

They walked slowly down the beach admiring the shimmering water and watching a flock of seagulls land in the distance. The tingling sensation Harry felt in his hand from Ginny's soft skin had not abated since they set out nearly half an hour before. He felt a happiness and peace which he could rightly say he'd never really felt before. Something about this girl with auburn hair, playful eyes and fierce loyalty captivated him in a wonderfully welcome way.

They reached the path back to the house entirely too soon in Harry's opinion and he reluctantly let go of Ginny's hand. She took the lead but instead of going back toward their own house, she made to go into the garden. Harry followed, realizing they still had half the day to spend together and there was no hurry to get anywhere.

"I love this place," she said as they neared the center of the garden.

A large fountain stood before them, its jets of water arcing into the air and splashing in the pool before slipping off down one of the many small streams through the trees and plants.

"I do too," Harry answered. "I remember how impressed I was the first time John showed it to me. He spends a lot of time working on it. He does most of it the Muggle way, too." Harry shook his head in amazement. "I think it's great but there's no way I'd put in that much effort. That's what the wand is for." He patted his pocket where his wand was stored.

Ginny laughed. "Yes, but he's got to find some way to pass the time, hasn't he? He can't always be training the next Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her but his smile didn't falter at all.

"Do you know what he did before... this?" she asked vaguely.

Harry crinkled his eyebrows. "No, not really. I've never asked. It must get pretty lonely though. I mean, he goes places and visits people but I think he spends most of his time here."

"Yeah, I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have someone to spend my life with."

Harry saw her eyes for a moment and watched as she turned away looking confused. His heart sped up a little and he squeezed her hand.

"I don't know what I'd do either," he replied simply and was rewarded with her renewed smile.

They passed from the open air around the fountain into a cooler shaded area where they took advantage of a comfortable bench. Harry was surprised when Ginny leaned into him and rested her head on his shoulder. Though the air was cooler in the shade, he felt like he was being warmed from within. A strange new feeling crept over him. It was a strange sort of protectiveness, and he pulled her closer. His words began to spill from his mouth without censure.

"I would protect you from it all, you know, if there were some way I could. You deserve to have someone looking out for you, taking care of you. You deserve so much more than you'll get by fighting alongside me. I wish there was some way I could keep you away from it all and safe, even though I know it's not possible. You deserve so much more. You deserve more than all this."

He felt her shift next to him and was worried he'd said too much, but she only settled back into his shoulder again.

"I know you would protect me if you could, Harry," she said. "I don't know what I deserve, but fighting alongside you is an honor and I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm happy that you wish it didn't have to be this way. But you're all I need, really."

A warm fluttering filled his stomach and he closed his eyes wondering if he'd really heard her correctly. They sat in silence for a few minutes before Harry felt his eyelids beginning to grow heavy.

"Does a nap figure into your schedule today?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, "but not here. Let's find someplace more comfortable."

Harry shivered slightly at the implications of her words but decided to take it on the most friendly of terms. They got up and walked back to the guest house.

As the door closed behind them, Ginny turned to Harry for a moment.

"I'll get some biscuits if you light a fire. It's chilly in here."

He could hardly say no to her sweet smile, so he nodded and went into the lounge. A small stack of firewood lay in a tray by the hearth and he piled it up carefully. He paused for a moment before pulling out his wand and whispering "*Incendio*."

Ginny appeared a few moments later with a small tray of biscuits and two mugs of hot chocolate. They intertwined their legs together on the sofa and ate their snack while trying to conceal their blushes.

Eventually the tray was emptied and Harry began to feel a tugging at his eyelids again. Ginny banished the tray and mugs to the kitchen and stood up. She walked around the room, aiming her wand at the curtains and drawing them closed. Harry couldn't help but feel slightly awkward sitting in an empty house with Ginny Weasley while she closed all of the curtains around them.

As the last light of day was dimmed she turned back to him. He had stretched out on his back and was now staring sleepily at the ceiling.

"Er, Harry?"

"Mmm?"

"Close your eyes," she whispered.

He didn't need telling twice. His eyelids were already asking for this wonderful relief.

He was dimly aware of her moving around and the next thing he knew she had lain down next to him on the sofa, resting her head on his shoulder while his arm draped around her. Her hand rested gently on his chest, rising and falling with each breath while the fire crackled quietly in the background.

He had never felt so wonderful before. The last thoughts that played through his mind were ones of perfect trust and sweet flowery smells. Her hair was like softest silk on his arm and neck, and his dreams were full of happiness and comfort.

Sometime later the fire was briefly disturbed by a girl with thick brown curls and a satisfied smile. She remained only a moment, but that moment was long enough to see the two people curled up on the sofa together, sleeping peacefully in each other's arms. She grinned and disappeared again.

When Harry awoke, he thought for a moment it had all been a dream. The peace, the comfort, the *girl*. As the fog lifted from his mind he shifted slightly and was surprised by a sweet murmur from his side. He turned his head and was face to face with Ginny. It hadn't been a dream at all.

As she continued to sleep, he chided himself for never having truly seen her before. He was sorry for the times he had dismissed her so easily. He was sorry for the times he'd only seen her as Ron's little sister. It wasn't that he'd been unkind to her, but his indifference had been just as damaging.

He observed the smooth skin of her cheek as she slept and the way her hair reflected the beautiful tones of the dying fire. Just as he lifted his hand to brush a few strands out of her face, she opened her eyes sleepily.

"Hi, Harry," she said dreamily.

"Hi," he said, smiling and feeling a bit dizzy.

They lay staring for a moment before Ginny's eyes got wide and she sat up quickly.

"Harry!" she cried. "Did- did we just take a nap together?" She began to giggle and even in the dim light her face was red.

"I think we did. Actually, I think I was here first and you laid down next to me. Either way it was... it was a good nap." Then he grinned and added, "Did you like it?"

She had both hands over her smile and she nodded. "I can't remember the last time I slept so well." She glanced at the clock on the wall and turned toward the kitchen.

"I've got to start making dinner. It'll take about an hour so you'll just have to find something to do on your own until then."

Harry got up slowly and rubbed his eyes. He spotted a Quidditch Weekly magazine on a table and grabbed it before opening up the curtains again. Ginny banged around in the kitchen for quite some time and the smells began to fill the house, tantalizing Harry's nose. He found himself trying to think of excuses to go see what she was cooking but knew she would see right through them.

He continued to read and finally, after nearly three-quarters of an hour, she poked her head around the corner and told him it was ready. He smiled at her disheveled look and knew she must have been working quite hard.

When he entered the kitchen his senses were nearly overwhelmed by the smells of sweet-glazed chicken, fried tomatoes, fruit salad, cooked cinnamon apples, and the most perfect treacle tart he'd ever seen.

"The house-elves would be proud to call you one of their number," Harry said, chuckling.

"Remember, not a word to Hermione. I'm your little house-elf *only*."

Harry blushed as he said, "I rather like having you as a *my* house-elf."

She smiled prettily as she brought the last of the dishes to the table. She pulled her wand out and lit the two candles Harry had only just noticed were present.

"Happy birthday, Harry," she said.

He decided he really liked the way she said his name.

“Thank you. This is wonderful, Ginny. No one’s ever-“

She held up a hand. “I know. That’s why I wanted to do it. You don’t seem to realize how special you are and I hoped this might help out a little.”

He looked embarrassed but managed a weak “Thank you” before tucking in. He enjoyed every bite of his wonderful birthday dinner and told her so. He knew that it wasn’t so much the taste of the food as it was the sweetness of the cook. As he took second helpings he suddenly realized he didn’t want to look like a pig and so took very small amounts. He often remembered Ron taking mountainous helpings at the Gryffindor table and hearing Hermione and Ginny scoff in the background. Besides, he knew Ron would eat any leftovers the next day.

When the meal was over, Ginny once again banished all of the plates and trays to the kitchen where they began to wash themselves. Harry watched in fascination.

“I never learned how to do that,” he said. “I *can* cook like a Muggle though. Maybe sometime I’ll cook for you. I’ve been doing it since before I went to Hogwarts and I’m not too shabby. Really.”

“I’d like that,” she said.

They talked and laughed for a few minutes before Ginny asked what Harry had in mind to do next.

He smiled. “I was thinking we could go for a broom ride. Maybe out to the cliffs. The sunset is nice up there and we could... watch it together.”

“That sounds great,” she said.

“You might want a heavier jumper. It’s getting kind of chilly and we’ll be riding, too.”

She retrieved a thick jumper from her room and pulled it on as they walked out the front door. Harry tried not to watch but found he couldn’t help himself. As her head popped out the top and her eyes met his, he turned away, his face burning with embarrassment. Ginny only smiled.

They walked to the broom shed and opened the doors. Ginny began to reach for her own broom but Harry touched her arm and shook his head.

“I thought we’d just ride mine.” He shifted his eyes nervously to his Firebolt.

“Oh. Okay. Er, where do you want me to sit?”

He looked into her eyes. “I want you to steer.”

Her mouth formed into a small ‘o’ and she gingerly took his broom in her hands.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Positive.”

She sat slowly down in front and Harry climbed on behind her. He wound his arms around her and grasped one hand to the handle and the other tightly around her waist. His grip loosened quickly though at the sound of her sharp intake of breath.

“Sorry. Did I hurt you?” he asked seriously.

“N-no,” she said. “No, nothing’s wrong. Go ahead.”

He placed his arm back around her and pulled her backward into his chest. He felt his heart thumping faster and faster as they drifted up off the ground.

Suddenly, without warning, the broom backed up into the shed with a soft *crunch*.

Ginny looked horrified as she turned to face Harry. She began to stutter an apology.

“Harry, I- I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

“It’s okay,” he laughed. “No harm done. Just... forward next time.”

She still looked concerned as she spoke. “I’m sorry. I don’t... I just forgot how to ride a broom for a moment there, I guess.”

Harry grinned to himself and pulled her closer to him, whispering in her ear. “Remember, forward.”

She nodded her head, her hair brushing softly against his face. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the clean, fresh scent of it. Just as he was beginning to get lost in it, she nudged the broom and it took off like a shot. They rocketed upward at an acute angle for several seconds – Harry barely hanging on – before she slowed and leveled off.

“Was that *forward* enough for you?” she laughed.

“Oh, that was good, but you just wait for the ride home,” he said wickedly.

They rode on for a while in silence. Ginny struggled every moment to contain her heart and steady her breathing. Harry’s strong arms had such a grip on her that she could hardly lean one way or the other and she loved every minute of it. She loved the fresh air in her lungs, the freedom of flying and the knowledge that she was wrapped up tightly in the arms of the boy she loved.

Harry smiled the whole flight. He couldn’t help it. Ginny was so warm in his arms and she seemed to fit so perfectly against his chest. He loved the way her hair blew in his face and the peace that seemed to radiate all around them.

To both of them it seemed the ride ended all too soon as they lit upon the rocky cliffs. Harry carefully set his broom aside, remembering that he wanted to fly them home, and then he joined Ginny on the ground. Even with her thick jumper, she was shivering slightly and he conjured up a blanket to wrap around them.

The sunset over the water was like watching two long-lost friends come together again. The sun greeted the water gently and began to sink into the horizon, casting out its long, red tendrils in great arcs across the sky.

They sat together in silence, slowly inching closer. First, Harry adjusted himself more comfortably next to her. Then Ginny found a rock under her leg that required her to shift. Harry found himself reaching out and holding her hand, receiving a shy smile at the same time. After a while, Ginny laid her head gently on his shoulder and he put a protective arm around her.

At long last, the sun ebbed below the horizon, the sky darkening behind it.

“I’m glad you asked me to come with you,” Ginny said, turning her head to look at him.

“I wouldn’t want to share it with anyone else,” he answered. “Everything you’ve done today was so... nice, I- I just wish there was some way I could pay you back. You’ve been such a good friend to me. Sometimes I think you can even hear what’s going on in my head, you seem to understand me so well. You’re more than just a friend, Ginny. You know that, right?”

She looked up at him and he was struck by how close her face was to his and how soft and beautiful her eyes were.

“Am I?” she asked quietly.

He found his voice stuck in his throat.

“You are.”

Their eyes stayed locked together. Slowly, as if guided by an invisible power, they began to move closer. Harry could feel her breath on his cheek. His heart was racing madly.

He watched as she closed her eyes, exposing her beautiful, full eyelashes. He felt his own eyes closing and his hand rising up to her cheek.

The moment their lips touched, all other thoughts were lost. There was only Ginny. He was lost in the softness of their kiss. It lasted only a moment but its effects would linger forever.

As they pulled slowly apart, Harry’s heart was lighter than it had ever been. He was soaring through the sky, propelled by this wonderful feeling and wishing it could go on forever.

Ginny’s smile and bright eyes captured his attention and he smiled back. He was sure his silly grin matched hers but equally sure he didn’t care.

She lifted her hand up and touched his face with her fingers, exciting little shocks in his nerves.

“Harry,” she said, “I’ve been waiting for that for so long.”

"I know. Me too. That was... that was incredible."

"Harry, you know what this means, right?"

He grew suddenly concerned. "Er, no. What does it mean?"

"It means you're mine," she giggled. "And it means I get to do that again."

She moved close and planted her lips on his. In a second his mind was lost again. This time was even more wonderful than the first and he wished they would never have to stop. It felt like part of him that was missing had been returned and he was complete again. This girl, this wonderful girl had just kissed him!

"Does this mean you're mine, too?" he asked when they pulled apart again.

She nodded her head fervently and laid it on his chest.

"I've always been yours," she added quietly.

He squeezed her tight and felt that nothing could ever be wrong again. He could do anything if only he could remember this moment. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply, contentedly.

They sat in the growing darkness lost in their wonderful new feelings. Harry knew they would have to part eventually and he finally managed to stand up, stretching his arms and legs. He gave Ginny a quick peck on the cheek and climbed onto his broom, riding in front. She sat down behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and laying her head on his shoulder. Her breath sent shivers up and down his spine as he led them slowly back home.

After they had deposited the broom back in its shed and climbed the steps to the front porch, he pulled Ginny into a long, tight hug, running his hands gently up and down her back.

"Harry! You've finally done it!" she said.

He pulled away looking confused. "Done what?"

"You finally figured out how to give a proper hug."

He took her in his arms again. "If it were up to me, I'd never let you go. I'd hold onto you forever. I should never have waited so long."

"Oh, Harry. You've never said anything so true." She smiled at him impishly. "Six years is a long time for a girl to wait, especially for the Boy-Who-Lived."

He pulled back a little and scowled.

She put a hand on his face and looked into his eyes.

"You'll always be Harry, just Harry, to me. Always."

He smiled and took her hand, leading them into the house. They climbed to the top of the stairs and shared one more electrically-charged kiss before separating to their rooms.

If only every day were this perfect, he thought as he lay in bed. *If only.*

Chapter Ten

A Surprise Invitation

Hermione was in the middle of asking Ron to pass the orange juice the next morning when Harry and Ginny walked into the kitchen. She appeared remarkably happy to see them.

“Ron, will you please pass— Oh, hi, Harry! Hi, Ginny! How was your birthday, Harry? Anything... *special* happen?” She grinned innocently.

Harry felt his cheeks flush and decided it should be illegal for anyone to look that smug. He wondered for a moment if Ginny had filled her in on the previous day’s events. The look on Ginny’s face, though, told him otherwise. She looked positively alarmed.

Fortunately Harry recovered quickly and remembered their plan for bringing Hermione and Ron up to speed. He glanced at Ginny, giving her the smallest of winks before going to get his breakfast.

“Nothing too interesting,” he answered Hermione at long last. “We pretty much stayed around the house all day.”

“Oh? Just relaxed and *napped*, I suppose?”

Harry looked at her in confusion for a moment. How could she possibly have known about that? Fortunately, Ron stared at her quite bewildered, saving Harry from answering.

“So, no,” Harry said. “Nothing much really happened. Although...” he paused and looked at the ceiling for a moment. “There is something I’ve been wanted to get off my chest for a while and I just don’t think I can wait any longer.”

He turned to Ginny, looking very solemn, and took her hands in his.

“Ginny, I just can’t take it anymore. I’ve been holding back for too long. I love you and I can’t stand to be apart from you any longer.”

With that, he grabbed her and kissed her fiercely. She went limp in his arms and allowed him to lean her back, holding her so she wouldn’t fall.

When they finally broke apart, Ginny put her hand to her heart and looked at Harry with as much passion as she could muster.

“Oh, Harry. That was positively wonderful. But why did you have to wait for so long? I’ve always loved you. Oh, now we can get married and live together happily ever after. I just can’t wait!”

Ron, who had been getting progressively redder with each passing moment, now stepped forward.

“Harry, that’s my sister! What d’you think you’re doing?”

“Ron—”

“No, I want to hear this, Hermione.”

“Ron,” she giggled, “you owe me a Galleon.”

He stopped in his tracks.

“I do not. It’s not his birthday anymore.”

She turned to Harry and Ginny. “And when did you have your *actual* first kiss?”

Harry reached over and took Ginny’s hand, a goofy smile on his face. “Last night,” he said shyly. Ginny grinned up at him.

Only then did Ron start to catch on. "Wait," he said, "this... this was just putting on, then? You two got together and thought it'd be funny to take the mickey out of me by playing it up, right?"

Harry pulled Ginny closer until her head was resting on his chest. "Well, basically, yeah."

"Some joke," Ron mumbled, turning and walking out of the room.

"Don't mind him," said Hermione, with authority. "He's just upset that I won the bet."

"The bet?" Ginny asked, raising her eyebrows.

Hermione looked embarrassed for a moment. "Well, Ron and I had a bet as to whether you two would kiss on Harry's birthday. I won. Oh, and I saw you two taking a kip on the sofa yesterday. I floo'd in to ask how things were going but it was pretty obvious you didn't need my help."

She smiled sweetly at Ginny, who returned the smile. In a moment, the girls were giggling and hugging while Harry looked on in amusement. Hermione soon let Ginny go and came over to hug Harry.

"Oh, Harry. I'm so happy for you. You're perfect for each other. Take care of her, okay?"

"I will," he said, feeling suddenly a little choked up.

"Well, I guess I'd better go find Ron. He'll be all right in a bit."

When she was gone, Harry took Ginny in his arms and held her close, breathing deeply the scent of flowers from her hair. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment. This was certainly how it was meant to be.

The new couple spent the remainder of the weekend lounging around the house and taking long, slow walks through the woods. Ron finally came around to the idea of them as a couple, eventually claiming that he knew all along and was only pretending to be upset. Harry let him think he believed him.

When Monday morning rolled around the Teacher greeted them with more than his usual enthusiasm. He took a moment to acknowledge the new couple and told them how it could only help them in their fight.

"Happiness," he said, "helps you to keep your focus."

Harry just smiled. "Yeah, I'll bet."

"Well then," the Teacher continued, "shall we get started?"

They all nodded eagerly.

"Okay. Today we're going to start working on some rather difficult magic. Now, Harry, do you recall what happened with Voldemort when you two tried to duel?"

Harry cast his eyes to the floor and took a moment to answer. "Our wands sort of connected and neither of us could use them properly. They wouldn't do battle with each other."

"Right. I think Dumbledore probably explained that to you, as well as what happened shortly thereafter. What I would like you to concentrate on is the actual connection. I want you to think about what it felt like when your wands met each other and when you were holding back each other's magic.

"There is a powerful defensive magic that can actually *capture* an incoming spell. It can only be used by the most powerful of wizards. Voldemort may be aware of it but he's probably disregarded it because he believes it to be above your abilities. We, however, know that to be untrue, don't we?"

His comment was shared among them with appreciative smiles.

The Teacher's face became more serious. "It's a very difficult magic to work, partly because it requires such intense focus and partly because there is *no incantation*. It requires such a tremendous force of willpower to use and isn't particularly useful to most wizards, so few ever learn it.

"I thought we would try working with this magic for the rest of the time you're here. Our summer is already half gone. I debated for a long time about this but finally gave in. We either start now or we don't start at all.

"The second challenge for you will be a series of spells and jinxes designed for neutralization and containment. After you've successfully disarmed the Death Eaters you will need ways to keep them contained.

"We'll keep up with the shield charms, perhaps expanding them to cover more than one person if you make good progress, and I'm bringing in a special tutor to start covering Healing magic. In the thick of battle a simple healing spell can make all the difference. I guarantee your enemy won't bother with it. Voldemort's followers are very independent, and one less of their numbers only means better chances for advancement in the ranks."

Hermione looked curious. "Who is it?"

"Someone you all know and love," he answered with a wry smile. "Someone that some of you are more familiar with than others. One Poppy Pomfrey."

Harry rolled his eyes but smiled anyway. If any witch knew her Healing magic, it was *that* witch.

They spent the rest of the morning going over the theory and intricacies of capturing and absorbing a spell. It seemed quite complex and Harry wondered if he would actually be able to do it. By the time lunch was served they were finally ready for some action. Lunch was simple, as usual, with sandwiches and salad, and before they knew it, the time had come to put theory into practice.

As each of his friends stood to work with the Teacher, Harry carefully remained in the background. As with each new spell they tried, he was turning the possibilities over in his mind, watching them play out in the final battle against Voldemort. Would he have the focus to use this bit of magic in the face of evil? Could this spell be used against Voldemort in a way that would diminish his power or destroy him completely?

Lost in his thoughts, Harry was startled when the Teacher summoned him loudly from the center of the room. He walked forward under the gaze of his friends and couldn't help but feel a little self-conscious. None of them had succeeded even in the slightest to slow down, much less capture, the jinxes and hexes the Teacher had thrown at them.

He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to calm his thoughts. It was just him in the room, he told himself. He could do this. He focused his mind on his magic and for a moment felt something powerful rise up inside of him.

The Teacher aimed his wand and Harry watched as the spell rushed forth from its tip. He extended his own wand, feeling strangely like it was more a part of his hand than something in his hand. He urged his magic just to the tip but not beyond.

When the simple spell collided with Harry's wand, a sparkle of brilliant white light enveloped the room, obscuring its occupants entirely. When all of the dying embers had cleared, Harry still stood, his wand held steadily in front of him. The first thing he noticed was the gleam in his mentor's eyes.

The room exhaled a collective breath as the Teacher slowed lowered his wand.

"Well done, Harry," he said slowly. "Can you explain how you did that?"

"Er, well... I don't really know," said Harry, beginning to feel the blood rush to his cheeks. He cast his gaze to the floor.

The Teacher turned toward the others with a guarded smile. "Would anyone care to tell Mr. Potter what they observed?"

"That was kind of freaky, Harry," Ron said. "I could just tell you were going to be able to do it."

"Yeah," agreed Hermione, nodding her head. "Even before you started there was this look in your eyes and a feeling... in the air."

"In the air?" Harry asked faintly, looking up at them.

Ginny took a step forward and held his gaze boldly with her eyes. "Harry, you knew you were going to be able to do it, didn't you?" She paused while he nodded slowly. "I could feel it, Harry. I could feel your magic. It was so powerful I was... I was almost afraid for you. But then it just seemed to obey you. You just needed to believe you could do it."

"I've seen you do that before, too. When you were fighting the Death Eaters in the catacombs you almost scared them off just with your look. You have something, Harry, that none of the rest of us have. It's what you're going to need to finally defeat Voldemort."

Harry rested his eyes on her for a moment, marveling at her confidence. He hardly felt the same himself, but at least her words gave him encouragement.

The next morning as Harry showed up at the Teacher's office door, he was handed a small piece of parchment as the man smiled and left the room.

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*The Ministry of Magic Cordially Invites You,  
Hogwarts Students and Alumni,*

*To*

**The Back-to-School Ball**

*To take place on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> August  
In the Ministry's Main Ballroom.*

*For security reasons, please arrive in the  
Main Atrium  
by eight o'clock in the evening.*

~~~~~

Harry read through the invitation several times and each time his feelings were different. At first he wondered how they could possibly have a ball and not attract Voldemort's attention; it seemed far too reckless. Then he wondered if he should go at all; he didn't want to make himself an easy target. In the end he decided that rather than becoming a target, he would make it an opportunity. An open ball for Hogwarts students and alumni the day before start-of-term would certainly be more of a smack in the face for Voldemort than it would be an invitation to attack. Besides, he knew there would be so much security there that an attack would be more like suicide for the Death Eaters.

The others were concerned about safety as well but were equally excited about an evening of fun with their friends. After discussing the matter for several minutes in the library with the Teacher, Harry found himself starting to look forward to the event. The smile that it brought to Ginny's face was more than enough to make him want to go. In fact, he found it almost inspiring enough that he could have faced Voldemort then and there.

They concentrated their practice once again on the magic they had started learning the previous day. Harry found himself able not only to capture and absorb the easy spells, but also to stop some of the more moderately powerful ones.

"I don't see the point," Hermione said as she took the floor. "Harry's the only one of us powerful enough to be capable of this magic. I don't want to waste our time if we won't be able to do it, too."

Then, as if realizing what she had said, she turned to the Teacher and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, John. I just get frustrated when I can't learn all of the fundamentals and have the strict guidance of a set of rules." She turned to glare at Ron, who was snickering quietly at the side of the room.

John appeared thoughtful for a moment. "You know, I think you're right. Not that you're not powerful enough but that your time might be better spent on something else." He turned to all of them. "Now, given what I've just told Hermione, I'll let you all have the choice of whether to continue. All except you, Harry."

Harry merely shrugged and nodded his head. He could definitely see the value in this magic and he really did want to continue. Beside him, Ginny stepped carefully forward.

"I'd prefer to go with Hermione. If Madam Pomfrey is here I think we should start learning healing charms."

Hermione brightened at the idea and nodded her head enthusiastically. Ron scowled a bit to himself. "I want to stay here with Harry," he said resolutely.

"Very good," John answered them all. "Ladies, you will find Poppy in the garden, I believe. She expressed an interest earlier in having a look at the healing herbs I've been growing."

With a brief wave and a smile, the girls left the room. Ron stepped forward.

"I want to have another go."

Half an hour later as Harry muttered "*finite incantatum*" for the umpteenth time, Ron got slowly to his feet looking thoroughly defeated.

"How about one more time?" Harry asked cautiously.

Ron nodded sluggishly. Harry walked over to John for a moment and they talked in quiet undertones. When they were done, Harry walked off to the side of the room.

"Ready?" asked John.

"Yeah, I guess," replied Ron, wearily raising his wand.

"Okay. On the count of three. One. Two--"

"IMAGINE THAT HERMIONE'S GOING TO BE HIT BY THIS CURSE!" Harry shouted.

"Three!" shouted John and launched forth his hex.

In the moment of time between Harry's voice and John's, a fiery new look came over Ron. As the hex contacted his wand there was a loud *BANG!* and a fiery flash of light.

Harry let a grin creep over his face. His friend had finally done it and Harry knew exactly why. Ron was having the same protective feelings about Hermione that Harry had about Ginny. It inspired a great deal of strength in himself every time he thought about Ginny in danger and he had suspected that the same was true for Ron.

As the reality of what had happened finally sunk in, Ron's eyes widened and a smile spread across his face.

"I did it!"

"Yes, you did," said John. "Why were you able to do it now but not before?"

Ron's ears began to redden and his smile faltered just slightly.

"I guess... it was because of the thought of Hermione getting hurt. I would do anything to keep that from happening."

John shook his head in amusement. "You and Harry are alike in so many ways."

Ron shot an unusual look in Harry's direction and Harry could only grin back. They understood each other in a new way now and Harry wondered if his friend might finally be able to accept that Ginny was dating his best mate.

They continued practicing for the rest of the morning, though at a much slower pace. Now that they had mastered the method, it became time to work on the fine intricacies. Harry clearly held much more powerful and raw magical energy than Ron, but Ron's determination served him well. By the time they broke for lunch the two boys were thoroughly hungry and more than a little tired.

They met Hermione and Ginny in the kitchen of the main house and proceeded to ask as many questions as they received. It turned out that the girls had gotten straight to work with the school nurse and had already found her more enjoyable and less strict than they had ever known.

"She actually laughed and smiled," said Ginny with amusement.

"And she really knows her stuff," added Hermione, who appeared to be quite in awe over the matron's abilities. "I mean, she went right into what to do for all sorts of curse and hex damage, and we already started practicing. This could make all the difference in the world, Harry! I've got so much to read, too. She's given us a whole stack of books from her personal collection. You two should read them, they're going to be so helpful."

Ron and Harry grinned at each other while Ginny rolled her eyes. They knew there was little point in saying anything. It was always best to let Hermione get it all out.

In fact, it took most of lunch for her to stop in her happy tirade. She slowed down quickly though when she learned that Ron had finally managed to achieve what she hadn't.

"Ron, that's so great!" she said. "That could be really useful. And if you miss, why then well just come along and heal you!"

They all laughed, even Hermione, while they magically whisked their dishes away to the kitchen.

"I think we'll have a bit of a break," said John. "Say about an hour, before starting up again this afternoon. You all deserve a bit of rest. When you come back we'll start working on containment spells."

They all nodded happily and Apparated back to the guest house. Ron and Hermione decided to go for a walk while Harry wanted to take a nap and Ginny wanted to read a book. Harry settled down on the sofa and Ginny sat on the floor in front of him. She cast a charm on her book to make it glow faintly so as not to disturb Harry.

After what seemed like only a few minutes, Harry fell asleep. At first his dreams were normal, at least as normal as dreams can be. They were filled with laughter and images of Ginny smiling at his side. Eventually, though, the scenes became more disturbing, finally turning to downright terrifying.

Harry found himself in a room he remembered vaguely. He and Ginny were dancing to the music of a wonderful orchestra. She was so beautiful in his dream that she appeared to glow from the inside. His heart had never felt so light.

Then suddenly the music stopped and silence overcame everything. Harry felt himself looking around in panic, an all-too-familiar pain rising into the scar on his forehead. His eyes

darted back and forth as he watched the dance floor clear and the Death Eaters wash into the room, overcoming all resistance with alarming speed.

In the blink of an eye he felt himself separated from Ginny by a force he couldn't resist and watched her helplessly as she was dragged from the room. As she disappeared out the door everything went black.

"Harry!" Ginny shouted. "Harry!"

He gasped loudly as he rocketed up off the sofa, pulling his wand from his sleeve with such force that the material tore down the seam. His breath continued in great gasps as he looked around and took in the room and the obvious lack of danger. The air around them crackled with energy as he turned in a small circle.

He turned to Ginny with fire in his eyes.

"Ginny!" he whispered urgently. "I've had that dream before! Do you remember? It was the morning when I ran into you at the bottom of the girls staircase in the common room. I knocked you over and told you that I'd just had a horrible dream.

"Don't you see, I've just had it again! I dreamed that we were at the ball and it was great, but then it all went bad. The Death Eaters came and took you away and I couldn't stop them. I couldn't stop them!"

Ginny was starting to grow concerned and she grabbed Harry by the arm and pulled him down onto the sofa. He was shaking a little.

"Harry, it's okay. Take your time and tell me exactly what you remember." She rested a hand gently on his arm and he began to calm.

He closed his eyes but found that it was already beginning to slip away.

"It was beautiful. You were stunning. We were dancing to an orchestra with everyone else and it was the most perfect evening. And then... and then the music stopped and everyone sort of went quiet. Before I knew what was happening there were so many Death Eaters we didn't have a hope of escaping. They separated us... or we got separated, and then they caught you and dragged you out.

"Ginny, we can't go. This is the second time I've dreamed the same dream. I don't want to risk us getting hurt. We just can't go."

"Shh," she rubbed his arm. "It's okay. It's just a dream."

Harry continued to sit on the sofa while Ginny whispered comforting words to Harry. Eventually Ron and Hermione returned and Harry related the dream to them as well.

"You don't really think that Voldemort would risk an attack with so many Aurors around, do you?" Ron asked incredulously.

Harry just shook his head. It was all starting to get a bit fuzzy. "I don't know. It seemed like they didn't have any trouble getting in, and there were so many that they outnumbered the Aurors, I think. Arrgh! I just can't remember now."

"Harry, maybe it was just a dream," Hermione said comfortingly. "You know, just your mind going through all of the possibilities."

"That's just it," Harry said. "I don't want this to *be* one of the possibilities. I just want to stay away so it *can't* happen."

"But, Harry, that's what Voldemort wants. He wants us to keep to our houses. He wants us to be scared of him and his followers. If we all acted like that then he would have already won, don't you see?"

Harry just closed his eyes and scrubbed his face with his hands. "I don't know. Just let me think about it for a couple of days, okay?"

They all nodded.

"It's time we got back anyway," Hermione said. "John and Madam Pomfrey will be wondering where we are."

"Yeah, let's do that," Harry said with a newly determined look.

Harry and Ron spent the afternoon learning to perform the incredibly complex Anti-Disapparation jinx. As a very finicky spell, it had to be cast just right or the effects would only last a few minutes. Although they all knew how to Apparate, John insisted that they practice the spell on him. He said he was much more used to the feeling and knew how to react if something went wrong. With thoughts of splinching in their minds, they agreed quite readily.

As they usually had to wait five to ten minutes to make sure the spell had been cast correctly, it was a very slow afternoon. In the down times they practiced binding spells. Harry recalled with perfect clarity the many times he'd seen the thin cords appear around someone, binding them so tight it became hard to breathe. The object for the caster was to bind their opponent so effectively they couldn't use their wand, but not to suffocate them. Once bound, the Anti-Disapparation jinx could be used to keep them until help arrived.

As the afternoon waned, Harry found himself starting to miss a certain young Weasley girl and he became more eager to finish. He knew it had only been a few hours since lunch but her absence was taking its toll. His daydreaming was keeping him from concentrating properly and his work was suffering.

As they finally ended their practice, Harry felt the Teacher approach him from behind.

"Harry, could I have a moment, please?"

Harry nodded and watched as Ron walked out the door, knowing his friend would see *his* girlfriend in a few short minutes. Meanwhile, Harry would just have to wait to see Ginny.

"Harry, I noticed your focus lacking a bit this afternoon. Is there something wrong?"

Harry could feel his mentor's eyes boring into his head as the blood rushed to his cheeks.

"No. No, there's nothing wrong. I just—"

"Perhaps your thoughts were more pleasantly occupied?"

Harry felt himself nod, an uncomfortable feeling constricting in his chest. A strong hand gripped his shoulder and he looked up. The man in front of him had nothing but concern and compassion in his eyes.

"Harry, under normal circumstances I wouldn't mind your distraction. Even now, I'm not angry with you, not in the least." He smiled, "I understand your distraction. I only ask that when you're here, you're here in whole. Think of it this way: the sooner you can defeat Voldemort, the sooner you and Ginny can truly begin your lives together. That means working with everything you've got."

Harry was slightly taken aback by these words and he gazed ahead as if not seeing anything properly. It was a few moments before his brain ground back into action.

"So you think that she and I..." he asked.

"Yes, I do," he said slowly. "I have no doubt that you're meant for each other. I say this from what I've observed here and from something Dumbledore said to me before you even arrived."

As if by the flick of a switch, a memory replayed in Harry's mind.

"The *four* of us," he said in with dawning comprehension. "So *Ginny's* the fourth." He felt the truth in his heart before even seeing the satisfied smile on his mentor's face.

"Now," said John, "keep in mind what I said. Keep your focus entirely on where you are and on your magic. Save your... other thoughts for other times. I know it will be difficult to do, especially just now as you're starting your relationship, but only by doing this will you be capable of mastering your skills completely. Deal?"

"Yeah, deal."

Harry shook his head to clear it and started for the door. He felt guilty for not putting in one hundred percent that day and wanted to talk to someone about it. He knew just who that person was.

He found her a few minutes later, sitting comfortably in the sunroom with a glass of iced pumpkin juice. All of the windows were open and the cool lake breeze blew through the room from one end to the other.

"Hi!" she said brightly as he sat down beside her.

"Hi," he answered. "How did things go with Healing?"

"Well, you know Hermione. She's already on the porch reading her books, or she was before Ron got back."

Harry grinned.

"But seriously," she continued, "it could be dead useful. We're not going to learn any of the sophisticated stuff like healing broken bones or internal injuries – that takes ages to learn – but we'll cover temporary charms and spells that work until help arrives."

"That's great," said Harry, looking out the window at the swaying grasses.

A moment later he was happily surprised by a kiss on his cheek. He turned to find a very red-faced Ginny grinning at him.

"I'm so happy you still do that," he said, brushing his fingers across her hot cheek.

"Well," she said quietly, "I'm still not quite used to us, you know?"

"Yeah, I do," he sighed.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching out to grasp his hand.

"John lectured me today about keeping my focus on what I'm doing. I was... distracted, by prettier faces than his and Ron's and I just wasn't thinking."

"Harry! Don't you dare think about Hermione like that!"

Harry's eyes widened for a moment before he smiled and chuckled. "Anyway, he had a good point. He said that the greater my focus is and the more I learn, the quicker I can defeat Voldemort and get on with my life. Or, with *our* lives."

Ginny shuffled over to lay her head against his chest. "So, he lectured you?" she asked seriously.

"Well, not really. It was more like that look that Dumbledore gives you when you've done something wrong. Disappointed, I think. He wasn't upset at all but I still felt guilty."

"So you'll just have to try harder, then."

Harry considered the simplicity of her statement. It struck him as odd that he hadn't thought of that himself and he laughed a little.

"You know, I hadn't looked at it like that. I was only thinking of the look he gave me and not what I was going to do about it."

"I'm happy to be of service," she said. He could feel her smile against his chest and suddenly his mind was occupied with other thoughts.

"The problem will be getting thoughts of that girl out of my head. After all, she's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. That's a thought that's hard to beat."

"Hey!" she said, smacking his chest with her free hand. "I told you not to talk about Hermione like that. I'm offended!"

"Oh? Would you prefer I talk about you like that, then?"

"I'd like that," she said quietly, lifting her face to look at him.

He met her look and couldn't help but kiss her. After all, it was what he'd been dreaming about all day long.

"So, what do you think about the Ball now?" she asked, snuggling back into his shoulder.

Harry's face darkened a little, but more from hard thinking than worry. Even with the threat of Voldemort around them, he couldn't deny that the image of Ginny in a beautiful dress, dancing slowly across the floor with him, was quite compelling. They would just have to be fully prepared for all possibilities.

"I think... I think I might still want to go. I want to go with you. It'd be so much fun."

“Good. ‘Cause we’re going shopping this weekend for something to wear. You and Ron are coming, too.”

Harry was a bit surprised but decided that it really could be fun. Any excuse to spend time with Ginny was surely worth the effort, even if it meant shopping, plus, they hadn’t left the Teacher in a month.

By the end of the week, Harry was looking forward to the weekend with no less than genuine happiness. He and Ron had discussed what they would wear and he was glad to find that Ron only planned simple, but formal, dress robes. They both determined to get their part over with as quickly as possible so they could spend the rest of the day with the girls.

First thing Saturday morning, after two pieces of toast with jam courtesy of an adorable, smiling Ginny, Harry and the others said a quick goodbye to John and apparated away. Their destination was an American Wizarding village just up the coast of the lake. A picture and an address were all they had to go on, but Harry knew it would be enough. After all, they had done the same during Apparation training.

As they arrived at the designated point, Harry looked around and was happy to see many witches and wizards walking about in proper cloaks. Although he liked Muggle clothing enough – especially on Ginny – he was starting to miss the anonymity he felt in the presence of a large magical population. Not that this village was large, but he enjoyed the sight anyway. It reminded him a little of the first time he set foot in Diagon Alley, the sights and sounds and activity of it all. He couldn’t help but sigh.

“What is it?” Ginny asked close to his ear.

He smiled gently as a shiver ran up his spine. She certainly had the ability to make him go weak in the knees. “It reminds me so much of the first time I went to Diagon Alley with Hagrid, right after I found out I was a wizard.”

Ginny smiled and squeezed his hand. He knew she would understand.

They mulled around a bit just looking into shop windows. Harry was slightly surprised that the American shops were hardly different than the ones back home. After nearly an hour of aimless wandering they finally came across a promising-looking storefront. An elegantly carved sign over the door read “Smock’s Wardrobes for All Occasions.” Upon closer inspection the shop seemed fairly neat and tidy, so they decided to go in.

“Hello!” cried a large, elderly woman as they entered. She swooped down on them so quickly Harry didn’t even have time to react and nearly fell backwards over Ron’s foot. After gently taking all of their hands, she escorted them to one side of the cozy shop. Two tri-fold mirrors stood on rickety old legs against the wall with two small boxes on the floor in front of them.

“Well now, why don’t we start with you two, my dears?” she motioned to Hermione and Ginny.

Ron looked fearful and backed away slightly, stuttering, “We’ll just go over here.” He motioned over his shoulder at some very feminine-looking gowns before turning beet red and walking quickly off. Harry muttered something very similar and followed his friend.

They mulled around the small shop for a while until joyful sounds of admiration peaked their interest. Returning to the girls, they were shocked to find them absent while the shopkeeper re-shelved various bolts of material.

“Er, excuse me?” Harry asked tentatively of the older woman.

“Oh, I’ll be right with you. It’ll just take me a few moments to get cleaned up from helping your friends.”

"I was just wondering... where they are," he added.

"Why, they're changing out of their new gowns, of course."

A sudden idea struck Harry. He smiled as kindly as he could muster and asked very politely if he might have a moment to speak with her. She followed him back to the counter.

"My friends and I..." he began, "well, we're not from around here."

"Thank you, I gathered that much, dear," she said and smiled.

"What I mean is... I want to pay for all of us but I don't know exactly how. All I've got is Galleons."

"That will be fine. Gringott's will exchange just about anything. Your money is as good here as it is back home."

"Great, then!" Harry visibly relaxed. "My friend and I need new dress robes as well."

"Well, of course you do! Come along then."

She led the way back through the shop until Harry could make out a head of Weasley hair standing taller than anything else. He smiled. It was always easy to recognize his friends.

"I'm sorry, dear, I forgot to introduce myself earlier. I'm Mrs. Smock."

Harry and Ron introduced themselves and shook hands with her before being hustled up onto some small stools to begin the process. Mrs. Smock moved expertly between them taking various measurements, squinting carefully, and pulling bolts of fabric down from the walls with her wand.

Harry realized with some enjoyment that she hadn't even paused when he said his name. There were definitely some benefits to being across the ocean from his home. At the same time he also noticed that Hermione and Ginny had pulled up seats and were whispering and giggling quietly as they watched from the side.

"Hey!" Harry said. "We didn't get to watch while you were, uh, you know, trying on things."

"Well, of course not, Harry," Ginny said sweetly. "You don't get to watch us but we *have* to be here to watch you. Boys just don't know what they're looking for and we have to make sure you pick the right robes."

Hermione nodded enthusiastically and Harry turned to Ron, who was scowling. They looked at each other and shrugged. There was nothing to be done about it now.

Mrs. Smock worked quickly, holding up various colors against their arms and faces, and talking animatedly with the two girls. Harry found himself feeling a bit put-out because his opinion hadn't been asked once. Ron appeared to be taking it better and smiled a little as Hermione's eyes took him in from head to foot.

Harry rolled his eyes and looked down at himself. He couldn't deny that he liked the look of the robes that were taking shape. They were black just like Ron's, but the look was very different and he was surprised at how comfortable they felt. It was then that he noticed the way Ginny was looking at him and his face flushed. She happened to meet his eyes for a moment and then turned away, a bright scarlet creeping up her neck.

As the elderly woman finished her work and stepped back the two girls came forward to inspect their boyfriends. Hermione took a no-nonsense tone with Ron and was busy explaining all of the magical qualities of the material in addition to its stain-fighting protection. Ron looked a little cross at the implication but smiled anyway as she fawned over him.

Ginny approached Harry with her mouth open just slightly and a light blush on her cheeks.

"They look good, Harry," she said, looking at him nervously.

"I bet they're nothing compared to yours," he answered.

She smiled and looked up at him for a moment before bursting out with a quick laugh.

"I'm sorry, I think I just had a first-year, Boy-Who-Lived moment, looking at you."

"Oh," he said, mischievously. "Going to start up the Harry Potter Fan Club again?"

WHACK!

Her hand bounced back from his arm while he grinned. They both laughed.

"All right. You boys can use the two rooms there to change back into your everyday clothes. Just leave the robes hanging up and I'll pack them up for you when you're done."

They did just as they were told.

When Harry came out of the small changing room a few minutes later it was with surprise that he found Ginny and Hermione waiting for him. The looks on their faces told him he had done something wrong.

"Er, what did I do now?" he asked, resigned.

It was Ginny who answered while Hermione stood by looking mutinous.

"Harry, you can't just go buying everything for us! You know Mum and Dad send us money once in a while and since we found out about the ball we've been saving up for these gowns. I think *Ron's* even been saving up for his robes. You can't keep doing this!"

Harry felt a tinge of anger that they were so upset about such a little thing and tried to reason with them.

"Look," he said, "I have two big stacks of gold at Gringott's – one of them shouldn't even belong to me, it should belong to Sirius. I certainly don't want it but I'm sure he'd like to have it used." As he spoke his anger continued to increase. "You have to let me do something with it or it's *never* going to be used. Don't take this away from me! If I don't make it through this, it's all going to be yours anyway!"

For a moment they appeared frozen on the spot, their eyes as wide as dinner plates. Harry replayed his words in his mind and dropped his gaze quickly to the floor.

"You weren't supposed to know that," he said quietly. A strange sadness began to creep up on him but was broken in an instant as both girls threw their arms around him, sniffing.

It was a very confused Ron who emerged from his changing room a few moments later. As the situation was explained to him his reaction was very similar to what the girls' had been. This time, however, Harry found that at least they were on his side. As the final piece of information was revealed, Ron's eyes took on a distant look and he seemed very concerned.

"Ron," Harry said, "It's okay. I made this choice a long time ago. The money was to be split evenly between Hermione, the Weasleys, and Hogwarts for scholarships. I've never had a second thought about it because you're all my family. There isn't anyone else I'd want to have it."

"Yes, well, you're not going anywhere!" said Ginny fiercely. "And if you think otherwise, Harry Potter, I swear I'll hex you into next week. We've already had *this* talk!"

Harry laughed a little, which deflated her anger and brought back her blush. He'd never seen her look prettier and the urge to kiss her nearly overcame the fact that they were in public. He decided to save it for later.

As they made their way back into the open street, it was with heavy bags, light conversation, and much laughter. While they had finally agreed to let Harry pay for their robes, they insisted on paying for lunch. They had an enjoyable meal sitting outside on a balcony overlooking the wooded river that ran through town. It was all so perfect that for a few hours Harry even forgot that he hadn't wanted to go in the first place.

A few hours later after having Apparated back to their house, Harry found himself recalling the intense look on Ginny's face from earlier with some anticipation. He slyly suggested a walk in the woods and she accepted happily, even under the angry glare of her brother. Fortunately, Ron was quickly and thoroughly distracted by Hermione, who led him into the sun room for some "reading".

Being late afternoon it was still quite light outside. A warm sun shone down on them at an angle through the trees, lighting up the path here and there with its soft touch. The scent of the forest beckoned them in and they walked together for some time, laughing and smiling. Harry wondered how he had ever thought it was better being on his own. The cares of the world seemed all but forgotten and there was only Ginny. He loved the way her eyes glittered when she laughed and the way her mouth curved up just a bit when she was being playful.

Coming across a secluded sunny spot, Harry conjured up a blanket and they sat down. He laid his head in her lap while she played gently with his hair. His eyes closed and he felt himself starting to drift off when his glasses were pulled carefully from his face.

He looked up to see Ginny's bright eyes very close to his as she kissed his forehead gently. With surprising grace he suddenly found her on the ground next to him. Her arms wrapped slowly around him and her lips planted a kiss firmly on his. She smelled so good that he wondered if there were any way to stay like this forever.

As their kiss prolonged it grew in intensity. Harry wasn't sure how he was drawing breath but it didn't seem to matter. His hands traveled over Ginny's back and neck and her kisses ran a trail across his cheek to his ear. As his lips found hers again his tongue explored her mouth hungrily and she grasped tightly at his back. He felt himself wanting more but knew he should hold back. They rolled quickly over and Ginny lay on top of him gasping for breath. Harry slipped his hand under her shirt to rest on the bare skin of her back and she smiled with her eyes closed before launching into a whole new level of kissing.

It was then that it happened.

As if conjured from nowhere, buckets upon buckets of ice water appeared in the air above them, all releasing their contents simultaneously onto the unsuspecting couple below. The resulting torrent of ice water effectively stopped all movement for a second in time, before...

"AHHH!" screamed Ginny, jumping off of Harry in a leap he hadn't thought physically possible.

A moment later, as the ice water pooled under him, Harry leapt up with the same disregard for physics, nearly materializing into the air opposite Ginny.

Her hair was dripping wet and sticking to her neck and she was soaked to the bone from head to toe. He also couldn't help but notice that she looked absolutely mortified. Having received much less of the shower himself he pulled his wand and took a step toward her.

"Here, let me—"

"No!" she cried.

But she didn't stop crying. Not taking a moment to obey her wish, he pulled her into his arms. She feebly tried to push him away but he held tight and she finally gave in. It was several minutes before he got up the nerve to speak.

"So... what was that?" he asked, the confusion evident in his voice.

"Harry, I'm so sorry!" she said. Her voice was muffled as she spoke into his shirt but he understood her every word.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded silently.

"Can you... can't we? What happened just now?"

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling away from him and sitting down on the now-wet blanket. "It was a long time ago... not that it changes how I feel... I should have told you."

"Wait," he said. He stepped around her and applied a powerful drying spell to the blanket and their clothes before conjuring up another blanket to wrap around them as he sat down.

She looked up at him and he could see the red in her eyes. "Harry, I should have told you this from the start. My mum, she taught me this spell to... well, to keep me from getting carried away with a boy."

Her eyes held a pleading look now and Harry nodded for her to continue.

"It's really simple, just buckets of ice water that appear and dump themselves on you when you get... when you go beyond where you want to. Only, you decide where that point is at the time you cast the spell on yourself. I did it years ago, not that it changes how I feel now, but... oh, Harry. I'll do anything you want to. It's easy to reverse. Please, please don't be mad at me."

She looked as if one word from him could crush her and so he smiled gently.

"Ginny, you mean everything to me. I-I've never been happier than during my time with you, both before we were going out and after. You make me want to live, so I can have the possibility of a future. What we were doing was... more intense than anything we've done before. I knew I should have stopped but I couldn't, and so I'm glad your spell worked. There are things that I believe that might seem... old-fashioned, but I think I've just been made even happier because I think you feel the same way."

She had the beginnings of a smile on her face as she slid over to him and rested her head on his shoulder.

I love you, Harry, she thought. She didn't even notice the slight twist of his head at her words, and she couldn't see the incredible smile that appeared on his face a moment later.

Chapter Eleven

Facing Voldemort

As the second to last week of their stay came to a close, Ginny thought back to that moment when her Purity spell had first been engaged. It took a week before she could properly look Harry in the eye again and not until her birthday did she actually believe he was okay with what had happened.

As she sat, she fingered the delicate and beautiful new gold chain that hung around her wrist. Well, it wasn't so much a chain as it was a series of tiny interlaced golden leaves. Harry gave the bracelet to her on her birthday when they made a special promise together. Though they might each wish for more now and then, they would be happy with their physical relationship as it was because they both truly wanted to wait. Not until the war was over would they consider their relationship in a different light or would they reconsider the Purity spell. Even then it would probably only be with respect to renew it until their wedding, though this was never spoken aloud.

They had talked about it for some time before agreeing not to take things further. When Harry produced the small chain from his pocket and hooked it around her wrist she knew that there were more important things in life anyway. He told her it looked delicate but was actually goblin-made and unbreakable. They decided it would stand for their unspoken vow and she thought it couldn't be more beautiful or perfect.

Harry had done something wonderful for her birthday, too, with some help from Ron and Hermione. Taking a leaf from her book, he'd explained that he would be her house-elf for the day, much to the chagrin of Hermione. Though not nearly as romantic as Harry's birthday, they had both thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Harry had cooked three perfect meals for her, Muggle-style – which amazed Ron – and he had taken her for a long walk. They even napped together on the sofa in the afternoon. All of this was especially difficult because, though the Teacher liked her very much, he hadn't given them the day off for her birthday. All in all, the couple was just happy to be together and make every day count.

As they walked hand-in-hand back from lunch, Harry watched Ginny out of the corner of his eye. He was always amazed that she chose him. She, who was beautiful enough to give Fleur a run for her money, could have any boy, and yet she chose him. He smiled contentedly as he watched her hair blow in the breeze. Though caught up in a ponytail today for practicing, he still was captivated by it. Unfortunately, they reached the door in only a few minutes and he could be absorbed no more. He had promised to give his all while they practiced and he had been as good as his word.

"Good afternoon, I hope you had a nice lunch," John said as they entered. "We're not done yet today but I wanted to take a moment and talk about next week's plans. Let's sit down in the library for a few minutes." He gestured toward the corner of the room.

Harry always enjoyed the library. It wasn't anything like the one at school, that was for sure. It was quiet and very, very comfortable. He could sit all day and read without worrying he would be interrupted. One of the most frustrating things about Hogwarts' library was the fact that Madam Pince followed everyone around like a vulture making sure they weren't talking too loud or breathing too hard around her books. John told them many times that books can be replaced and they shouldn't worry about having food while they read. Hermione always looked scandalized when he said this.

As they sat down he began to speak. "First, I want to briefly review what you've learned so far this summer. We've consistently worked on your ability to allow others into your mind. I believe this will be critical to the downfall of Voldemort, Harry, because you'll be able to combine your magic with your friends. You are a powerful wizard but this will give you both power *and* longevity, which Voldemort won't be expecting and likely can't match.

"I've also had you doing physical exercise every day. You grumbled at first but if you look back on it now, you should see the difference in your endurance. You learned how to use light balls for illuminating the battle field and we talked some about battlefield tactics. You also learned not to trust your eyes entirely. The things you see around you might not be real and you must be cautious.

"You have learned how to put up an anti-Disapparation ward and hold prisoners to great effect. Ron and Harry, you have learned how to absorb an incoming spell. That's no small feat, I can tell you. Hermione and Ginny, you've learned some important battlefield healing spells. They may very well mean the difference between life and death, victory and defeat.

"We have duelled countless times and you seem to be learning new hexes every day, though where you're getting them from I haven't a clue!" He smiled as they all looked pointedly at Hermione, who was thumbing absently through a reference on hexes and curses. She looked up and smiled slyly.

"Most importantly, you four have learned to work together. It is *not* an accident that you are friends and together you fill all of the gaps to make a perfect unit.

"Next week I plan to have you spend some time learning how to disappear; how to hide yourselves and how to become nearly invisible. The last day or two we'll spend dueling and I may have some special guests here to help."

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked with a hopeful grin.

"Well, since you ask, yes, he will be one of the wizards helping out."

"Bet I don't stand a chance against Dumbledore," Harry added, "but I sure want to try!"

They all laughed and in a few more minutes it was time to get started again. The afternoon was full of mock-battles, dueling, tactics, and pseudo-healing. To exercise Hermione and Ginny's knowledge, the Teacher randomly called out an injury upon one of them. That person had to continue fighting while injured and hope that one of the girls could help.

Fortunately for Harry, broken bones were nothing new and he barely let them slow him down. At the same time, he was becoming quite adept at firing a barrage of spells and then Apparating quickly across the room.

During a pause in the action while they caught their breath and accepted praise and critiques from the Teacher, Ginny caught everyone's attention with her observation of Harry's performance.

"Could you repeat that?" asked John.

"I said, I think Harry's continuing to fight *while* he's Apparating," she said as she caught her breath.

"What do you mean?" asked Ron. "That's impossible. Isn't it?"

They all looked toward the Teacher.

"I've never heard of it being done but that certainly doesn't make it impossible. Harry, would you like to try it for us?"

Harry was standing off to one side looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Er, I guess," he said. "What do you want me to do, exactly?"

"Just Apparate across the room and try to fire off a spell or two at the same time. I mean to say, after you have Disapparated but before you appear again."

Harry shrugged and began to turn. He was gone before he made half a turn. In the split second before he appeared again, two jets of light rocketed across the room as if emanating from

thin air and struck Ron and Ginny down. As Harry reappeared, Hermione cancelled the tickling charm he had cast on his friends and helped them up.

Harry pocketed his wand and turned toward the Teacher, his expression curious but turning to wide-eyed disbelief as he took in the scene. The Teacher was smiling thoughtfully with one hand on his rough chin and the other twirling his wand distractedly.

"Harry," he motioned toward the others, "it appears you were able to accomplish the task, and with extreme ease."

"That's an understatement," muttered Ron quietly.

"Quite," added Ginny, dusting herself off.

"You managed to charm your friends exactly as I asked you to," said John. "Have you done this before, Harry? Did you know you could do it?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "I just... did it. I didn't think about it. That's how I've been dueling all along. If Voldemort can't keep track of me then it's a lot easier for me to go on the offensive. I'm just trying to get the advantage."

"Harry, I've just had an idea!" cried Hermione. Harry couldn't help but smile at the look on her face. He'd seen it a hundred times before when she came up with, what he was generally loathe to admit, were great ideas.

"Harry, you're getting so good at Apparating that you can use it against Voldemort to—"

"I know," Harry cut in.

"No wait," she continued, "the only thing that's bad is that he can still *bear* where you're appearing. If we had a spell that could imitate firecrackers, or even had some real firecrackers, Voldemort would never be able to find you. You would be impossible to find unless you stood still for very long."

"Fire-whats?" asked Ron curiously.

"Firecrackers," answered John with a broad smile. "That's a wonderful idea, Hermione. Firecrackers, Ron, are these small exploding devices that Muggles play with sometimes. They explode with a loud crack when you light them off. The sound would probably be very similar to the sound of someone Apparating. And, as Hermione has observed, if Voldemort can't find you by the sound of your Apparating, you're in a much better position to attack him. At the same time I imagine he'll also be dueling with at least three of your friends, as well."

Harry turned slightly pale at this and shook his head. "I wish—"

"Harry," Ginny said softly, "we've been through this before. We're going to be there with you. We're going to help you because we want to."

And because we love you. I love you, she spoke to him in her mind. He seemed to be resigned to her words but she could tell he still wasn't happy about it.

"Well, I think that's enough for today. Why don't you all go and have a nice dinner. I would say to take the weekend off but it would be better if you didn't. Harry, on Monday I'd like to see you do this again. So, if you don't mind, practice a bit this weekend, all right?"

He merely nodded as he aimed his footsteps toward Ginny. She waited for him and accepted his arms around her. She closed her eyes and reached out to him with her senses. He seemed tired but no more so than usual. She concentrated a little harder and began to feel some disquiet within him.

"I know you're concerned about us but we really have been through this before. As a matter of fact, it's really got nothing to do with you." She pulled away from him and took his hand, starting to walk toward the door. "We have to win, not just for ourselves but for everyone in the Wizarding world. Even if you weren't the one chosen to defeat Voldemort, would you still be here?"

He nodded thoughtfully and they paused at the door.

"See? It's not just you, Harry. We love you and want to do everything in our power to help you, but that's really only half the reason we're here. We *have* to defeat Voldemort, no matter what it takes. We'd be here anyway, just like you would."

He smiled and she knew she was starting to get through to him.

"How is it that you know me so well?" he asked.

She smiled a little and blushed, knowing that it wasn't just the simple question it seemed on the surface.

"You already know, Harry. I've been watching you from a distance since my first year. Whatever you care about, I care about. That's what love is, right?"

He nodded, seemingly lost for words, and then pulled her into a hug. She thought she heard some sniffing but suddenly they were walking again. They walked in the comfortable silence of two people in love until they separated at their house.

"See you in a bit for dinner?" he asked tentatively.

She almost giggled at his question. "Of course. Going to miss me, are you?"

He turned a bit red and ducked his head, but his smile was still evident.

Of course I'll miss you. I love you, he thought.

She returned his thoughts in kind, and they each went their own way.

When Monday morning came, Harry groaned as his charmed alarm clock went off. He didn't have one of those fancy contraptions that play music or yell at you to wake up. No, his just buzzed annoyingly until you got fed-up enough to turn it off.

One week left, he told himself. It was a strange feeling. After an exhausting weekend of practice he wasn't ready to face another week. At the same time, though, he knew it was the last and he didn't want it to end. It was freedom, living here. Even though he was preparing himself to fight center-stage in a war against the most evil dark wizard of all time, the reality of it still seemed very far off.

He rolled out of bed, putting on his slippers and dressing gown. Ron was either still asleep or eating breakfast already, because their shared bathroom was dark. Harry took a long, hot shower and tried to ready his mind for the day ahead. Given that it was to be the start of their last week, he was sure there wouldn't be any skiving-off or lazing about. There was work to be done and at the end of the week they would try to prove themselves against the greatest sorcerer in the world: none other than their own Professor Dumbledore.

That thought seemed to spur him on and he dressed quickly and ran down the stairs. A quick breakfast later, and once again holding hands with Ginny, they began their walk to the main house. Harry found he preferred walking to Apparating and saved the latter for inclement weather days. He glanced at Ginny and was surprised to see her looking slightly nervous. He could even feel her tension in the air around them.

He squeezed her hand and gave her a small smile. "What is it?"

"I don't know," she answered. "It's partly that... well, I'm not ready to leave here yet. And then..." She looked up into his eyes and he felt her magic shift around him. He stopped walking.

"What else?"

She looked at the ground. "Maybe I'm just being silly, but I don't like to think about what's going to happen when we leave. I'm... I'm going back to Hogwarts and you're going... somewhere, probably Hogsmeade, and we won't get to be together like we are here. I just... don't know what to think about that." She raised her eyes to his again.

He looked back at her with something in his eyes she'd never seen before, something warm and gentle, and meant only for her. But his voice had stopped working, and he closed his eyes for a moment to collect himself. His mind was jammed and his senses seemed to feel everything around them. It was overwhelming.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said scratchily. "I can't imagine myself without... everyone. I know I get to live with Ron and Hermione, and they're great, but..." He cast his gaze away from her for a moment, then decided he couldn't say what he was feeling and turned it back to her. His tone was different though, deep and caring, and there was passion in his eyes.

"How are you doing? Are you worried about this year, in school, I mean?" He searched her eyes, and could almost see the answer.

"Yes," her voice quavered, "I... I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You'll be the last one at Hogwarts," he said slowly, "are you, er, are you going to miss Ron... and Hermione?"

Harry couldn't seem to help himself. It was like he was grasping at something that he wanted to exist, but he couldn't tell what it was. He could feel it pulling at his heart but couldn't describe it in words if his life had depended on it. His palms were starting to sweat and he felt warm and shaky.

She found his eyes again and forced him to look at her with her soft smiling gaze, then she moved her head and rested her temple gently against his cheek. Her hair shimmered in the morning light with a thousand shades of red, and suddenly, unexplainably, he wanted very much to hold her like this forever. When she spoke again, her voice was smooth, and took on a tone which Harry had never heard before. It was something like warmth and tenderness and it was so real it made him shiver.

"Harry," she murmured and he warmed at the way she said his name, "it's you. It's always been you, and I'm going to miss *you*." She continued quickly, "There won't be a day that I won't think of you... Promise... promise me you'll think of me?" She lifted her head and looked at him.

He could see the pure vulnerability she had opened up to him and struggled to find a way to express his feelings. He now knew what he was feeling. It was what had been missing for so long, what had been taken away from him so many years ago. It swelled in him like a crescendo of beautiful music, like the sunrise he had shared with her at the Burrow. It lifted his very soul, encouraged him, and gave him peace like he had never known before. Ginny, whom he had known for so many years, now it felt so right holding her tight against him. It felt so right he couldn't even find the words to tell her.

I love you, he thought. *And I won't stop thinking of you, no matter where I am or what I'm doing.*

"I love you, too," she murmured.

They stood there together for several minutes until Ron and Hermione came along, on their way to the main house.

"Hi, Ginny! Hi, Harry!" Hermione said as they approached. "Our last week," she sighed. "I wonder what it'll be like. I can't wait to duel with Dumbledore, and then there's still the Ministry Ball on Saturday. That should be fun!" She glanced sideways at Ron, who's ears seemed to turn a light shade of pink.

"Yeah," said Harry, brightening up a bit, "the ball. That *is* going to be fun." He never took his eyes off Ginny and he felt her magic shift again, this time becoming bright and warm around him.

"Let's go. Let's go get ready to kick some Voldemort arse," she said. They all laughed. It was becoming normal practice for them to discuss Harry's defeat of Voldemort in such light terms. It was a way of keeping their purpose in mind but also not letting things get too dreary.

As Harry's Monday morning intuition had been of hard work and busy preparation, so were their lessons the next three days. They barely left the training room, except to eat and sleep and even Hermione was starting to get a little snippy with everyone.

"Okay, we're done for today," the Teacher said late Thursday evening. "Tomorrow will complete your training day here this summer. You'll be dueling and fighting mock battles with Dumbledore, Remus Lupin, and Nymphadora Tonks."

"Remus and Tonks are coming, too?" Harry asked. His excitement was barely controlled and seemed to be contagious. Hermione and Ginny glanced at each other and smiled, while Ron thumped Harry on the back.

"Give 'em everything we've got, won't we, Harry?" Ron said, with a clever look on his face. Harry could only agree.

The Teacher continued. "While you won't have time to get a good night's sleep in the heat of battle, I've decided to let you sleep in tomorrow morning anyway. We'll begin at ten o'clock sharp. Be prepared for anything."

Harry's smile faltered for a moment when he saw the mischievous look in his mentor's eyes but then he let himself be led from the room and back to his own house, forgetting what he had seen. They ate a late dinner and all sat together in the sun room reminiscing about the summer and speculating on what sort of activities they would be doing the next two days. It was a long, quiet evening and Harry enjoyed the time with his friends immensely, knowing that there wouldn't be many more moments like this.

As the sun dipped below the horizon and darkness fell, they went their separate ways. Harry collapsed into his bed and was asleep within moments, all thoughts pushed aside for the enjoyment of a quiet night's sleep.

Chaos reigned the next morning as only Hermione remembered to reset her alarm while the others simply charmed them off. Harry awoke to shouts from the hallway outside his room to get up and get dressed because it was now quarter to ten.

He never preferred the Cleaning charm to a hot shower – it was far too uncomfortable – but this morning he ran his wand up and down, shivering at the scrubbing feeling all over his body. He threw on some clean clothes and ran down the stairs. In the kitchen, Hermione and Ginny were already sipping juice and eating some breakfast. Harry blushed slightly as Ginny offered him a piece of toast. He took the proffered portion and munched it absently as he rummaged through the refrigerator.

"Honestly, you're as bad as Ron sometimes," Hermione said from behind the door Harry was holding open. He jammed the piece in his mouth and stood up.

"Mmff?"

The two girls burst into laughter and Harry couldn't help but grin. Whether they would believe it, he knew exactly what their response would be and had done it on purpose. He pulled a few pieces of melon from a magically sealed container and sat down next to Ginny, swallowing his last bite of toast.

"Good morning," he said and kissed her quickly on the cheek. She grinned and turned to him with a dreamy look.

"Good morning to you, too."

They were both aroused from their greetings by a muffled giggle from across the table.

"Something you'd like to add, Hermione?" Harry asked with a smile.

"I can't help it, you two are just so *cute* together. I can't believe it took you so long in the first place."

They were saved a response by the entrance of Ron, who muttered something about 'not missing breakfast' before opening the refrigerator and pulling out several boxes of food.

“Ron,” said Hermione, “we only have two minutes ‘til we have to leave. Exactly how are you going to eat all that?”

He gave her an annoyed look and said simply, “Eat and walk, Hermione. Eat and walk.”

It was some time before their laughter finally subsided and as they walked out the door, Harry was thankful for a moment of laughter. They walked slowly toward the main house, their tension and nerves increasing with each step.

“So what d’you reckon?” Harry asked. “Take it as it comes? Or plan ahead?”

“I’d rather plan ahead,” answered Ron, “but this is Dumbledore... and Lupin and Tonks. They don’t even have to think about what they’re going to do.”

“Yeah, well, neither does Voldemort,” said Harry.

Now it was Hermione who answered. “Yes, Harry, but Voldemort’s evil. Pure evil. We already know what he’s going to do. He’s going to find every possible way to hurt us. In some ways that’s *easier* to deal with than what we’ll get today. I mean, Dumbledore’s got such a wide range of spells to use. I don’t even know where to begin.” She growled in frustration which made Harry smile slightly. He didn’t have to feel half so concerned because she was concerned enough for all of them.

When they reached the door to the main training room they took a collective breath and entered as a tight group, wands drawn. It had occurred to Harry as they walked that the battle could begin as soon as they entered the door and they wanted to be ready.

Thankfully all was calm and Harry looked around and spotted his old Headmaster among a group of four gathered at the library door. The group turned to face them and even from across the room their warm smiles were obvious. The foursome picked up their steps and in a moment were greeting the others with handshakes and smiles. As he reached Lupin, Harry almost laughed out loud as he shook his old teacher’s hand, realizing that the other hand was firmly held by Tonks. He knew he’d have to ask more about that later.

After a few minutes of greeting, John cleared his throat loudly, indicating quiet. They all turned, some sitting down on the floor and others, like Dumbledore, conjuring up comfortable, squashy chairs to sit on.

“First of all, to our newcomers, thank you so much for answering my request for assistance. It is with great appreciation for your abilities that I asked you here today and I have no doubt that you will have need of your abilities before the day is done.” He looked at the four teenagers with a gleam in his eye and Harry couldn’t help but notice an old familiar twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes, too.

Turning back to the adults, John began again. “Be warned. These four have learned a great deal this summer.” He paused for a moment and then spoke very slowly. “They have learned more than you realize and you would do best not to underestimate them, for that will be *Voldemort’s* downfall.”

His eyes turned to Harry, scrutinizing him with the most minute detail. “Some of the magic they possess I have never before encountered and will probably go into the history books as entirely unique.” He paused for a moment, surveying them all. “The group of four,” he whispered, then shook himself back into the present and smiled.

“At first, I was going to participate today but then I thought better of it. I decided I’m too close to the situation and know your abilities too well. It would give me an unfair advantage, which I’m not sure I could wholly repress.”

“But John,” interrupted Hermione earnestly, “that would be all the better. We don’t know who we’re going into battle against. Wouldn’t it be better for us to fight with the greatest disadvantage? That way we would have to use our skills in every extreme because we know you’re aware of them. This is supposed to be as real as possible, right? Voldemort will use any advantage given to him and we should try to be prepared.”

John was thoughtful for a moment and then nodded his head slowly. "You know, Hermione, I think you're right, which is certainly not unusual. So unless the others have any objection, I may change my mind and join your illustrious Headmaster." He turned to each person in the room and received no negative response.

"All right, I'll participate. The rules of engagement are simple. Stay within the boundaries of the peninsula. You may use the land, the catacombs and the houses. Since we're in decent company I'm sure none of you will use Dark Magic but that won't stop your enemy from using it. Now, does anyone have any last questions or thoughts? Yes, we will stop at dinner time, Ron."

After the laughter died down, Lupin spoke. "Harry, even though we're your friends, I don't want you to think that way today. If you have the opportunity, take it, even against someone who is down. The Death Eaters show no mercy. I'm not saying that you *shouldn't* show mercy, I'm only trying to say that it should appear in the form of containment, not murder." His last words were spoken with a quiet and bitter voice.

"On the other hand, Harry, though we know you well and care for you deeply, we will likewise press any advantage we have. As I understand it, the purpose of this exercise is to prepare you for battle against Voldemort. He will use all possible magic to hurt you," he paused with a grimace, "and we will do the same. I apologize in advance."

With this statement the mood in the room became somber. Each person looked the other in the eye, trying to decide if they really had it in them to hurt someone they love. Finally, John stepped forward again.

"Each of us will carry one of these portkeys. Should anything too serious happen, you need only press and rotate the handle. It will recall all of us to this room. You will hear a notice when it is time to stop for dinner. Then we'll relax and discuss what you did right and what you could have done... uh, differently."

Harry looked around the room. It was now or never.

"Okay. I'm ready," he said.

By early afternoon Harry was dirty, tired, and discouraged. Aside from one quick skirmish and many lengthy stretches of boredom, not much had happened yet. In some ways it was harder than an outright fight.

Immediately upon setting out that morning the four had separated; Ron and Hermione had set off into the woods while Harry and Ginny tentatively entered the catacombs. Having been unwilling to separate at first, Harry changed his mind when Hermione reminded him that they could all still work together. They had a gift of communication that Harry had all but forgotten about.

Through most of the morning and into the afternoon they talked off and on trying to keep track of their enemy's location. Ron and Hermione had had a few brief spats with Lupin and Tonks but nothing else to speak of. Harry and Ginny had sometimes glimpsed and heard the swish of a cloak around corners in front of them but had yet to encounter anything *really* interesting.

It was in this state of boredom that Harry suddenly felt a substantial and apparently unfounded dread. It crept up on him like a quiet darkness and slipped its smooth fingers around his heart. He turned slowly to Ginny.

Her face was solemn as if seeing a great evil elsewhere in the world. A light sheen appeared on her forehead and Harry squeezed her hand.

"Do you feel that?" she asked in a hoarse whisper, her eyes already seeing the truth on his face.

"Yeah," he whispered. "What... what do you think it is?"

"I don't know. Harry, I'm a little scared. I think maybe that's not what you're looking for in a girlfriend, but... there it is."

He smiled grimly as he laced his fingers into hers and lifted his wand slightly.

"I love you, anyway," he said softly, just to reassure her. Then slowly, so as not to attract any notice, he raised a shield around them. It was very tight, almost invisible except around their hands and faces.

With his shield in place and his wand raised, Harry felt slightly calmer, though he couldn't shake the feeling of dread in his stomach. He squeezed Ginny's hand and she seemed to understand him, though her hand shook slightly. Gathering up his strength, he cast a powerful spell down the hallway and through the very rock of the walls around them. It reverberated mutely with a deep bass tone.

Harry's eyes shown for a moment as if seeing the very makeup of the catacombs and all of their secrets. He breathed in a muffled gasp.

"He's here!" he said, hoarsely. His own hands started to shake.

"Who's here?" Ginny's asked next to him.

"It's him. It's Voldemort! I thought he wasn't supposed to be able to get here! The peninsula is impenetrable!"

At that very moment a ball of fire shot straight at them from down the hall. They dropped to the ground and rolled against one wall. As the fire blazed past them its light somehow seemed to linger behind and the hall remained illuminated in a deathly red.

From the floor they raised their eyes, suddenly and fearfully aware of a long, drawn face approaching them. It had eyes like a snake and no hair covered its scarred head. There was no mistaking who it was. Voldemort had found them.

Without a second to hesitate, Harry jumped to his feet and launched several high-speed spells down the hall. At the same time he yelled for Ginny to run. She didn't need telling twice and together the two of them set off at a sprint.

Not twenty yards down the hall they jumped through an unlocked and previously unnoticed door. Without even turning around they slammed it shut and paused, panting for breath.

"Lord Voldemort always knows!" a voice hissed from the shadows behind them.

Before they could even register shock, Ginny screamed and with a flourish she blasted the door back off its hinges. Their hands gripped together as they tore off down the hall again.

"You can't run forever!" a vicious voice cackled far behind them. They jumped into another open room. Harry scanned the walls around them with his lit wand as Ginny sealed the door.

"I think we're trapped, Harry!" she cried as she began to search the room.

"Maybe we could blast our way through another wall," Harry suggested. He was starting to feel a bit of panic set in now that they had a moment to catch their breath.

"Harry, wait, what if... what if he's not real?"

Harry almost tripped over himself.

"What... what do you mean?"

She spoke slowly, apparently thinking out loud. "You remember the last time we were down here? There were all those Death Eaters. They weren't real. Maybe Voldemort's not real."

"Okay, but if that's true, what do we do about it? Moon him?"

Ginny giggled. "No, I don't think that will help but it's something along those lines. Maybe we just need to believe that he's not here. Or maybe it's a Boggart. Maybe it's John pretending to be Voldemort."

"Yeah, well, if it's John he's got one hell of a Halloween costume."

A thud and a crack at the door stole their attention.

"I think we're about to find out," Ginny whispered.

A moment later the door blasted in on them, throwing a shower of splinters through the air. A tall figure glided over the rubble and came to a stop not more than ten feet from them. Its forked tongue tasted the air and its slotted eyes opened slightly, staring at them with an insane glare.

"*Riddikulus!*" Harry shouted, nearly petrified with fear.

Voldemort only laughed, his face contorting into an ugly sneer. "Not today, Mr. Potter!"

"*Accio* mask!" Ginny screamed.

Again, nothing. Only the gleam of red in the Dark Lord's eyes.

"Perhaps you would like to try something else?" he hissed. "Or perhaps your pitiful magic is no match for me."

Harry gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on his wand, steeling himself for one last possibility. "You're ridiculous," he said, "and I think you should give up, because I've already won."

Ginny stared at him in amazement while Voldemort hissed violently. Between them, Harry extended his hand slightly, unnoticed by either of them.

"That's right!" continued Harry. "I've already won." He closed his eyes. "You can't beat me. If you destroy me you'll die, too. If I kill you, I'll go on living. Either way, you won't live to see the outside of this room."

With a sudden movement, Harry lifted his wand into the air and pulled it back violently downward. Red eyes, green eyes, and brown eyes all watched as a crack appeared in the ceiling and with an enormous *boom!* a boulder fell, crushing Voldemort beneath it, ending things before they could even begin.

Harry breathed out deeply and Ginny jumped to his side, grabbing his arm to support him.

"Harry? What did you do?" she asked in astonishment.

Harry pocketed his wand and scrubbed his face with his hands. He was about to start his explanation when a horn sounded. It was muted, as if many miles away, but they knew what it meant. They were done. The game was over for today.

"C'mon, I'll explain later," Harry said.

As if the dark, wet tunnels and closed rock chambers were obeying some hidden command, a dim light filled every room and hall as they walked. It seemed to be leading them and Harry was fairly sure he trusted it to get them back to the start.

They climbed uphill for a few minutes and then came to a narrow stair set deep into the wall. Voices sounded from far above and Harry gestured Ginny to start first. She accepted with a tired smile and began to climb up.

With a crunch, Ron bit off a piece of carrot and began chewing. This, of course, didn't deter him in the least from the story he was relating with great animation. Hermione, seeing that her boyfriend was doing an excellent impersonation of a pig, glared at him with such a fierce gaze that he stopped talking almost immediately. With a nature beyond what Harry had ever comprehended before, Ron apologized and swallowed his food before continuing.

"So I was fighting with Remus from across the path when Tonks jumped out. Hermione took her down with one hex. One hex! Can you believe it? I was going to compliment her when this git," he stuck his thumb out at Remus, "decides it's time to really start fighting. Now, I'm just getting warmed up and I start launching curses and hexes so fast I thought my tongue was going to

get tied up. He got me with a particularly nasty stinging hex and then Hermione got all fired up. You should have seen it! She was great!”

Ron looked at Hermione with a silly grin and Harry could see her face turning red.

“Well, I wasn’t that great. I just used a standard leg-locking curse mixed with *Tarantallegra*. The result was kind of... surprising.”

“I’ll say,” added Remus with a smile. “I won’t be able to walk properly for days.”

“I’m so sorry!” said Hermione, looking at him with pity. “I probably should have come up with something else but—“

“No, you did very well, Hermione,” the older man said. He turned to the group. “Then she conjured up some quite strong cords and bound me up. Quite fine work, I tell you. I must learn that, Hermione, if you have time before we leave.”

“So, meanwhile,” Ron continued, “Tonks is sneaking around this huge tree when Hermione goes back to start looking for her. Just when she’s bringing up her wand at Hermione’s back, I got her.”

“What’d you use?” asked Harry.

“His fist,” answered Tonks, still nursing a bruised cheekbone. Remus looked at her and gently touched the purple spot.

“I could fix that up in just a moment if you’d let me, you know.”

She merely took his hand and smiled at him. The others looked away and went back to their food. Harry found himself getting more and more absorbed in his steak when he caught his own name in the conversation.

“Harry took out Voldemort,” Ginny was saying. “I don’t quite know how he did it, or really what exactly was even happening. Harry? What *did* you do?”

Harry finished his bite and swallowed hard. He didn’t really feel like talking about it, if he was perfectly honest with himself. Voldemort’s face still shone red in his thoughts and he shuddered at the memory.

“I... well, Ginny had a theory that it wasn’t really Voldemort at all, that it was some sort of figment of our imaginations. That would explain why he just appeared in the first room,” he glanced at Ginny, who seemed struck by the thought. “We tried *Riddikulus*, in case it was a Boggart, and we tried to take his mask, in case it was just one of you in disguise,” he smiled apologetically at John and Dumbledore who merely nodded in understanding.

“I finally just decided to see what I could feel of his magic. I, er... I can feel Ginny’s magic, you know? So I thought maybe I could tell if it was really him. I distracted him with some crazy talk and tested the room while he wasn’t paying attention. I figured a powerful wizard like him would be easy to find. What I got was nothing, nothing at all. I could feel Ginny really strong next to me but there was no one else.

“That just proved to me that it wasn’t even real. Then, I don’t know... I broke the ceiling and crushed him with the rock. That’s when the horn came and we were done.”

John stared at him. “You just broke the ceiling and crushed him?” he said faintly.

Harry’s face reddened slightly. “Well, yeah. I had to do something. If he hadn’t come into the room at all I was going to blast a hole in the wall. There was a big room next door and I think we could have gotten back to the main tunnel through it.” He took a bite of his potatoes.

They all stared at him. Dumbledore recovered quickly and seemed to almost laugh.

“Harry! You really are a remarkable young man. I hope you’ll consider teaching one day. You would be the best in the school.”

Harry forced a smile and went back to eating while the others talked. Only two months ago he would have balked at the thought of teaching. He hadn’t allowed himself any thoughts of life beyond Voldemort. But after letting Ginny into his life, he was starting to reconsider a few things. It went sorely against the grain but he had to admit that there were still some things in life

that he wanted to do. He wanted to know what it would be like to try out for a professional Quidditch team. He wanted to know what it would be like to enter a classroom and have all the students listen to his every word. If he were truly honest, he wanted to know what it would be like to spend every day of the rest of his life with the red-haired girl sitting next to him.

As if sensing his mood changes, which, if he were right, she probably was, she took his hand and rubbed her thumb over his fingers. Almost immediately a soothing calm began to seep through him. He knew the feeling and loved it. Ginny's magic. She was sharing it with him and it, like she, was trying to comfort him during a difficult moment.

The rest of the evening was spent discussing their activities during the day. Each side gave detailed descriptions of their actions and they compared notes of whereabouts and plots. It turned out that Dumbledore had indeed entered the catacombs and was leading them into the depths of the rock with the intent to corner them. His plan was working quite well until the arrival of Voldemort. After much intense discussion they finally agreed that Harry and Ginny had actually handled the situation very well.

"You see, Harry," Dumbledore was saying, "if you had let your imagination run away with you, Voldemort would have won. I'm certainly proud of the thoughtfulness of Miss Weasley."

"As am I," added John. "You learned a valuable lesson today. Don't take things at their face value. Have you ever wondered why your esteemed Headmaster isn't afraid of Voldemort?"

They nodded.

"If I may, Albus?" John asked and the white-haired man nodded.

"He sees things not as they appear but as they should be, as they were meant to be seen. He sees the good and the possibility in everything. It's a wonderful trait for a teacher to have and Hogwarts is privileged to have him."

"What you mean," said Hermione, "is that instead of Voldemort, he sees Tom Riddle, as he could have been. I can understand that but how do you get around the evil that Voldemort uses?"

"With pity," Dumbledore said heavily. "He was an exceptionally bright young man. Probably the brightest ever to attend Hogwarts. His potential was limitless and he chose to waste it. Indeed, it makes me very sad. And so I pity him but I do not fear him.

"At the same time I do have one advantage that you four do not. I am old and have lived my life to the fullest. I have accomplished many things, some of them very great, if you pardon my humility, or lack thereof. I would dearly love to see Harry finally complete what he has to do so that he may move on with his life. That is the one thing that still remains. But if I were to die today, I would be prepared. I know that's a difficult concept for you but someday you'll understand. I am afraid neither of life nor death.

"Harry exhibited some of those same characteristics today, from what he described of his trials. He spoke of what he thought was crazy but perhaps it wasn't all that strange, was it, Harry?"

Harry just continued to look the old man in the eyes.

"Yes, I see that you're starting to understand me. You didn't show fear so Voldemort didn't know how to react. He only understands fear and hate. He cannot understand love and acceptance and compassion. You had him stumped, Harry, which is why you were able to get the upper hand. Yes, I believe you learned a very valuable lesson today."

There was silence for a few moments as everyone took in his words. Finally, John stood up and began to send their plates out of the room with his wand.

"Well," he sighed, "I think we've had enough for today. Will you stay around until tomorrow Albus? Remus? Tonks?"

They all nodded.

"I thought we were continuing this tomorrow," said Harry.

John paused and looked around at the other adults. They all nodded slowly to him so he turned back to Harry.

"I changed my mind today, Harry. You're as prepared as I can make you. You don't need any more teaching from me. Besides, I daresay you'll need most of the day to repack your things for the trip home. And isn't there a ball tomorrow night?"

He turned away with a wink and left the room. Remus led Tonks away with a request to look at her bruise while Dumbledore followed John into his office.

"I guess that's it, then," said Harry, looking and feeling a little disappointed.

"Yeah, but that's okay," said Ginny as she pulled him into a close hug. "You can spend tomorrow with Remus. You haven't seen him in quite a while."

The thought brightened up Harry's face and he followed his friends as they meandered back to their house.

The next morning found them with some unexpected guests. The four older adults had walked over from the main house and were enjoying comfortable seats in the sunroom when Harry found them.

"Good morning, Harry," said Remus. "I hope you slept well. No unusual dreams, or anything?"

Harry couldn't pretend he didn't know what the man was talking about.

"No, not at all," he said with a sly smile. "I had far better thoughts to occupy my mind last night."

As if on cue, Ginny walked into the room, rubbing her eyes on her jumper sleeves. She stopped suddenly and appeared surprised to see so many faces looking at her with highly amused smiles.

"Er, good morning?" she asked, stifling a yawn.

"Hi," Harry said, taking her hand. "We were just hoping that you slept well last night, that's all."

"Oh," she said as she laid her head on his shoulder with a smile. "I slept just fine, thanks."

Harry hugged her for a moment before turning back to their visitors. A sudden inspiration had just struck him.

"Have you had breakfast yet?" he asked them.

"Nope," said Tonks with a smile. "Are you offering?"

Harry laughed. "As a matter of fact, I am! Let me just see what we've got."

Remus stood to follow but Harry insisted that he stay with the others. With only a slight hesitation he sat back down.

"Harry, you know your father couldn't cook at all. Should we be worried?"

"Right," said Harry from the kitchen, "well... I learned how to cook when I lived with the Dursleys. About the only thing I got out of that place," he added.

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "I hope that someday you'll be able to forgive an old man. I should have found a better way." He sighed deeply.

Harry's head appeared around the doorframe. "There was no other way. I think I've finally accepted that. I just wish you would have come by now and then to say hi and maybe knock some sense into my aunt and uncle. Or you could have sent Remus, he's a bit less threatening, although I always enjoyed the looks on their faces when you did come by."

"I am sorry, Harry. And when this is all over I hope you and I can spend some time working together and really getting to know one another."

Harry blushed slightly and made to go back into the kitchen before turning back.

"I'd like that," he said, then disappeared.

A little magic, a little mess, and about ten minutes later, an enormous pile of serving dishes levitated their way into the sunroom onto the magically enlarged table. Ron and Hermione had come down (Ron most likely because he had smelled food) and they all sat down to eat.

The conversation was light with everyone keeping busy with the breakfast Harry had prepared. The sun was bright through the windows and with a casual flick of his wand, Harry opened them, letting a light breeze pass through the room. They ate and talked and laughed, reliving memories from the summer and their time together at school.

As Harry began to clean up, John asked the question they had all been avoiding.

"Well, Harry, when are you going back home?"

Harry sent the last plate into the kitchen where it began to wash itself along with the others. With a sigh, he plopped down into his seat again and looked at his friends. He raised his hand to his teacher and asked, "Give us just a minute?"

Harry closed his eyes and reached out with his mind to his friends. Having become somewhat accustomed to it now, he marveled for only a moment at how much easier it had become over the summer. Regular practice must really have done its good.

"Ron, Hermione, Ginny, are you all there?"

"Yes," came the silent answers from his friends.

"I, er... well, I thought maybe we'd go back to the Burrow to get ready for the ball, unless Hermione wants to see her parents today? I don't really have anywhere else to go."

"No, Harry, I told them I'd see them tomorrow. I planned on staying at the Burrow tonight and going home tomorrow."

"The invitation said we should arrive at the Ministry no later than eight tonight," said Harry.

"Well, these two are going to need a couple of hours to get ready, I expect," said Ron, nodding toward Hermione and Ginny.

Harry tried not to laugh but couldn't avoid a smile. *"So if we get to the Burrow by four that should give us plenty of time."*

"That sounds great, Harry," said Hermione.

"Works for me," added Ginny.

"All right," said Ron, *"you girls had better get to work. All Harry and I have to do is throw a few things in our trunks."*

"Watch it Ron or you'll find yourself at the wrong end of my wand." Ginny raised her wand with an evil smile. Ron just laughed.

"You see," said John to the others, "it's fortunate for the teachers of Hogwarts that these four didn't discover this bit of magic while they were at school together!"

Several enthusiastic nods and chuckles followed this comment.

"Right," said Harry, finally speaking out loud. "We're going to leave here at four. That should give us enough time to unload our things at the Burrow and get ready for the ball. By the way, are any of you going?"

"I will be the only one not attending tonight, Harry," said John. "I'm afraid I rarely leave here these days. If I were hurt or killed, the passing of this land to someone else would be very difficult. However, if you should find you need me, just let me know. My floos are always open to you."

With a few parting words the four adults began their walk back to the main house. Harry found himself standing in the kitchen with his three closest friends, wondering sadly if he would ever come back to this place again.

"You're going to miss it, aren't you?" asked Ginny.

Harry just closed his eyes and accepted Ginny's arms around his waist. She always seemed to know what he needed and he was learning to treasure these little moments they had together.

"It's okay, Harry," said Hermione, "you're not alone. Remember, we're going with you."

"Yeah," he answered, brightening up a little. "That's right. We're doing this together." He sighed. "I guess we'd better get started then."

They didn't move for a moment while the words *I couldn't do this without you* hung unspoken in the air and in their hearts. Slowly, they began to clean the house and gather their belongings.

By mid-afternoon they had cleaned the whole house and piled their trunks by the fireplace. Having lived so long with the Dursleys, Harry still marveled at how much easier everyday tasks were made with magic. Of course, he still had to rely on Ginny to make sure he didn't overlook some article of clothing and only Hermione knew the really powerful spells for cleaning the dust from every corner.

As they sat together on the porch that afternoon he smiled at how well things had turned out this summer. His two best friends had finally realized they loved each other, the Teacher had shown them more magic than even Harry had anticipated, and best of all, his arm was now filled with tingles just because he was holding hands with Ginny. He surreptitiously glanced sideways at her, still marveling at the fact that they were a couple.

After relaxing for a while they walked slowly up to the main house and said goodbye to John and the others. Their teacher seemed as content as always, wishing them luck and telling them they were always welcome in his home. In his heart, Harry felt that he would be back here someday. He couldn't place the reason why, so he just concentrated on having a few last moments of peace with his friends.

At about a quarter after four they began shoving their trunks into the blazing green flames of floo powder. Harry watched as Ron and Hermione disappeared into the flames. He promised Ginny he would be right behind her and then for a moment he was alone.

He let his eyes wander around the room for a minute, as if saying goodbye, and then stepped into the fire himself. Having never been favorable toward traveling by floo, Harry found that he hadn't missed the experience these last few months. Traveling internationally required every ounce of one's concentration and the trip seemed to last for minutes on end.

Just as he was about to give up and launch himself out of the closest fireplace, the Burrow swam into view. With a last gasping breath he fell outward toward clean air and friendly faces, not even bothering to attempt standing up. He felt his head bump against something and looked up to see Ginny's face smiling down at him. She offered a hand to help him up.

"Still not a fan of floo powder, Harry?" she asked with a grin. Then, with a sound like a great vacuum cleaner, she ran her wand over his clothes removing all evidence of their trip.

"Welcome home, Harry!" Mrs. Weasley said warmly from nearby. Harry smiled broadly at her meaning and accepted her hug with as much joy as ever.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," he said as she released him.

"Now, Harry, one of these days you're going to have to learn to call us Molly and Arthur."

Harry's forehead creased slightly as he thought he saw her wink at Ginny. To make matters worse, Ginny started blushing furiously and turned away to hide her face.

Harry was relieved from saying anything by the arrival of Mr. Weasley, who had been carrying their trunks up the stairs.

"Hello, Harry! Still don't like traveling by floo, do you 'ol boy?"

"No," Harry laughed. "As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of having Professor Dumbledore teach me how to make Portkeys. I may still fall on the ground at the end of the trip but at least I'm clean!"

"From what I've heard, you could probably do it!"

“Well,” said Mrs. Weasley, “you can go unpack some of your things, if you like. I’m whipping up a few little things here and there for you to snack on. No supper tonight. I imagine they’ll have some mighty tasty food for everyone at the ball.”

Harry turned and made for the back door. An idea had been forming in his mind for a while and he had every intention of acting on it. He hadn’t done nearly enough flying this summer on his broom.

“I’ll come with you if you want the company,” said Ginny, sneaking up behind him. He accepted happily and they walked together out to the broom shed.

The feeling of the air whipping past his face and the rush of adrenaline in his veins was wonderful. He swooped and spun and dove to his heart’s content. Ginny seemed to be having nearly as much fun, judging by her screams of delight and excited smiles.

As dusk began to fall, Harry looked at his watch and was shocked to see that it was half-past six already.

“Ginny! Look what time it is!” he shouted, pointing at his watch.

With a yelp she turned and rocketed toward the house, throwing her broom unceremoniously into the shed and waving once at Harry before disappearing inside. Harry smiled to himself as he drifted lazily above the trees. The sunset was beautiful and nothing but the knowledge that he should be getting ready, too, made him finally leave it behind.

“Where is everyone?” he asked as he stepped into the kitchen a few minutes later. Mr. Weasley was already dressed for the occasion in robes of deep brown and he looked up from the paper he was reading.

“The ladies are all upstairs doing goodness-knows-what and Ron’s in his room.”

Harry started toward the door.

“I know you need to be getting along but might I have a word, please?” the older man asked.

Harry turned and nodded, stiffening a bit as he leaned against the doorframe. He thought he knew where this was leading. With Mr. Weasley’s connections at the Ministry he was probably going to be asked if having Aurors follow him around all night was okay, or if he wouldn’t mind having a private chat with the Minister during the course of the evening.

“Now, Harry, you know I think of you as a son and that I’ve only ever had your best interests at heart.”

Harry nodded glumly. It was just as he had suspected, or maybe worse.

“Well, for a moment I’m going to have to suspend those feelings. I’m going to ask you something and I need you to give it some thought and give me an honest answer. Will you do that?”

Again, Harry nodded. His robe was starting to itch around the neck and he lifted a hand to adjust it.

“Harry, what are your intentions toward my daughter?”

Harry’s hand dropped, along with his jaw, and he walked slowly over to the table. With a hand running distractedly through his hair he debated how to answer the question. He wanted to tell the truth but he didn’t want Mr. Weasley to think he was rushing things, either.

“I... I—” he stuttered.

“Maybe first you should understand where I’m coming from. You see, Ginny’s been... she’s had a fascination with you since she was a little girl. I know the two of you became friends at school but I suspect that she never really dropped her fancy for you. She’s my only daughter and I just want to make sure she’s treated right.”

“I understand, sir, and I’ll stop dating her if that’s what you want. I know you’re probably worried that she’ll be crushed if I die fighting Voldemort.”

“Harry, that’s not—“

"But just know this first. I struggled for a long time... a very long time about my own feelings. I've felt this way about her since at least the beginning of last year, and probably years before that if I were really going to admit it." His eyes became far away as he looked back into his past, remembering her in every way he'd ever known her.

"I think it *has* been a long time that I've loved her but I can't put a date on it. This summer I finally decided to let go of my worries and see if she could still like me. It took me a long time to decide that. I was worried about what would... *will* happen when I fight Voldemort but she – and Ron and Hermione – have always said they would be there, no matter what. So I decided to give it a try."

His voice became softer and a smile crossed his face. "And look what happened. I don't think I could give her up for anything. In fact, I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you and say that I *won't* even do it for you. I apologize and I plan to leave tomorrow. If you'll put up with me for one more night, that is."

Harry wasn't sure but it looked like the older wizard was trying to gather his wits back about him.

Finally, Mr. Weasley reached a hand across the table and grasped Harry's arm. He was smiling. "Harry, you haven't disappointed me at all. In fact, you've impressed me. I don't know the battles you've been through, physically or emotionally, but I'm glad you finally decided to let her in. She's a remarkable woman and I have no doubt that you'll treat her right.

"And as far as Voldemort is concerned, we're all in danger. Ginny as much as any of the rest of us. As much as I don't like the fact that she wants to be with you in the end, I know that what she can offer you might make the difference between defeat and victory."

"So," he continued with a twitch of his smile, "you're in love with my daughter?"

Harry felt his face heat up. "D-did I say that?"

Mr. Weasley was now chuckling quietly. "You did, indeed."

"Oh. Well, I am. I guess there's no point in denying it now."

"You'll do fine, Harry. Just fight with everything that's in your heart and you'll make it through all right. And take care of Ginny, okay?"

"I will," Harry answered. Inside him something was bubbling up that he seemed to have no control over. His hands were sweating and his neck was hotter than ever. He could feel the words spilling out before he could stop them and his eyes widened as he spoke.

"I-I plan to take care of her for a long time. I'd like to take care of her forever, if I make it through all this. Er, do you think she would... I mean, if I asked her... but first I guess I should ask you. What I'm trying to say is... would you, if it were okay for me to ask her, would you let me? I guess it seems kind of soon, doesn't it? And I don't plan to anytime soon but I'd still like to know what you think because that would make all the difference in the world... I mean, if you said it was okay—"

"Relax, Harry," Mr. Weasley said with a smile. "I agree, it is too early, but at the same time, I give you my permission to ask my daughter to marry you. That is what you were trying to ask, right?"

Harry nodded. His voice seemed to have failed him and it felt as if his face was on fire.

"Good, then. Now you really *do* have something to live for. And speaking of living, you should probably go and put your robes on. It sounds like the girls are almost done and we'll be leaving soon."

The next thing Harry knew he was in Ron's room, thankful for the breeze blowing in the open window as he pulled his robes around his shoulders. He had no idea what just happened and was beginning to doubt it was all real. Perhaps he'd just fallen asleep and had a strange dream, that was all.

As he and Ron reached the bottom of the stairs, Mr. Weasley greeted them and gave Harry a small wink. Apparently Harry hadn't been dreaming after all. He flushed again and adjusted his robes needlessly. Fortunately, the girls chose that moment to appear and Harry promptly forgot everything else in the world.

He'd never seen anyone so beautiful in his life as Ginny Weasley coming down the stairs with a smile just for him. He couldn't have described the color of her dress against her skin, all he knew was that it was perfect. *She* was perfect. Most of her hair was done up on the back of her head but several curls fell down the sides and back in a way that made his heart skip. She wore long gloves that covered her arms to the elbows and slippers that looked perfectly delicate. Her dress swished musically as she descended toward him and his eyes began to hurt from lack of blinking.

"Hi, Harry," she said as their hands met.

"Hi," he said, breathlessly. "You look... amazing."

"Thank you, you look quite handsome yourself."

"Well, shall we go then?" Mr. Weasley's voice from across the room brought Harry back to his senses and he looked around.

"Hermione!" Harry cried upon seeing her. "You look wonderful!"

"Thank you, Harry. I believe Ron was trying to find those very words just now."

Ron did in fact appear to be trying to speak but without any success.

Mr. Weasley held out a piece of parchment. "For such a special occasion and with such a guest of honor, we'll be traveling tonight by Portkey. This was arranged specially for you by Dumbledore, Harry."

"Then I'll have to thank him tonight!" laughed Harry.

Then, all together, they reached out and put a finger on the magically-enhanced ball invitation. As the clock struck quarter-to-eight, Harry felt that old, slightly-less-uncomfortable-than-before feeling tug at his navel and in a flash they were gone to the Ministry.

Chapter Twelve

Into the Chamber

Harry knew something was awry the moment they touched down. Of course, it may just have been that he lost his balance and fell to the floor immediately. He was okay with falling – being used to Portkeys by now – but the fact that he landed smack-dab on top of Ginny, and in front of her parents, made him want to disappear into thin air.

Fortunately, he avoided major embarrassment because Ginny simply smiled up at him and said, “Hi, Harry!” as if it were the most normal thing in the world to her. He scrambled to his feet and then helped her up, brushing himself off in the process and trying to avoid everyone’s gaze.

“All right, come on, you lot!” Mr. Weasley said loudly, beckoning them toward a roped-off corner of the room. “Does everybody have their invitation?” he asked.

Harry fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a slightly-wrinkled piece of parchment with his name on it. Looking around, he saw that the others were doing the same.

“So this is supposed to stop Death Eaters from attacking?” asked Ron incredulously. “They’re not allowed in if they don’t have an invitation? Somehow I don’t think that’s going to stop ‘ol snake-face.”

“Ron!” Hermione chastised. “You shouldn’t—“

“No, it’s okay, Hermione,” Harry said with a chuckle. “I don’t mind. It *is* kind of silly if they’re expecting invitations to stop Death Eaters. I wonder what else they’re doing?” He began to look around the hall in earnest. He could see that there were Aurors strategically positioned in every corner making no effort to blend in. They wore their official Ministry uniforms and tried to appear imposing and alert. Amid the guests, Harry also thought he caught a glimpse of other Aurors, dressed in formal ball attire and doing their best to fit in.

“You really want to know what else they’re doing?” asked Ron, looking over Hermione’s head. “They’re checking wands.”

“Well,” said Harry, “there’s nothing wrong with my wand. We should be fine.”

“No, no. I mean they’re *collecting* wands. You check your wand at the door and get it back when you leave.”

“They’re what!” Harry shouted.

“Shh!” said Ginny. “Keep it down. Unless you want to attract the attention of those *Prophet* reporters over there.” She pointed across the room at clouds of purple smoke that appeared to be lingering over the heads of several reporters and photographers.

“Sorry,” Harry said, trying in vain to hide behind Ron.

“Right, who’s next?” a sweet, feminine voice called from the desk in front of them. Harry looked up and saw a pretty young woman in very formal dress robes, smiling expectantly at them. Suddenly an idea popped into his head. “Ginny,” he whispered, “forgive me, okay? Maybe I can help us out a bit.”

Putting on his most charming smile, he stepped forward and pulled his wand out for the woman to inspect. As he did so, he ran his hand through his hair in a jaunty way, exposing his scar from under his fringe.

“Hi,” he said casually. “I’m Harry Potter and these are my friends Ginny Weasley, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger. Nice night tonight, don’t you think? You know, we’ve been looking forward to this ever since we got our invitations. It should be fun, shouldn’t it?”

He focused his eyes directly on her. "What a great way to start a new year: meeting new people and making new friends." He leaned forward on the counter. "So, will you be joining the party tonight, er... Alexandra?"

The others looked on in astonishment as the woman blushed and dropped her eyes. As far as they remembered, Harry had never used his celebrity status like this before and they certainly couldn't remember him ever flirting.

"No," she said quietly, "I'll be working the desk all night."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sure you'll miss an outstanding party. So many good people." He straightened up and looked around. "Well, I suppose we'd better get inside. Lot's of old friends to see, you know." He smiled again and began to lead his friends away.

"Oh, Mr. Potter," she called after him, leaning across the counter.

He paused and stepped back. "Please, call me Harry," he said gently, laying his hand on hers for a moment.

The woman blushed again.

"H-Harry, I'm... I mean, you're supposed to leave your wand before you go in. It's... it's Ministry policy."

"Oh. Hmm. Well, maybe you could do me a kind of favor. It's not every day I get to meet a Ministry employee who's so pretty, er... hard working. Maybe you could let my friends and me take our wands in, you know, just in case?" He put on his most innocent face.

"I-I don't know. I could really get in trouble for this."

"No one else has to know," he said, lowering his voice. "It would just be between *you* and *me*."

She bit her lip and then looked up at him as if caught in a dream. "Okay," she said breathlessly, "I guess you can go on." She inched closer to him. "But," she whispered, "you owe me."

"Thank you," he said. "I do owe you."

Once they were safely inside the main ballroom, Ron, Hermione and Ginny burst into fits of laughter.

"What did we miss?" asked Mr. Weasley, coming up next to them. He and Molly had gone through a different line because of his employment with the Ministry. Ron proceeded to give a word-for-word account of what had just happened. With each word, Harry felt himself growing redder and redder until he was sure he would die of embarrassment.

"That was quick thinking, Harry," Mr. Weasley said when the story was done. "I didn't want them to take your wands but I have no authority in that area. I'm glad you found a way around it, even if you did have to, ahem, go about it that way." He grinned.

Harry was sure Mr. Weasley was going to burst so he said 'thank you' and steered Ginny away toward the hors d'oeuvres. They picked some of the more appetizing delectables and found a table with Ron and Hermione. The decorations on the tables and around the room were impressive and clearly expensive.

"I wonder who paid for all of this," Harry mused.

"Actually," said Hermione, looking critically at the flowers, "most of it was funded by businesses and private donors. I think Fred and George even contributed, though I'm sure this wasn't at all what they had in mind. It's not exactly their style, is it?"

"What she means is don't touch any of the flowers or you might sprout petals around your neck and turn yellow the rest of the night!" Ginny added.

They talked for a while about the decorations and the guests. While they sat, more than one friend from Hogwarts stopped by the table to chat. Neville and Luna wandered up to them and Harry was happy that she hadn't changed at all. Though the radish earrings were conspicuously absent, her unusual personality was showing in abundance. Harry counted three

different topics in one sentence, which was only a small fraction of the paragraphs she talked in one breath, and none of it made any sense.

Harry became concerned when Neville's grandmother approached but was surprised to see her smile at her grandson.

"My Neville's found quite the young lady here, hasn't he?" she asked the table at large. "Yes, his mother and father would be proud. Now then, come find a table with me, dear. I'd like to ask your friend a few more questions about her father."

Neville waved goodbye while Luna said 'hello' and then abruptly walked away.

As the first hour passed, Harry found himself gazing for longer and longer periods at Ginny. He couldn't remember a time he felt so happy or so content. As the orchestra began a new piece he stood and offered his hand to her. Without a word, she took it and followed him onto the floor. Both of their hearts were racing as they clasped hands and began to step with the music and rhythm of the strings and brass. Harry was both concerned about his dancing skills and amazed that he held the hand of the most beautiful girl in the room. Ginny's dazzling smile and bright eyes seemed to be made only for him and it made the blood pound in his ears.

As they moved about the floor their eyes never left each other. They spoke volumes without saying a word. Harry found himself simply moving with her as if they were one. As the dance floor became more and more crowded, though, they finally decided to take a break and have some dinner.

They walked a full circle around the room searching for food but returned to their table empty-handed. Ron and Hermione were already eating and Harry looked at their plates longingly.

"All you do is tell your plate what you want, mate," Ron said through a mouthful of steak.

"Hey, I remember when they did that at Hogwarts once," said Ginny brightly, picking up a menu.

Suddenly feeling quite famished, Harry filled his plate with an assortment of foods, while Ginny called up a salad and roast chicken. The food was well-prepared and Harry had to wonder if some of the house-elves from Hogwarts had come to the Ministry to help cook. He tried to imagine Dobby in an expansive kitchen directly below them, stirring and chopping and filling plates.

"What is it, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Nothing, nothing," he said and continued eating. He knew better than to bring up house-elves around Hermione.

Just as he took his last bite, a chill ran up his spine as a familiar voice approached their table. He wondered if he would ever be rid of Draco Malfoy in his lifetime.

"Well, Potty and the Weasel together at last. Can't believe that mudblood-lover Dumbledore let you leave the school. I'm surprised he let his treasured student out into the open where he could get hurt. Of course, if my father had had his way, you would have been chucked out of there years ago. If you'd survived this long, which you wouldn't have, you'd be living under a bridge somewhere hiding from the one *real* wizard in the world. None of this—"

"Malfoy," said Harry irritably, "if your father weren't in prison, which he is, *he'd* probably be dead by now."

"Don't be so sure, Potter," the pale-faced boy sneered. He paused as if to add something but turned away suddenly and disappeared into the crowd.

Something about Malfoy's last words bothered Harry and he couldn't help but ask Ginny what she thought.

"So, did he mean that his father wouldn't be dead or that he wasn't in prison?"

She tilted her head in thought. "I don't know. He must think that Tom would have let him off, even though he didn't get the prophecy from you. I think he just meant that he wouldn't be dead."

Harry nodded his head, but deep down, he couldn't shake the worry that something had happened at Azkaban. A few minutes passed in silence as he considered Malfoy's words over and over and finally he decided to forget it and ask Ginny to dance again. As he stood and turned to her a firm hand came to rest on his shoulder, making him jump and spin around.

Standing in front of him was none other than the Minister of Magic. The man held out his hand to Harry.

"Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you," he said gruffly. "I'm Arthur McFee, Minister of Magic. I wonder... do you have a few moments?"

Harry glanced at his friends but they just stared blankly at him. It seemed he had no choice.

"Certainly, sir," said Harry.

The older man led him on a weaving path through the tables and as they walked a thought came to Harry.

"Excuse me, sir?" Harry asked.

"Yes?" the Minister replied, though without slowing his steady gait.

Harry decided to just put it all out in one question. "Has anything strange happened at Azkaban lately?"

The man stopped so suddenly that Harry nearly ran into him. With eyes of steel, he turned toward Harry.

"How..." he began to say but then stopped. "What happens at Azkaban is no concern of yours, Mr. Potter. We have the situation entirely under control."

Having long ago given up respect for Ministers of Magic, Harry pressed on. "So, no prisoners escaped, then?"

The Minister appeared slightly bothered for a moment but then sighed in resignation. "Come with me, Mr. Potter, we can't talk here."

Harry decided to wait and see how things went. He still had every intention of finding out if Mr. Malfoy had, in fact, escaped, or if Draco had other meanings. They reached a side door of the ballroom and the Minister nodded to the guard who let them pass through. Inside was a very boring room of gray with a large table in the center. Harry supposed it was some sort of meeting room. About a dozen high-backed chairs were placed evenly around the table but otherwise the room was empty. The Minister pulled out two chairs and beckoned for Harry to take one.

"Listen, Harry... may I call you Harry?"

Harry nodded and the older man continued.

"I have the highest respect for you and Albus. In fact, I've given him rather a lot of leeway this past year, no doubt in order for him to train you in fighting Death Eaters. They certainly seem attracted to you, anyway, and I'm sure you'll make a fine Auror someday soon."

"Harry," he said tiredly, "I don't know how you found out about it – I only heard myself a few hours ago – there *was* a breakout from Azkaban early today."

"I heard it from Draco Malfoy," said Harry heavily.

The Minister's eyes hardened. "*Did* you? Yes, his father was among those who escaped. There is no doubt it was the work of Voldemort. As of today, the Dementors have given up control of the island and disappeared. We have every Auror who's not on duty here out looking for them.

"I *had* only wanted to speak with you for a moment to say hello and express my wish that you had an enjoyable summer. However, under the circumstances, I would like to impress upon you the gravity of the situation and ask that you not get involved, at least not for a time. The Ministry has many Aurors trained in this sort of work and it is their job to deal with Voldemort and the Death Eaters."

"Minister, I can't—" Harry began to say.

"Harry, please take my word under consideration. As a young man who's faced Voldemort far too many times, it would be better for *you* if you just stayed away for a while."

They sat a few moments in silence. The wheels in Harry's brain turned rapidly, trying to come up with an answer to such a request. How could he agree? He knew it wasn't possible but for some reason he didn't feel like arguing right now.

He sighed deeply. "So this is how the war starts then," he said quietly. He had known this day would come soon but hoped it would at least wait until after the ball. The heavy weight on his shoulders seemed to increase and he felt them slump.

A firm hand pushed them back and he looked up to meet the Minister's gaze.

"Yes, this is how it begins. But don't give up hope, there are a lot of people fighting for the right side. It will just take some time."

Harry couldn't tell him that it could only end with him, nor did he have the heart to. Instead, he stood and looked pointedly at the door.

"Go ahead," the older man said, "have a good night with your friends and don't worry about this. *Someone* will get it sorted out."

Feeling slightly disheartened by the Minister's lack of faith in his Aurors, Harry trudged back across the large room. He wondered how it would happen. Would Voldemort come to him? Would his friends be captured and used as bait? No matter what the situation, Harry was once again having trouble seeing the other side of it, the side where he came out alive.

As he sat down, Ginny laid a soothing hand on his arm and caught his eye with a comforting gaze. Ron and Hermione just looked on, having seen Harry like this many times. They simply awaited the news.

"The Dementors have left Azkaban and the prisoners have escaped. The Minister just told me."

Harry had expected gasps and concerned voices but what he hadn't expected was silence. He looked up and found his friends' heads bent. It took only the work of a moment for him to understand. Always before had he watched them to see their reaction to *him*, to how it would effect *his* world. But he saw them now as their own people. The news affected them in their own lives, not just in their friendship with him but in their own families, as well.

"But you know what?" he asked sternly. "I'm not going to let them ruin my night. You three have been right all along. If we stop living our lives, then he's already won."

He stood and offered his hand to Ginny, watching in amazement as his words sank in and she began to smile.

"Ginny," he asked, "would you like to dance?"

She nodded and stood, giving him a peck on the cheek as they started off toward the dance floor. Harry glanced behind and saw Ron and Hermione, hands clasped together, following them with their own smiles. He grinned to himself. Maybe he would still have a good night.

After nearly an hour of dancing, sometimes slow and sometimes fast, Harry found he was still having fun, despite his aching feet and the warmth of the room. Ginny danced and twirled around with him as he laughed and pulled her close.

"What would I have ever done without you?" he asked. He felt her shiver as his breath touched her ear.

"You would still have Ron and Hermione," she said, "but I don't fancy the idea of either of them kissing you."

Harry laughed.

"Harry," she continued, "I don't... I don't know what I'd do without *you*. I feel like everything will be okay when you're around. And I want to help you deal with everything by just being there for you."

"You have no idea how much that helps," he said quietly.

"I'm glad," she continued. "All my life I've felt like I was standing on the outside looking in, but with you... I feel like there is no in or out, like we're together just taking it as it comes. And there's no one I'd rather be with than you. I love you, Harry. I always will."

"I love you, too, Ginny, and—"

The both paused mid step and looked around. A strange magic seemed to fill the air and it made the skin on Harry's neck crawl. A sound like fingernails on a chalkboard filled the room and people threw their hands over their ears in fear. In the pit of his stomach, Harry felt a slow dread begin to fill him. It crept up his back and around his shoulders and he unconsciously drew his wand. He felt Ginny unwrap her arms from his sides and her own wand appeared in her hand.

The noise reached a crescendo and then, as if by some unseen magic, it disappeared entirely. The shock filled the room and total silence reigned. A suggestion of a memory came into Harry's mind and he broke out into a cold sweat.

"G-Ginny," he said shakily, "do you remember my dream? The one where the Death Eaters came to the ball?"

Her eyes grew wide and she nodded slowly, her face paling.

"It can't happen," he said stiffly. "I won't let them take you. We'll Apparate out of here, right now."

"Harry," she said, "you can't Apparate out of the Ministry." She touched his face. "No matter what happens, I love you. We *can* do this together."

As if on cue, Ron and Hermione appeared next to them, looking vigilant. Their wands were drawn and their eyes sought out Harry, watching for his reaction. He closed his eyes and stretched out his magic across the room.

His eyes opened again quickly. "They're here, Death Eaters," he said, staring off toward the far end of the room.

At that very moment a blast ripped through the air and suffocating screams erupted. A cloud of dust was visible rising into the air far away from them. Dark-cloaked figures poured into the room like molten tar, wrecking everything in sight. The Death Eaters had arrived.

As if previously watching in a trance, Harry's mind clicked back into action. In unspoken agreement the four pressed hard against the flow of the crowd. Harry's concern grew two-fold as he realized that none of these witches or wizards had their wands. The bright arcs of spells across the room were coming from the Death Eaters, the Aurors, and the few Ministry employees who had been allowed to carry their wands. The stupidity of the Ministry barely registered in his mind as his brain switched into fighting mode. Without a second thought he burst through the edge of the retreating crowd and began blasting spells and hexes at every hooded figure he could see.

As if surprised by the sudden appearance of a machine bombarding spells upon them, the Death Eaters backed off for a moment but then surged forward again. Cloak after cloak fell to the ground with a thud or a cry. Harry was using nearly every hex and spell he had but at the same time was holding back. It pained him to do it but they couldn't yet know his full power. In split-seconds between rushes of magic he glanced sideways at his friends. Ron and Ginny were both fighting with the powerful resolve he'd often seen in their mother when she was yelling at the twins, while Hermione was downright scary. Harry couldn't remember a time he'd ever seen her fight with such ferocity. Her arms and robes whipped about her and most of the Death Eaters she struck down hardly knew what hit them.

Harry now found himself jumping and dodging fallen hooded bodies as he pressed forward. The floor was littered with Death Eaters and whether dead or alive he couldn't tell, and didn't care. There was so much blood that his stomach started to twist and turn. And still they came.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a few mighty spells reach Ginny but she dodged and rolled across the floor. He could see stains on her robes and hoped the blood wasn't her own.

With new resolve he attacked the Death Eater in front of her. A tripping jinx brought the man to the floor but in a flash he was up again, his hood now slipping down across his shoulders and his blond hair spilling out.

The fiery eyes of Lucius Malfoy turned on Harry and he could feel the hatred burning behind the man's mask. As they traded hexes and curses and for the first time, Harry felt himself finally being challenged. The elder Malfoy was not to be toyed with lightly and Harry now understood one of the reasons he'd been admitted into Voldemort's inner circle.

A cutting curse grazed his leg and he winced in pain. In return he cast a stinging hex, catching Malfoy's arm and giving him a moment to shift his weight and wipe the sweat from his brow. A brief side-to-side glance showed him that his three friends were still fighting and appeared unscathed.

Pulling up a mild shield, Harry began to fight Malfoy in earnest. He was at least thankful that Malfoy's attention was drawn from Ginny. Without dwelling on the thought, he continued to fight the hate embodied in front of him. For minutes they battled, each sparing moments here and there to fire a spell off at another opponent, but mostly concentrating on each other. Harry's brain was a whirling mix of spells, hexes, jinxes and curses.

As the battle around them miraculously began to wind down, Harry looked away for a moment toward Ron and Hermione. He saw them still fighting and allowed himself a small grin. As his eyes turned back to Malfoy he almost expected to face the green jet of a killing curse and internally berated himself for looking away. What he actually saw was much worse. In the moment between looking away and looking back, Ginny had been knocked unconscious, and by the look on Malfoy's face, *he* was responsible.

Anger filled his thoughts and he began fighting with more powerful spells and more cunning methods. With his attention focused entirely on this one man, Harry knew he would be victorious. It wasn't until the snarl of laughter escaped Malfoy's lips that Harry looked away again. Three Death Eaters had Ginny held up between them and were dragging her away from the fighting. With an all-but-unstoppable stunning spell, Malfoy was knocked out and Harry chased after Ginny. Seeing him coming, the Death Eaters carrying her gave a quick nod to each other. The largest one reached around her waist and activated a portkey at the same time. In a flash he and Ginny were gone.

The realization took a moment to hit Harry. One minute they had been battling side-by-side, the next she was unconscious and then before Harry knew what had happened, they had taken her. They had taken his Ginny. They had taken the girl that he loved.

Facing the two Death Eaters left behind, Harry raised his wand and gave a cry that echoed across the room. The briefest look of fear crossed their faces before they crumpled unconscious to the floor. Turning on the spot, Harry began to methodically remove every Death Eater in his path. Leaving no spell unused, he stunned and bound every single one. As his path of destruction reached Ron and Hermione, he saw shadows cross their faces as they reached out to him. Only a handful of Death Eaters remained and what Aurors were left captured them in short order.

Feeling suddenly defeated, Harry let himself crash into his friends and close his eyes. He couldn't face the world and he didn't want to. Voldemort had Ginny in his very clutches by now and there was nothing Harry could do. His exertion from the battle caught up with him and only with the help of his two friends did he manage to stand at all. His eyes drifted across the room to the heaps of fallen bodies. Most were Death Eaters but some were not.

Suddenly unable to take it in, he fell to the floor and retched, heaving up what was left of his dinner. Tears mixed with sweat as four hands reached down to gently hold him. His senses seemed dulled and he was only dimly aware of the chaos around him and the movement of his body. At last he gave in to the darkness and let his conscious mind fade away. The last words he heard were *'Let's get him out of here'* before he lost consciousness.

The muffled sounds of an argument filtered slowly through his mind as Harry began to wake up. He couldn't identify the voices or where he was and only by sheer willpower did he open his eyes. Thankfully his glasses were still on and intact. He raised his head and was surprised to find himself on the floor in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. His head began to spin but he forced himself to sit up anyway.

All around the floor were people sleeping on mats. Turning to find the source of the disturbance, Harry discovered he was only a short distance from Ron and Hermione. From the few words he could hear, they seemed to be arguing about him.

"Ron, Hermione, I'm awake," he said quietly, rubbing his eyes.

Their whispered discussion stopped and their heads snapped around to him. By the guilty looks on their faces he decided they *had* been talking about him, but he didn't care.

They came toward him and Hermione hugged him while Ron looked on worriedly.

"What happened, mate?" Ron asked.

"Ron!" Hermione said. "It's too early, he needs some rest."

"There's no time, Hermione," Ron added, with a quick sideways glance at her. "Harry might know what happened to Ginny and we don't have time to mess around."

At Ron's words it all came back to Harry like the crack of a whip. He groaned and put his head in his hands.

"See, I told you we should have left him alone. Now you've got him all upset again."

"No, Hermione," Harry said, "Ron's right. We've got to do something." He proceeded to tell them everything that had happened. By the end of the story, Hermione looked stricken and Ron was as red as a beet.

"Why, those—" he began but couldn't find the right words.

"I know," Harry groaned. He was starting to feel tired again but knew that there wasn't any time to waste. He had to find Ginny before something happened to her. He sat up further but was held back by Hermione's quick grasp.

"Harry, wait. Voldemort's not going to hurt her yet. It's you he wants. It always has been. He's using Ginny as bait to get to you. I know you want to go after her right now – I do, too – but we need to have some sort of plan. We don't even know where she is, for Merlin's sake!"

Harry relented and his shoulders sagged. "But what if he hurts her just to get back at me?"

They all looked at each other, knowing it was possible but not wanting to say it out loud.

"Okay," said Ron, gritting his teeth, "we'll wait a few hours but then we're going after her."

Harry looked at his watch. It was nearly six in the morning and he was surprised to find he'd been out for so long. The Death Eater attack had to have been well before midnight. Feeling slightly awakened by the thought, he sat up straighter and pulled his wand from his pocket, rolling it absently between his fingers.

"Okay, so finding out if she's okay should be easy. With your help I should be able to reach her. The problem is, what if Voldemort knows about us and our... connection, and he's watching her mind. He'll know I'm there and he'll know where we are. I think we should wait to talk to her until we're ready to fight again."

The other two considered it for a few moments and then nodded. Hermione seemed intensely thoughtful, while Ron was still looking murderous. They tossed ideas around for a few more minutes but couldn't seem to get anywhere. Finally, Harry suggested that they just lay down for a while and store up their strength.

"Harry, you and Ron can lay down for a bit. I'm going to talk to Dumbledore about our plan."

Both Harry and Ron made to argue but she cut them off with a quick wave of her hand and walked away. They sat back down and watched her. As she reached Dumbledore, Ron laid down on his mat. Threading his fingers behind his head, he closed his eyes, although Harry could tell he wasn't going to sleep.

Harry remained sitting up and looked around the room. There were upwards of a hundred people present and he knew most of them. Some were students who had been in the D.A. and others were members of the Order, or Ministry Aurors. He was happy that they all seemed to be in one piece but he could feel the somber emotion filling the room.

Minutes ticked by and still Hermione talked. Harry couldn't hear them but he wondered what Dumbledore was saying. Just as he began to get to his feet, he was shocked to see the centaur, Firenze, gallop quickly into the hall. The noise and vibration of his hooves caused quite a commotion and every eye followed him to the end of the hall. He came to a skidding halt in front of Dumbledore.

After a conversation that couldn't have lasted more than half a minute, Dumbledore turned to face everyone with a most serious expression. His voice quavered as he began to speak.

"My friends, this night marks a sad night. First the attack at the Ministry, and now... now we are under attack in this very castle." The old man held up his hand to quiet the cries and shouts that followed his statement.

"I will not force you to come with me but I will *lead* those of you who are able and willing to fight. We must go, and we must go now." He walked quickly to the doors of the hall and turned to see who was following.

Harry jumped to his feet along with Ron and together they began to walk toward the doors. Hermione met up with them only a moment later, just as they reached the edge of the massive crowd gathering around Dumbledore. Over the heads of the people, Harry could see a fire come into his mentor's eyes and he knew why. He turned and looked about the room. Not a soul had remained behind.

Dumbledore's loud voice echoed off the walls and the very depth of it seemed to stir their souls. "We go now to what may be the final battle," he shouted. "We will defend this school and the good that is in its students and its teachings! To the gates!"

With surprising speed the aged man took off at a run. The front doors of the castle burst open well before the rest of them reached them. As they sprinted across the vast lawn, Harry saw a handful of Aurors battling a large group of Death Eaters just inside the gates. Jets of light arced into the sky and fire rained down everywhere.

As he ran, Harry was feeling torn inside. He wanted to defend the castle but he also wanted to track down Ginny. He knew that he might have a hard time finding her and retrieving her without Dumbledore's help. He wondered what Hermione had learned but had no time to ask, for they had reached the gates.

A bright orange spell shot over Harry's head and he spun and ducked, firing off a barrage of stunning and cutting hexes against every dark-hooded figure in sight. It was very dark this far from the castle and that fact seemed to be working to the Death Eaters' advantage.

In one swift movement, Harry pointed his wand straight up and uttered a quick incantation. He was nearly forced to the ground with the surge of energy that burst forth, even bracing his wand with both hands. A great arc shot into the sky and exploded into a brilliant ball of white-hot fire. All of the grounds were suddenly lit up like noonday. The Death Eaters were struck by the brightness for a moment and many were struck down as they tried to shade their eyes.

The battle raged on and on. Harry grew anxious as the time flew by. Whether it was seconds or minutes or hours, he couldn't tell. How could there be so many Death Eaters? How had Voldemort recruited them all and convinced them to follow his ways?

A shower of dirt from a wayward spell hit him in the face and he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. The light of morning was beginning to show across the horizon but it gave him little new strength. He bound a Death Eater nearby and began to search for his friends. His eyes barely turned when he found them fighting on either side of him, no more than twenty paces away. In spite of the situation he felt honored by their show of loyalty.

Calling up his reserve strength he spoke a few hasty words to them in his mind and turned to run. Behind him he could sense them turning to follow. They were moving slowly, though, trying to eliminate any who saw them going.

At last they reached the castle and ran inside. Harry leaned a hand against the wall to catch his breath while Ron and Hermione sat heavily on the main steps. Ron looked a little worse for the wear but seemed to be all in one piece. Hermione was dirty and Harry noticed her scowling at her left shoulder. He watched as she twisted her wand into it and muttered something under her breath. A look of pain flashed over her face and then she lifted her head with an odd grin.

"It worked," she said simply, in answer to his questioning look.

"Harry?" a voice called from the doorway.

Turning, Harry saw the fiery gaze of the Headmaster. A sense of awe flowed through him and he was reminded of the battle in the Ministry atrium, when Dumbledore had fought Voldemort. A power seemed to permeate the air and Harry felt it and, for once, understood it.

"Voldemort's not out there," Harry stated. "Do you think he's here or do you think he just sent his followers?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes and stood quietly for a moment. "I can not say for sure, Harry. Perhaps now is the time for you to use your *own* magic. My time may not be long and I wish for you to learn to choose your own path. You are fully capable."

"Sir, I—"

"No, Harry. Listen to me. *You* must choose. I will only tell you that I believe he is here. I also believe he has Miss Weasley with him."

"Very well," Harry said through gritted teeth. He closed his eyes but found his anger with Dumbledore was too intense to continue. Forcing himself to concentrate on Ginny alone, he felt his senses slowly leaving his body and searching the castle. He tried to focus on her smile and the calming sound of her laughter. Instinctively, his magic began to look downward, into the very bowels of the castle.

A glimpse of a familiar sight flashed in his mind. He tried to separate reality from memory and focused even harder on the girl he loved. The scene reappeared for a moment. It was eerily reminiscent of the end of his second year, only now the girl lying on the floor looked somewhat older and only slightly less worse for the wear.

Without opening his eyes, he spoke. "Voldemort *is* here and Ginny's with him. They're in the Chamber of Secrets."

With an audible gasp, Hermione buried her face in her hands. Ron put a comforting arm around her shoulder, his face visibly paling.

Harry felt a strong hand grip his shoulder and opened his eyes. He was greeted by the brightest blue as the Headmaster's eyes turned on him.

"It is time, Harry."

Harry could only nod mutely. *It's time*, he thought. *Does he think I'm going to die? Does he think he's going to die? Is it time for Ginny and I to die together fighting the most evil Dark lord of all time? What about Ron and Hermione, will they make it through this?*

Recovering, he discovered his feet were moving under him. He looked ahead and found they were nearly to the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Steeling himself, he pushed it open and walked over to the tap he remembered from years before.

The hissing and spitting of his voice seemed familiar but far away. It was only a moment before he was sitting down, preparing to slide down the pipe into the sewers below. A strange cry echoed around the room just as he was about to let go and he turned, feeling his heart lighten. Fawkes had swooped into the room and come to rest on Dumbledore's shoulder. Harry pulled himself quickly back out of the pipe.

"You know the way, don't you, Fawkes?" he asked the large bird.

In answer to his question, Fawkes lifted his leg toward Harry. Beckoning Ron and Hermione over to him, Harry let the bird take hold of his shoulder. He felt strength flow through him and his body grew as light as a feather. Fawkes lifted them slowly off the ground and with a strange grace, carried them all at once down into the darkness below.

A dim light surrounded them as they slipped down through the stale air. In the pipes and sewers of the castle time was all but forgotten. The thick smell of mildew caught in Harry's nose and he opened his mouth to breathe instead.

His memories played back in bursts as they reached the bottom. Some of the journey was missing in his memories, while other parts were overwhelmingly clear. Sensing Dumbledore's intentions, Harry took the lead as they began making their way through the maze of enormous pipes toward the Chamber. They came to the place where Lockhart had caused the ceiling cave-in and through Dumbledore's careful work, enough rock was removed for them to pass.

At last they reached the Chamber door. Squinting his eyes, as he remembered doing before, Harry commanded the door to open and it obeyed. When it finally ground to a halt, a great sense of dread came over him. He still didn't know what he was going to *do*. They had talked about this day for so long but he still had no clear plan to defeat Voldemort.

He turned to ask Dumbledore what *his* plans were, but instead, the older man walked right past him. Harry shared one last look with Ron and Hermione before turning to follow.

From the far end of the chamber, the sight looked very much as it had so many years before. Ginny lay on the ground and though he could tell she was alive, he couldn't hear her voice in his head when he called. Above her, as if admiring his prize, stood Voldemort. His red eyes glowed while his twisted smile made him look very sinister compared to the young man from Harry's memories. The hairs rose slowly on the back of Harry's neck and he internally thanked Dumbledore for taking the lead.

"So we meet again, Tom," Dumbledore said quietly as they approached.

Voldemort hissed angrily. "Only you have ever dared call me by that name, old man."

"It is still who you are, Tom. You have only chosen to forget."

While the two traded barbs, Harry organized with Ron and Hermione to spread out into a half-circle. That way, at least they wouldn't hit each other if they missed hitting Voldemort. Harry moved around one side of Dumbledore, while Ron and Hermione spread out on the other. He felt mildly encouraged by the four-to-one count and he wiped the sweat from his wand-hand, preparing to fight.

Voldemort turned and addressed Harry directly now. "When will you learn, boy, that it is useless pitting yourself against Lord Voldemort? You, like your mentor, will not rise to the level of magic I have reached, therefore it is impossible for you to beat me."

"You mean that we won't resort to Dark Magic?" Harry snarled. "True, but your downfall will only be because you didn't bother to learn the power of magic that's good."

"Spoken from the heart, Harry," Voldemort spat, "but I'm afraid noble notions won't help little Ginny, here."

From the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Dumbledore give a tiniest flick of his wand. A thread, barely visible to the eye, spun from the end and wrapped once around the feet of the Dark Lord. With a small nod, Harry agreed.

In a flash of light, Voldemort was knocked off his feet. In the same moment, Harry Apparated over to Ginny, grabbed her arm and twisted to Apparate away again. Unfortunately, he didn't make it. The words of the Cruciatus curse barely registered in his ears before he was blinded with an all-consuming pain. It felt as if his very skin were on fire. Then, as quickly as it came, it was gone. He raised his head and saw a battle of three-on-one begin. Throwing himself upward with all his might, he pulled Ginny's arm. She didn't move. A curse flew his way and he dodged it, taking only a moment to look down and see that Ginny was somehow bound to the floor with nearly transparent cords.

Anger filled his mind and he took a mighty leap forward, launching into a barrage of hexes that caused Voldemort to recoil slightly. He felt curses tearing at his robes but ignored them. Ron and Hermione seemed to have worked out a system of alternating hexes, while Dumbledore drew vast power through his wand and struck Voldemort repeatedly with powerful bolts of lightning that ricocheted around the room. For his part, Harry remained focused on how to get Ginny away. He was at least thankful that Voldemort was too busy to target her.

A cutting curse struck Harry across the thigh and he cried out in pain but did not stop fighting. Ron was bleeding from above one ear and his left hand was badly gashed. Hermione had so far avoided any major damage, for which Harry was thankful. Dumbledore fought on, but whether injured or not, Harry couldn't tell.

He had to find a way to get to Ginny. The longer she stayed unconscious, the less likely she was to come back. He fired a particularly vicious stunning spell and saw his opportunity. He Apparated to the other side of Voldemort from Ginny and attacked fiercely, drawing his attention. He fought from his position for a few moments and then Apparated ten feet to one side. He did this several times, each time remaining roughly opposite Ginny. The very last time he reappeared next to her and leaned down.

The cords were bound very tightly around her and seemed to grow from the floor. Knowing he only had a second or two, Harry cast *Reenervate* without thinking. With a gasp, Ginny's eyes opened and she looked frantically around. Harry Apparated back to the other side of the room and fired a few quick spells. In his mind he called to Ginny.

"Ginny, Apparate away! Now!"

"I can't! I don't have my wand!" she cried out loud.

Hearing her cries, Voldemort turned to her. Before he could raise his wand, Harry had reappeared between them.

"You won't hurt her again!" Harry shouted.

Voldemort sneered at him and fired a cutting curse. It was absorbed by Harry's shield but in the second it took to perform the spell, Ron caught Voldemort with a Reductor curse and shattered his left hand. Screaming madly, Voldemort spun around to Ron but Harry hit him with an Impediment Jinx. Grabbing Ginny's hand, he squeezed his eyes shut and Apparated her out of her bindings.

"*Accio* Ginny's wand," he shouted. It came flying right from the Dark Lord's robes and Ginny caught it deftly. She didn't wait a moment to join in the fight.

The first real look of concern crossed Voldemort's face now and his eyes searched madly for an exit.

"You can't get away, Tom," Dumbledore said between spells.

Voldemort's red eyes turned on Dumbledore with an insane look. "You!" he screamed. "I should have been rid of you years ago." He began to advance toward the older man.

"Leave!" shouted Dumbledore.

"Yes, leave!" cried Harry.

He felt a tug on his elbow and turned slightly. Ginny was standing next to him.

"Harry, he meant for *you* to leave. For *us* to leave."

"No!" he shouted, pulling away from her. "I won't leave him to fight alone!" He moved closer and positioned himself several yards from Dumbledore. Ron and Hermione were still opposite and were still fighting. Ginny ran up beside Harry, her wand blazing with spells. It seemed none of them had any intention of leaving the Headmaster by himself.

For many brave minutes they fought. Voldemort grew more and more out of control. His curses were now being fired in every direction, regardless of where his opponents were. Harry's confidence was growing but he was also concerned about what Voldemort might try in this state of madness.

In one gut-wrenching moment, his question was answered. Voldemort turned slowly, positioning himself facing Dumbledore. He fired a couple of spells and then in the blink of an eye, Apparated directly in front of the old man. Harry watched in horror as Dumbledore lowered his wand and Voldemort raised his. The others could only look on as if frozen in place. It couldn't be happening like this, Harry told himself. Voldemort's wand was mere inches from Dumbledore's chest.

"Go ahead, Tom," Dumbledore said evenly, "but you will not win by my death. Harry can, and will, defeat you in the end."

A quiet voice broke into Harry's mind, "Goodbye, Harry, and remember: love, Harry, love."

In a flash of green it was over. Dumbledore fell lifeless to the floor and Voldemort disappeared with a cackle of mad laughter.

Harry had no idea how he got out of the Chamber. Through his shock he only remembered the jostling and touching of strong hands and walking up countless stairs; fawkes apparently having abandoned them. When his senses returned again it was only to discover he was back at the entrance to the Great Hall. The room was full and Harry could only assume that the Death Eaters had either been destroyed or disappeared with Voldemort.

As they walked numbly through the door the room went silent around them. Harry looked up in wonder as Hermione walked bravely to the front and stood where the Headmaster usually addressed the room. When she spoke, her voice was strong but cracked with emotion.

She told them of the fight against Voldemort in the Chamber and the rescue of Ginny. She told them of the heroism of her friends and how none of them would leave Dumbledore, even when he asked. And then she told them, in a voice full of emotion, how Dumbledore had chosen the time of his own death. She finished, somewhat more quietly, by saying that Voldemort had disappeared and they should still be prepared to fight him again.

Ron had followed her to the front of the room and now held her close as they walked slowly back toward Harry and Ginny. Together, the four friends left the Great Hall and made their way aimlessly about the castle. In the end they arrived, unplanned, at Gryffindor Tower and decided to seek comfort there.

The fat lady wiped her eyes as they approached. "Is it true?" she asked quietly.

They could only nod their heads.

Without even asking for the password, she opened silently to admit them to their old house. Harry followed last in the group and turned as he stepped into the hole. He looked back down the hall, remembering the years he had spent going to classes and chatting with his friends... and getting to know the Headmaster, whom he later called his friend and mentor. He missed the old man terribly and suddenly didn't want to go inside.

A hand on his arm caused him to turn back and he was encouraged by the sight of Ginny, gently persuading him to follow. They went quietly to the sofas by the fire and sat down. For a

time, nothing was said. Words seemed to fail them all and fall short of expressing their true emotions.

“D’you think the Death Eaters are gone?” Ginny asked after a while.

Harry’s head popped up at the question but Ron answered.

“They must be, right? I mean, everyone was back in the Great Hall and we were winning when we left. I wonder if they just Disapparated or if they were... you know, captured.”

It was quiet again for a time. The small fire hissed and popped in the hearth but they paid it little attention.

Harry had been giving some thought to the Headmaster’s last words. Unable to make sense of them, he decided to say them out loud.

“The last thing Dumbledore said to me was to remember to love. I heard it in my head before he... but I still don’t know what it means! How is love going to stop Voldemort? How am I ever going to win?” He buried his head in his hands.

“Harry?” Hermione asked. “Maybe it’s simpler than we think. All along we’ve been looking for some really powerful spell to kill him. Maybe all you really need is the strength to fight him and the will to live through it.”

“Yeah,” added Ron, “Hermione’s right. It would be different if you didn’t have anything to fight for, but you do.” His eyes darted to Ginny and back. “I mean, if it was me, and Voldemort was threatening any of you,” his eyes went to Hermione and stayed, “I’d fight for everything I was worth because I’d want to come out on the other side alive. I’d want to have my future. I’d fight because there are people I care for.”

“You can do this, Harry,” he continued, “you don’t need anything special. You’ve got it all right here in front of you. All you have to do is just find the opportunity. You know, smash him under a dirty great rock or something.”

Harry chuckled in spite of himself.

“It doesn’t have to be now, Harry,” said Ginny, squeezing his hand. “You can take time to regroup, to do whatever you need to do.”

Harry sat up slightly. “No,” he said firmly, “this needs to be finished and it needs to be finished now.”

“You don’t mean... right now?” asked Hermione in a trembling voice.

“I do,” he answered. “It’s time to finish Voldemort once and for all.”

Chapter Thirteen

The End of Ginny Weasley

"You can't be serious!" exclaimed Hermione. "We've already fought Voldemort three times today! Look at how many people were hurt and how many were... were..." She burst into tears and buried her face in Ron's shoulder.

"Harry, you sure about this? You know you can wait," said Ron.

"I know," answered Harry, "but how many more have to die? If I can end this now, if there's any chance I can win, then I *have to try*."

He paused for a moment and looked at the floor. "I'm ready to do it on my own but I won't say no to some help."

"Hey, mate," said Ron, looking shocked, "we're always with you. There's no way you're going it alone."

I love you, Harry, and I'm going with you, Ginny's voice burst into his thoughts.

"Harry, we're all going with you," said Hermione, through her tears. "I didn't mean to say we weren't, I just wanted to make sure you're really ready, that's all. If you're ready then we're ready."

"Thanks," Harry said gratefully. "Now, how do we go about this, exactly? He won't be prepared yet because he probably thinks I'm scared of him. That gives us a bit of help but not much. And do we go to him or get him to come to us? Honestly, I'd rather bring him here. At least I know my way around here. How, though? How do I get Voldemort to come back to Hogwarts?"

Ron and Hermione shook their heads without an answer. Finally, Ginny spoke up quietly from beside Harry.

"You get him to think that you're angry, that you're out of control. If he thinks you want to fight him only to avenge Dumbledore's death then he'll think he can win. But, Harry, *you* have to know that you're fighting for your own reasons, not just out of anger. Dumbledore said it has to be out of love. Can you do that?"

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Could he really fight without hate? Could he honestly claim that his drive wasn't solely based on revenge?

"I can," he said finally. "It's strange, I mean, I'm sad about Dumbledore but somehow I don't feel responsible for him like I do the others—"

Hermione and Ginny made to protest but Harry stopped them with a quick look.

"I have enough reasons of my own for wanting to win. I want to protect those I still have left." He looked at Ginny and was happy to see a faint blush come over her cheeks. He turned to Ron.

"So, what do you think? The grounds? The castle? The Chamber? The forest?"

Ron thought for a moment. "He's already seen the grounds and the Chamber, so those are out. There's too much danger for the students if we lead him to the castle. In fact, we ought to do everything we can to keep him away from the castle. The forest has good and bad points. We've been in it enough to know it some and Hagrid knows it like the back of his hand. Still, there're a lot of other things to consider. We don't really know everything that lives in there." He shuddered. "And, Voldemort *has* been in the forest before, though that doesn't mean he knows it very well."

He scratched his chin with his thumb for a few moments. "I don't think we have a choice. The forest may have some unknowns but it's still better than going to him. Maybe we ought to talk to Hagrid. You know, see if he's got any ideas."

Harry nodded. "The forest it is, then. Let's go find Hagrid."

With that, the four went off to find their bearded friend. After nearly half-an-hour of searching, Harry was beginning to get perturbed.

"Oh, come on, Harry, let's just go ask someone in the Great Hall," said Hermione in exasperation.

He gritted his teeth but Ginny squeezed his hand and he relaxed a little. His brain had started on an idea and run with it. He didn't remember seeing Hagrid when they regrouped after the last battle and he was starting to get worried that something bad had happened. Quickening his step, they made it to the Great Hall in only a few minutes.

Seeing Professor McGonagall still presiding over the assembly, they ran up to her and she immediately gave them her attention.

"Professor," asked Harry quietly, "have you seen Hagrid? We need to talk to him."

Her lips grew thin and she eyed them suspiciously. "I fear to ask why you need him so urgently. I last saw him escorting some first-years to the Ravenclaw common room."

Harry glanced at his friends and they took off at a run. They hadn't made it twenty paces, though, when Harry slowed to a stop.

"What is it, Harry?" Ginny asked quickly.

"I... I feel funny without Dumbledore to help. Maybe we should tell McGonagall what we're planning. At least that way she can get help if we need it. She knows how to contact the Order quicker than we do and we might need their help."

Apparently having talked himself into it without a response from his friends, Harry went back to the Headmistress. She was involved in a conversation with the Head Boy and Girl but Harry interrupted them.

"Professor, er, would you mind helping us find Hagrid? We don't really know which direction he went. Maybe you could at least give us a head-start."

She gave an exasperated sigh combined with a calculating look before nodding.

"Very well, Mr. Potter. But I can only give you a few moments."

Harry led her back to his friends and together they walked through the doors into the entrance hall.

"Now, what is this really about?" she asked when they were out of earshot of the students.

Harry summoned his courage and looked the older witch in the eye. "I'm going to confront Voldemort – here and now, and I need Hagrid's knowledge of the forest because that's where it's going to happen."

Of all the reactions he was expecting, he was surprised when her look softened and she nodded her head very slowly.

"Harry," she said, placing a hand firmly on his shoulder, "I don't fully understand why this burden was given to you but I will help you in any way that I can. Your intention is for this to be the final confrontation, then?" Her voice cracked slightly.

Harry nodded.

"Very well. I will inform the Order. Quietly, of course. For now, let me summon Hagrid. If you are intent on going into the forest, you *will* need his help." With a flick of her wand a white shape sped off through the castle.

It seemed only a few moments had passed when a large shape emerged from a corridor to their side and Hagrid jogged up to them. He was winded but determined.

"Professor," he nodded, "Y' summoned me?"

“Yes, Rubeus, I’m afraid... the time has come. Harry needs your help preparing for the final battle. He intends to confront Voldemort in the forest and your knowledge of the area may mean the difference between success and failure. Please find me after you have discussed the matter. I will need to know where to send the Order. Good luck.”

At her words, Hagrid’s face became stonelike and Harry couldn’t remember him ever looking so menacing. He led them silently out the front doors and down the grassy slope toward the dark edge of the forest. Just as they cleared the first trees, Hagrid stopped and turned sharply to them.

“Harry, are y’sure this is what ye want t’do?” he asked.

Harry nodded.

“Righ’ then, well, the very bes’ place is due North ‘bout ten minutes at yer pace. There’s a clearin’ tha’ should do. You go on’n I’ll get Arma and Grawp. Norbert, too, looks like. Don’t never know who’s help we’ll need. Th’ Headmistress’ll need to know but I’ll tell ‘er. Now, Harry, I know y’can do it. Just use yer heart and ye can do anything, ye hear?”

Hagrid turned away from them and strode back toward the castle. In the distance, Harry was sure he heard the giant man blow his nose a few times. After a few moments he was lost from sight and they turned toward the trees again.

The light of morning grew dim as they made their way into the forest and Harry was strangely aware of every sound around them. He gripped his wand tightly as they began to walk.

He checked his watch repeatedly as they walked and just as ten minutes passed, they stepped into a very definite clearing. Harry squinted around and estimated the whole of the clearing to be about half the size of a Quidditch pitch. The trees were as large as those in the forest around them, though more sparsely populated.

Over the next several minutes they scouted out the perimeter together, noting places to hide their defenses and finding escape routes back into the forest. As they reached their starting point again, Harry sat down heavily. Ron and Hermione sat across from him while Ginny quietly kneeled next to him, snaking her arm through his and squeezing his hand. Her magic seemed to surround him and he felt reassured by it. He had lost count by now of the number of times she had given him help like that. In his mind he knew she loved him but he was only just beginning to comprehend what it truly meant.

“There’s nothing left to do now,” Harry said. “It’s time to let him know we’re here.” He closed his eyes but Ron stopped him almost immediately.

“Harry, I think we should wait for the Order. If Voldemort brings his Death Eaters, even what’s left of them, we won’t stand a chance. The Order should be here any moment and I’ll only need a minute to spread them out, then... then you can do what you have to do.”

Harry caught the fear in his friend’s voice but was impressed at his resolve. Looking into himself, he was surprised at his own calm. Even knowing what was about to happen, he felt very little emotion. His mind seemed to be focused on the next few minutes and nothing else. He knew he might not make it through but that wasn’t important next to knowing that the Wizarding world would finally be safe.

They moved off behind a larger clump of trees and waited quietly. After a few minutes there was a rustling in the trees, quite different from the shifts of the leaves in the wind. They listened more closely and silently agreed it was the sound of footfalls. Standing up together they made their way under the cover of the trees to surround the newcomers.

“Stop!” cried Harry, dropping from a low branch at the head of the group. At the same moment, the other three appeared to each side and behind the group, wands trained on those closest to them.

Harry took a step forward. “Moody always said constant vigilance. Who are you?”

The leader spoke. "I am Headmistress McGonagall. I spoke with you just a short time ago and gave you instructions as to where to find a friend of yours."

"Thank you, Professor. I'm sorry but I had to ask. I'm glad you're here. Ron'll explain what he wants you to do." He raised his voice and addressed everyone. "I expect every one of you to follow Ron's orders or I'll hex you myself." A dark look crossed his features and he looked more tired than ever. "I have a job to do this morning and I expect you all to stay out of my way and let me do it, no matter what the price. Ron, they're all yours now."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment until a hand touched his. He exhaled deeply as Ginny wrapped herself around him, burying her face in his chest.

"Ron knows what to do," she said. "I'm glad you trust him to lead them. Bit harsh, though, don't you think?"

"I had to be. And it has to go for you, too. No matter what happens, you have to let me do it. I c-can't let you stop me. If it means taking him *and* me, then... that's what I have to do." He reached up behind her and wiped at his eye, annoyed that he wasn't keeping himself together.

"Harry," she whispered slowly, "I know what you're feeling. I feel it inside you. And I know why you have to say that. Only, I want you to know that I'm here, too, and I can help."

She pulled away and looked into his eyes with a steely glare. "*Use my magic.* If you think it's going to be the end and you're going to take him with you, use my magic, too."

"But, Ginny—"

"No, Harry! Listen to me! I'm not being melodramatic or anything. I'm just thinking that it might be enough to save you, even if you don't think so. Remember what your mother did? I feel that inside me and I think you can use it. Promise me, all right?"

His tears were now escaping freely and he pulled her close again. *I promise, Ginny, because I love you. That's all there is to it. I love you.*

I love you, too, Harry. That's why I'll promise to do the same, okay?

He nodded into her hair just as Ron came jogging up to them.

"There are eighteen Order members here. Not as many as I'd hoped but McGonagall said that more are on the way. At least the ones we've got are the best of the best, except for my family not being here."

"It'll be enough," said Harry. "I only need them to distract the Death Eaters." With that, he calmly closed his eyes and reached out to his friends.

It's time, he thought. I'm glad you're here. I couldn't do this without you. No matter what happens, I just want you to know that... I...

We're your family, Harry, said Hermione, and we love you.

I-I love you, too. I've got to go now. Wish me luck and maybe we'll see each other on the other side.

He was about to open his mind to Voldemort when suddenly Ginny leapt on him, kissing him fiercely and setting his senses on fire. For a moment he lost all other thoughts. What really mattered to him was the girl he was holding. This girl, his girl, his life, his future, his family.

As he reluctantly pulled away, he wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb, giving her a smile.

"Okay," he breathed, trying to keep his emotions for her under check. "You'd better stand back into the trees. We don't know what he's going to do. Whatever happens, whatever I do, it's for the best, okay?"

She nodded and backed up just inside the darkness of the trees.

Harry walked into the center of the clearing. His heart was pounding now and he felt power all around him. Holding his wand tightly, he opened his mind and forced his thoughts to focus on Voldemort. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead as he struggled to allow only the thought of his location to be seen.

As if struck by a whip, a blistering pain seared into his scar and he struggled to maintain control. *Only this, only here, only now!* he thought. Like the bursting of a dam, he suddenly felt the presence of his enemy in his mind.

"Well, Harry," the voice hissed. "Is it time? Are you an arrogant enough fool to think you can avenge the old man's death?"

"Come and find out!" Harry cried. "It's time for you to pay for what you've done!"

"Very well then, Harry. You shall taste death!"

For a moment the pain blinded him completely and he fell to the ground, vile laughter still echoing in his mind. He wiped his brow and stood again, straightening his back and holding his head high. If he was going to die, he would die fighting. The time had come.

Horrible cracks filled the air and in seconds the whole clearing was filled with Death Eaters. Wand light mingled everywhere in contrast to the yellow rays of the rising sun. Around him stood some fifty Death Eaters in a broad circle. Their hoods were pulled up and their backs were to him as they faced the Order head-on. In front of him, with the loudest crack of all, Voldemort appeared, standing tall and radiating pure hate. His sick laughter filled the air as he held his wand above his head, aiming it directly at Harry.

Without a second thought, Harry spun and aimed a spell at the edge of the trees. A cry came from within as Ginny was struck and frozen in place, safe, Harry thought, from the battle. Taken aback by her cry and fearing that it had drawn Voldemort's attention, Harry Apparated to the opposite side of the circle of Death Eaters and began firing hexes at his opponent.

With wand work like lightning, Voldemort spun after him and engaged him full-force. Harry breathed a sigh of relief that Ginny was safe before focusing himself wholly on the evil before him.

"Harry Potter!" a female voice cried from the trees. "I'll get you for this!"

Drawn by the cries, Voldemort cast a powerful destructive spell at the ground in front of Harry, causing him to sputter and close his eyes for a moment as dirt was thrown everywhere. His worst fears were confirmed as he reopened them to see a flash of light moving swiftly away toward Ginny.

As the bright light reached her, it exploded into a shower of sparks, from which Ginny emerged unharmed and able to move again. Voldemort turned back to Harry, seething with rage. Before he could raise his wand, Harry spoke, his voice calm and his features schooled.

"You should have given up, Tom, when you had the chance. Not only can I defeat you but I can protect my friends at the same time, as you have just seen."

"I do not recognize that name! And who are you, boy, to think you can match yourself against the greatest wizard of all time!" He immediately began hurling curses and hexes in a blinding array of colors.

Harry fought back using his shield when he could and otherwise Apparating so quickly that Voldemort couldn't keep up. As he had trained, Harry began firing spells while he Apparated. For the first time, a look of fear came upon the snake-like face of his opponent. Now and then, Harry couldn't help but notice spells of other colors finding their way toward Voldemort. Sometimes, Voldemort's own curses slipped past Harry and struck his own Death Eaters.

He glanced quickly around and saw that many of the Death Eaters had fallen and the holes were allowing the Order to fight directly with Voldemort. The spells they were using, it seemed, were designed to hurt him or slow him down. Just as Harry had ordered, though, none were trying to kill him.

Suddenly an earth-shattering roar filled the air and for a few seconds all heads looked up on both sides. For a moment Harry was dumbstruck at the sight before him. Rising slowly over the trees was a huge black dragon. Its line of razor-sharp ridges running from neck to tail and its

sharp, poisonous fangs glittering in the morning sun. At the same moment, several burly figures emerged from the trees, hollering and swinging deadly clubs.

Harry blinked twice as he recognized Hagrid, accompanied by Madam Maxine, followed close behind by Grawp and Arma. Watching the scene for a moment, Harry was even more surprised to hear Hagrid roaring “*Norbert!*” at the top of his lungs. The Norwegian Ridgeback appeared to glance down and follow the signals of the gamekeeper.

I guess Hagrid wasn't out of his mind in the Hospital, Harry thought wryly.

The battle went on and on. But with the help of four giants and a dragon on their side, the Death Eaters had more than they could handle. Harry was nearly alone in fighting Voldemort.

Soon, he found sweat dripping from his forehead but couldn't spare a second to wipe it. As a cutting curse was leveled at him, he dove and rolled over one shoulder, Apparating away in an instant. In return, he fired a simple bat-bogey hex, grinning as it hit its target. Momentarily pausing to reverse the spell, Voldemort didn't notice Harry approach him from the side.

In the blink of an eye, Harry threw a swirling fire toward his opponent. He smiled as the inferno engulfed Voldemort but was shocked when it disappeared to reveal the red-eyed man laughing evilly.

“Come now, Harry. You'll never defeat me using the pathetic rules set down by your school. Only an unforgivable curse will end me. But, dear me, I seem to recall your inability to perform such advanced magic when we met at the Ministry. You remember what happened there, don't you?”

Harry spun around with a powerful fire in his eye. Swinging his wand in a great arc, he combined a bludgeoning hex with a Sticking charm, casting it out in all directions. The sheer force of the magic was enough to knock most of the combatants to the ground. The few Death Eaters remaining after the onslaught of Order members, giants, and a Norwegian Ridgeback dragon cried out in fear and pain as they were hit. In an instant, members of the Order were hauling them away and binding them, hiding their stunned captives inside the dark line of the forest.

“That comment cost you your remaining Death Eaters!” shouted Harry in fury. “Care to say more?”

Suddenly a bright spark pierced his side and Harry nearly dropped his wand. For the first time that morning, he felt real pain. He gasped a few breaths and was surprised to feel the pain suddenly relenting. He launched a barrage of confounding spells at Voldemort and glanced around. His eyes fell on Ginny, who had hidden nearby behind a large tree. He saw her smirking at him turned back, surprised but happy that healing spells could be used from a distance.

Focusing his attention back on Voldemort, he dodged a few spells and renewed the fight with vigor. Every one of the Death Eaters was now dead or captured and only Voldemort remained. Around the battling pair, the Order formed a new circle, casting spells of every kind. Voldemort was under attack from every direction and yet he remained standing. Harry was surprised at his power as he managed to defend himself and continue to fight.

Around them, the circle began to close in. The Order was now three dozen strong. Thankfully, Harry spotted his friends among them, giving Ginny a special nod.

To his regret, Voldemort saw it and was now looking in her direction intently. Casting a protective spell around himself, the evil wizard raised his wand. Insanity mixed with terror and loathing filled his face as he began to lower it in what seemed like the slowest motion on earth.

In his mind, Harry knew Voldemort was building up for the Killing Curse, even before the man had spoken the words. Time seemed to slow as he watched the snake-like tongue and lips begin to form the first word. His gaze was drawn down the arm and the wand, finding it aimed with absolute precision at the red-haired girl standing only feet away.

Without thought or feeling, Harry closed his eyes. His body twisted and the earth below him shook. For a fraction of a second Harry Potter was nowhere. When he reappeared, he stood

stock still between Voldemort, his enemy, and Ginny, the girl he loved with all his heart. He knew what was about to happen but he knew there was nowhere he'd rather be.

A rushing sound like the thunder of a mountain of water came down upon him. Had his wand not been raised there would have been no time for it. As the spell reached him, Harry instantly knew what he had to do. Forcing every last ounce of his magic at the tip of his wand, he reached out to Ginny with his senses. As if she had known what was in his mind, her own powerful magic collided with his and together they faced their fate.

The jet of green light struck home, entering Harry's wand with such force that everyone standing in the clearing was once again knocked from their feet.

As one, Harry and Ginny fell to the dry earth; their wands still aimed at their target and their faces screwed up in pain and agony.

It happened in the blink of an eye. One moment Harry was watching from the side, the next he was standing in the way, and the next he fell rigidly to the ground. The words of the *Avada Kedavra* curse still lingered in the air.

As the horror of the situation sank in, Ron and Hermione could only watch helplessly from afar. There were so many things to see and to feel, they couldn't begin to grasp what was real and what wasn't. Swarms of Order members converged on the bodies inside the circle. Hermione was happy to see the school's nurse, Madam Pomfrey, among them, though she knew there was nothing to be done. Ron's strong arms reached around her as they watched the scene unfold. Her tears spilled down her face, leaving lines of clean skin contrasting with the dirt and mud of battle.

She struggled against Ron's strong grip as Harry and Ginny were raised limply from the ground and bound to floating stretchers. Her small fists pounded against Ron's arms but he held tight until she finally gave up, sinking slowly to the ground. Ron followed her down, cradling her in his arms and letting his own tears mix with hers, sparkling slowly as they dropped to the earth.

Together they sat for minutes on end, simply holding each other.

"He knew, didn't he?" Ron finally asked quietly.

Hermione could only nod.

"He knew all along, and Ginny, too. They can't have planned it like this but somehow they knew. I always wondered why Harry put so much work into capturing spells."

"Mr. Weasley, Ms. Granger, would you come with me please?" a voice interrupted their thoughts.

They looked up to see Professor McGonagall reaching down toward them. With her help they stood, still gripping each other tightly.

"I think there's something you should see," she stated quietly, her voice trembling.

They followed her across the clearing, coming within feet of the very dead body that had belonged to Voldemort. Hermione had the urge to curse it one last time but she allowed herself to be led on by Ron's strong arms. They followed their old professor into the trees and were surprised to find several stretchers lined up in rows, each holding an injured person a few feet up off the ground.

Professor McGonagall led them to two near the end. As Hermione recognized black and red hair, she let out a strangled cry. Her legs seemed to give out and she held onto Ron with all her strength. He remained standing, his face like iron, but his legs had stopped moving.

"Come forward," another voice pressed them. Madam Pomfrey had appeared beside them and began to urge them toward the pair laid out before them.

At last they were close enough to reach out and touch their friends. Professor McGonagall cast an intricate spell in the air above each bed, at the same time asking Ron and Hermione to hold

tightly onto each bed frame. A shimmering light obscured their vision for a moment and when it had gone, they found themselves standing in the hospital wing at Hogwarts.

A moment later two cracks split the air and Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey both appeared.

"I want you to watch closely," the latter instructed them, slightly breathlessly.

Again she waved her wand in the air above each body until two glowing orbs appeared. The orbs were red in color and seemed to pulsate rapidly.

"But... that's not possible," Hermione stuttered. "It can't be! I saw the spell and I watched them fall!"

"Wha—" Ron began to ask.

"These are simply showing me the health of my patient's hearts," the matron said, indicating the two orbs. She turned to face them directly. "What happened out there?" she asked sternly. "I need to understand why they weren't killed so that I might now save their lives."

"The—the Killing Curse," Ron said faintly. "We saw Voldemort use it. He was trying to kill Ginny but Harry jumped in the way and let it hit him. Only it didn't hit him directly. He sort of absorbed it through his wand. He and Ginny were both lit up by the green light and they both fell. But, right as it hit Harry's wand, some of it was reflected back onto Voldemort. It killed *him* in a second. But Harry and Ginny... they're... they should be dead. But, they're not?"

"No, Mr. Weasley," answered the Headmistress. "That is what we're trying to understand."

Madam Pomfrey turned back to her patients looking oddly anxious. She began muttering under her breath as she waved her wand over each one again and again. Bits and pieces of her words could be heard by the three observers.

"... no, it can't be that... no other major injuries... curse missed... how can this be?... perhaps his mother... or perhaps..." She turned rapidly to Ron and Hermione. "You say they both fell at the same time?"

They nodded.

"Did Harry... was there some way that he could have touched Ginny as it happened?"

"No," answered Ron. "I saw them. They were at least ten feet apart. There's no way they could have touched."

"Yes, of course," she answered, looking crestfallen. "But it does appear that they shared... no, there's no other way." She went back to examining her patients.

"What could they have shared?" Hermione asked quietly.

Madam Pomfrey stood up and walked back to them, rolling her wand slowly between her fingers. "Were Harry and Ginny friends?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes, they've known each other for years," answered Ron.

"No, I mean, how close were they?"

Hermione's voice cracked as she answered. "He loved her."

"And she loved him," Ron added, quietly. "It was obvious." He glanced sideways at Hermione but her hair hid her face from view.

"But you say there's no way they could have been touching?" the older witch asked again.

"Well," said Hermione, "maybe not physically..."

"What do you mean 'not physically'?" Madam Pomfrey asked eagerly.

"We found out this summer that we can talk to each other, sort of in our thoughts. And Harry, he could even draw from our magic..." Hermione's eyes went wide. "Do you think—"

"Yes, I do," Madam Pomfrey interrupted her. "The evidence shows they were both affected by the curse. They're not dead because part of it reflected back onto Voldemort and the rest was shared between them. I would have thought Harry would get the worst of it but it seems to have affected Ginny more."

“What does that mean?” asked Ron in a shaky voice.

This time it was Professor McGonagall’s turn to speak and her voice was much more compassionate than normal. “It means that while Harry is already making progress to recover, your sister is not. She’s not getting worse but she’s not getting better. It is, however, still very early and we must be patient and watch carefully.” She reached out and put a hand on Ron’s shoulder. “Do not give up hope, Ron, love has powers beyond our understanding. This morning its power defied death. There may yet be miracles in the works.”

Madam Pomfrey worked over her patients for several more minutes, diligently repairing what damage she could. Finally, she turned back to Ron and Hermione.

“I’ve done what I can. They’re as comfortable and stable as I can make them. I must get back to the forest. So many injured...”

Ron nodded and pulled Hermione close again. As the two older witches turned to leave, Professor McGonagall twirled her wand briefly and a squashy sofa appeared at the foot of the beds, just wide enough for two. With one last nod, she left the room.

The couple sat down heavily and it was only a matter of minutes until, even unwillingly, an exhausted sleep caught up with them. Nearly two hours went by until they were awakened by the simultaneous sounds of the doors bursting open and the noon chime ringing. They sat up and looked about groggily. In half a moment, Mrs. Weasley’s arms had engulfed them both in a hug. A second later she was moving cautiously toward Ginny’s bed. She laid a hand softly on her daughter’s cheek.

“What happened?” she asked, without looking up. “Minerva only said I should get back to the castle quickly. By the time I arrived the battle was over. Your father is still out there... helping where he can.”

Ron made to answer but Hermione touched his hand and stood up. She moved to the other side of the bed, taking Ginny’s hand.

“They... they fought Voldemort, or really, Harry fought Voldemort. He was brilliant, I’ve never seen anything like it, not even from Dumbledore. Anyway, the Order captured all the Death Eaters and then... and then it was just them. Voldemort was going to attack Ginny but Harry just... got in the way. We think they somehow combined their magic to survive the... the Killing Curse.”

Mrs. Weasley gasped audibly and covered her mouth with one hand, shaking her head.

“Mum,” said Ron, “they think Ginny got the worst of it somehow. Madam Pomfrey said Harry’s already improving but Ginny’s just... just stable.”

“My Ginny,” she said with a sob, brushing her fingers through her daughter’s hair. “She’s always been strong. And she’s always wanted to help.”

“She did,” said Hermione. “She may have saved Harry’s life. Voldemort got him with a curse but Ginny was right there and managed to perform a healing charm from out of sight. Harry was hurt pretty badly and he might not have been able to win without her help.”

“She’s loved him for so long,” added Mrs. Weasley. “She was willing to give herself up so that he could win. My dear girl. My dear Ginny.” She wiped a few tears from her face and turned back to the others, looking slightly dazed.

“I—I should go help Arthur. You’ll let me know if anything changes?”

They nodded.

“Good, then. She’ll be all right. She just needs time to find herself.” She hugged Ron and Hermione once more and then hurried out of sight, wiping hurriedly at her eyes as the door swung shut behind her.

Without knowing what else to do, Ron and Hermione sat back down on the short sofa. Ron ran his fingers slowly through Hermione’s hair as she rested her head on his shoulder. After some time, her eyes closed and her even breaths told Ron that she was asleep. He continued

running his fingers through her hair, more now for his benefit than hers. The minutes ticked by slowly and the rays of sunlight moved across the floor, dripping from tile to tile in silence.

The slightest sound caught Ron's attention and he perked up, peering around the room. It came again and he zeroed in on Harry. His friend's face was covered in beads of sweat and his throat was working, producing the nearly silent groans that had caught Ron's attention.

With the utmost care, Ron slipped out from under Hermione, propping her head with a conjured pillow. He moved quietly to Harry's side where he used a corner of the sheet to wipe the sweat from his brow. Harry continued to groan quietly but his body seemed to be waking up. There was a slight twitch in his fingers now and then and his feet were starting to move.

Ron grew more excited as his friend began to wake up but when the groans changed to silent cries, he started to panic. Grabbing his friend's shoulder, he shook him slightly, calling his name. When nothing happened, he called out to Hermione. Her eyes grew wide when she saw what was happening. "Ron! We have to get Madam Pomfrey!"

"How?" he asked.

"I don't know! No, wait! What if we sent a Patronus?"

"I don't think I could cast one right now," he said quietly.

She nodded and said 'okay', moving away from the bed. She closed her eyes, facing the door. As Ron watched in great hope, she raised her wand, saying the words. A long shape shot from her wand and disappeared under the door.

Hermione turned back to the beds, her eyes bright. "I did it," she said in awe.

"You did. That's why I love you so much."

She hugged him from the side, unable to say any more.

Together they waited. The minutes ticked by and they began to wonder if the message had reached its recipient. Finally, the sound of clicking feet drew their attention to the door. Madam Pomfrey entered quickly, alone, and hurried over to them.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Harry started moving and groaning. He was sweating, too. I got worried, though, when he tried to cry out."

"Pardon me, please," she said as she moved to his bedside. "Mr. Potter," she called out as she began examining him. "Can you hear me?"

"Mmmph," was the only reply.

The matron's face lit up. "Mr. Potter, listen to the sound of my voice. You're at Hogwarts and you're safe now. Your friends are here with you. Try to come back to them."

"Ginny," he said faintly.

"She's—she's here, Harry," said Hermione through her tears. She took one of his hands in hers and squeezed it.

"Okay, it's time to get down to business, Harry. I need you to help me. Can you open your eyes or move your fingers?"

Harry raised an arm and made a fist. At their continued urging he struggled to open his eyes. At first he could only blink a few times but finally he opened them completely.

"Where are you?" he asked in a scratchy voice. "I can't see you."

"We're here," said Ron as he joined Hermione standing next to Harry. Together they leaned over the bed so he could see them.

"I—I can't see anything. Is it night?"

Madam Pomfrey waved her hand in front of his face. "Harry, can you see my hand?" she asked patiently.

"No. What's wrong? Is it dark? Why can't I see?" he asked with a slight panic.

Madam Pomfrey continued to examine him with her wand. She spent several minutes over his face and when she was done, she gave a heavy sigh and touched his arm gently.

"Mr. Potter, your vision is gone for now. The curse must have been more than your body could handle and it shut parts down in order to protect them and heal."

"So I'm blind?" he asked quietly.

"Not permanently," she answered. "But you may be for some time. It's difficult to tell but it could be for days or even weeks."

"What about Ginny?" he asked. "Is she okay?" His voice began to raise. "Was she hurt? How come she isn't answering? You said she was here!"

"Harry," said Hermione, "you were both hit by Voldemort's Killing Curse. I have to ask... do you remember... were you sharing her magic when it happened?"

"We... we had it worked out beforehand," he answered. "If I got in trouble, I would use her magic and the same for her. We thought it might save us. You know, two against one. Will you please tell me what happened to her? Was she—"

Madam Pomfrey cut in. "I wish I had good news for you, Harry. She's stable but isn't showing any signs of improving or waking up. Perhaps... well, it may be a little unorthodox, but perhaps she needs *you*. When you're well enough to move, we'll have you talk to her and work with her."

Harry gripped the sides of his bed and began to sit up.

"Not now! Goodness gracious! You'll hurt yourself."

"I need to help her," Harry growled. "I don't care what happens to me."

Madam Pomfrey looked unhappy but moved to Ginny's bed anyway. She suspended several indicators in the air above Ginny and with a wave of her wand, Harry's bed slid over. A noise at the door distracted them momentarily but they turned back after seeing that it was only the Headmistress. The thudding of Ginny's heartbeat indicator was quiet but steady as Harry reached for her hand.

As soon as he made contact, her heart began to speed up.

"Easy, Harry," the matron said.

"I can't find her," Harry announced. "I can't feel her magic. It's always so strong but I can't feel it now!"

Ginny's heartbeat continued to increase in speed. Ron and Hermione backed away from the beds and stood next to Professor McGonagall. In a rare show of compassion, the older witch put her arms around them and pulled them close to her.

Harry continued to grip Ginny's hand tightly in his own. Her heart was racing now and her breathing became erratic. Madam Pomfrey worked like mad above her body but grew more and more frustrated.

Then, in one moment it was all over. Her heartbeat stopped. Harry cried out in pain and collapsed back onto his bed, entirely unconscious. Several feet away, in a voice too quiet to be heard, Professor McGonagall said only a few simple words.

"I fear this is the end of Ginny Weasley."

The Autumn sun was bright through the bedroom windows of the Burrow. Harry stirred and sat up, rubbing his eyes. Though it had only been a few days, his sight was beginning to return and he was now able to distinguish light from dark.

"Ron?" he asked quietly.

"I'm here, Harry," Ron said sleepily from across the room. "What do you need?"

"To use the loo," Harry answered.

With the guidance of his friend, Harry made it across the room to the door. Just as Ron opened it, another Weasley appeared.

“Ginny!” cried Ron. “Here, you take Harry to the loo so I can go back to bed.”

“Erm, Ron?” asked Harry. “I think it would be best if *you* helped me.”

Ginny giggled and said, “I’ll meet you two for breakfast then.” She turned and ran down the stairs, her ponytail swinging wildly behind her.

Harry shook his head and smiled. “Maybe I should have asked her to help me take a shower.”

“I’m not afraid to hex a blind man,” said Ron. “Even my best mate who just saved the world.”

“Oh, all right. Come on, I’ve really got to go. We can argue about your feeble wand-work later.”

“If you fell down the stairs it would look like an accident, you know,” said Ron as they started their descent. They continued the friendly banter all the way to the bathroom and then on to the kitchen. When they came through the door into the kitchen, Ginny took Harry’s arm from Ron and led him to the table, sitting down next to him.

“Good morning,” she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Harry laughed. “That had better have been Ginny, not Ron!”

She squeezed his hand and giggled.

After breakfast and a shower (without Ginny’s help), Harry found himself sitting on the back porch with her, sipping a mug of cocoa. They had been at the Burrow for two days and he was still learning how to depend on others for help. To him, that include his lack of ability to do any activities like Quidditch during the day. He had quickly found that Ginny was his best hope for both entertaining and varied conversation.

This morning, however, he found himself being quizzed by Mr. Weasley about his and Ginny’s recovery. Ginny had gone inside at her mother’s request and Mr. Weasley had come out to be with Harry. After hearing the story every day since they’d arrived, Mr. Weasley still couldn’t believe everything that had happened.

“Harry,” he said, “I owe you a great debt of gratitude for saving Ginny. I know I don’t have to tell you how special she is – you’ve learned that for yourself – but it would have been very difficult to go on without her. I would have missed her dearly and I don’t think her brothers would have known how to act without their only sister.”

“I know what you mean,” said Harry, “and I wish I could explain how it all happened, but I don’t really understand it myself. I remember hearing her heartbeat stop and just reaching out with everything I had to bring her back. I don’t really know how it happened. Madam Pomfrey just said it restarted a few seconds later and within a few minutes she was awake and talking again. I guess I took a bit longer, but I made it, too.”

Harry paused and frowned at the ground for a few moments.

“I think Dumbledore would have said something about my mother and how she protected me when she died. I guess it’s like that, only I got to stay.”

“Love, you mean,” said Arthur.

“Yeah,” replied Harry thoughtfully.

They sat quietly for a while before Harry tried to speak up again.

“Erm, Mr. Weasley?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been thinking about something for a while and I wanted to talk to you about it. See, I, well, I really want to ask Ginny to marry me. I know we kind of talked about this before, but... I don’t have any reasons now to hold back. I can... can have a *life* now.” He ducked his head and fidgeted with his fingers on the arms of the chair. “Of course, I’ll understand if you don’t want me to. It’s not like my life’s been peachy up to now and I sure seem to attract danger. But I love her, just in case that makes any difference.”

Mr. Weasley put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Harry, you know we've always thought of you as a son. And as strange as it may seem for my son to want to marry my daughter, I think I can get used to it," he chuckled. "She's been rather fond of you for some time, as I understand it."

"I'm sorry," said Harry, "I didn't mean for it to be weird, I just—"

"No, Harry," Mr. Weasley laughed louder, "I don't really mean it that way. In fact, I'm happy to give my full consent for you to ask her to marry you. The best compliment I can give you is to say that she deserves someone like you."

Harry felt his cheeks turn red and muttered a quiet thanks.

"So, when do you think you'll propose?" the older man asked.

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't have any reason not to do it the very next moment I see her." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. "I've even got my mother's ring. It took some doing to convince Ron to help me get it, but with some help from Hermione, he finally did. I'll have to remember to thank her."

"Well, here comes your chance, she's on her way back out. Ginny, that is."

With that, he got up and went inside. In a few moments, Ginny sat down next to Harry. Her flowery scent made his senses swirl and he couldn't help but smile. "I want to be able to see you again," he said.

"I'm right here, Harry."

"No, I mean the worst part of not being able to see is that I can't *see* you." He reached out and put his fingers on her face. "I want to see your face again and the color of your hair. I want to see your smile."

"Soon, love, soon. Madam Pomfrey said it might take a few weeks."

"I know," he sighed, "but I've never been that patient. Still, I do like having you take care of me. Even if you won't help me bathe myself." He grinned.

"Sorry, Harry, you'll have to wait on that. Remember our agreement?"

"I do," he answered seriously. "So, it's a nice day?"

"It is. The leaves are changing colors. It's beautiful."

"Fancy a walk?"

"Let me think... a walk with my boyfriend on a beautiful autumn day. Okay!"

Together they made their way slowly down the steps and out into the fields behind the house. There was a cool breeze but the sun kept them warm. Ginny led them to a patch of grass by the stream and they sat down for a while. Harry struggled with himself wondering when he should ask her the question that had been burning in him for so long. He still had self-doubts that she would say no, but on days like today it felt like they were already bound forever.

He drew in a breath and decided that the time had come. Turning toward her warmth and magic, he sat on his knees and fumbled to get both of her hands in his.

"Ginny, I want to ask you something and I just can't wait anymore. I love you so much. For a long time I denied it to myself but now I want to shout it out to everyone that I love you. You make me feel special in a way that no one else ever has. You know me like no one else does. You know what I'm feeling even before I do and you know how to change my mood just with your smile. Without you I would have been lost and I'm sure I wouldn't be here today.

"I don't have anything to offer you except who I am, which really isn't that much. But I promise to always do everything I can to make you happy, the way that you make me happy. Ginevra Molly Weasley, will you make me the happiest man in the world by saying you'll marry me?"

Ginny swiped her tears away and pounced on him, hugging him with all her might.

"Of course, Harry!" she cried, "I love you." She held on around his neck, whispering 'I love you' over and over again. When she finally pulled away, she sat next to him and took his hands in hers.

"Harry James Potter, I love you and I want to marry you. I want to be the person I am around you all the time. You make me so happy by the way you treat me. You show me honor and love and gratitude and I hope I can live up to those things. You're the kindest, most gentlemanly man I know and I would be honored to be your wife. I've loved you for a long time and I'll keep loving you... forever."

When she finished he pulled the box from his pocket and laid it in her hand.

"This is for you," he said softly.

She opened the box to reveal a small diamond ring. She gazed at it for a few moments before eagerly slipping it onto her finger. It instantly resized itself onto its new home.

"Harry, it's beautiful. But when did you have time to get it?"

"Actually... it was my mother's. It was one of the few things of hers that I knew about in my vault at Gringott's. I had Ron get it for me the other day."

She laughed. "I bet he loved that!"

"Yeah," Harry chuckled, "Hermione had to convince him. I don't know what she did but I think there were threats involved."

They both laughed. They laughed with true joy and basked in the feeling of it. The rest of the morning they talked about when they would get married and made bets on when Ron would ask Hermione to marry him.

"So, what do you want to do now? Do you still want to be an Auror?" Ginny asked much later that morning.

"Well, actually... did you know that Professor McGonagall offered me the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts? I've been thinking about it a lot and... and it might really be what I want to do. I've kind of liked teaching ever since the DA."

Ginny smiled and squeezed his hand. "I think you'd be brilliant," she said. "Not only are you The-Boy-Who-Lived but you're a really good teacher."

Harry scoffed but smiled.

"No, you really are," she continued. "Ask anyone who was in the DA. Harry, you're one of the best teachers any of us ever had. Of course, I might be biased. I learned a lot from you but at least half the time I was daydreaming about you."

"Oh," he said, "what about me?"

"Just the usual. You flying down on your white hippogriff, sweeping me off my feet. Then we land in the Quidditch pitch where you get your broom and take me for a romantic moonlit ride. We finish off the night sharing chocolate frogs. Then of course Ron bursts in ruining everything by asking if you'll trade his Agrippa card for Ptolemy."

"He would," said Harry.

"It doesn't matter, though," she continued more seriously, "because I'll have you now forever. We can do whatever we want. Doesn't that sound good? Being free from everyone's expectations, free from that prophecy, free to go anywhere and do anything?" She sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. The calm around them was nearly palpable.

"You know, that does sound good," said Harry. "It's just the beginning. No more being told what to do. No more hiding, no more fighting. We can finally just enjoy our life together. I'm not sure I know how to do that, really. What d'you think?"

"I think we're already starting to find out. Whatever happens now, we're in it together."

"So, should we go home and tell your family?"

"Can't we just stay here a little longer?" she asked.

“We can do whatever we want. That’s the beauty of it. Now we can do whatever we want.”

“Yeah, we can. And *home*, I like the sound of that. *Home*.”

They stayed for a few more minutes before getting up and starting slowly back. When they finally reached the back steps, Harry paused.

“Well, here we are. This is what home really feels like.”

“Yes, it is. Welcome home, Harry.”

Minerva McGonagall tapped the small envelope in her hands with her wand and smiled as she saw the handwriting within.

Harry’s writing always was easy to recognize, she thought.

But what’s this? Ginny wrote, too? She smiled at the thought and read the short letter. Her smile only grew as she read. Putting it down, she sipped quietly from her mug.

So, Harry, you’re going to teach. The students will love you, that’s for sure. They always did. And you’re going to get married. Well, Potter, it’s about time you saw what’s in front of your face. Just like your father, you are. You’re going to make a great husband to that beautiful girl.

Then another thought struck her.

I guess it really is the end of Ginny Weasley. Potter is such a good name and it’ll be nice having another Mrs. Potter around.

And then Minerva McGonagall did something she hadn’t done in a long time. She laughed. She laughed and laughed until she couldn’t breath any more. It had been so long. But not anymore. Now they would live in peace. Now they would live in freedom. Now they would be prepared for their future, taught by one who had *lived it*.

Harry Potter had saved the world.

Though perhaps he deserves a year off.

She picked up her quill and began addressing letters for a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Some things never change, she thought.

Epilogue

Lesson Learned

Awaking his senses from the crashing waves, Harry opened his eyes again, surprised at how overcome he was with memories of the past few years. Voices from inside the house drew him in and he picked up his shoes and dropped them by the front door. Pushing it open, he stepped into that familiar entrance. There were so many feelings and memories made in this place, they almost overwhelmed him again.

A smooth hand made its way into his and he smiled.

"What took you so long?" Ginny asked. "We've been waiting for you. Ron's going off about how he always knew you and I would get together. So I conveniently reminded him of the time when Hermione kissed you. You've been missing all the fun!"

"I guess I have," Harry laughed. "I was just stuck on some old memories of this place... of that time. We learned so much here."

"Yes, we did," her eyes glittered with mischief, "I believe it was when you finally broke down to my feminine powers over you."

Harry wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, kissing her.

"Married two years and still doing that?" a voice called out from behind them.

"Hi, John," Harry said, offering his hand. He was once again amazed that this man never seemed to age. Perhaps it was the water. He would have to ask sometime.

"Shall we go have some dinner?" John asked.

"Yeah, let's do that. And then maybe we can reminisce about old times."

"Around a fire on the beach?" John added.

Harry laughed. "Sure. Then what? Planting trees in your garden and battling each other in the catacombs?"

"If you like. But I think I've got a better idea. How about a chair on the back porch looking out over the lake and watching the sun set?"

"That sounds great. Where're Ron and Hermione?"

"They're already out there," answered Ginny. "C'mon, let's go."

Taking his hand, she led him out the back door.

The sound of the water greeted him again and he smiled. Yes, this was a good place. It was a good place that had helped him make a good life. Without the close quarters and good company he might never have realized just how important Ginny was in his life. With her help he had overcome hate and fear and found that he was capable of loving and of being loved.

Love had started it all. His parents had loved him and *that* love had protected him through many dangers. His friends had loved him, sticking with him and helping him through the toughest of times. And then Ginny had loved him. She loved him with a never-ending kind of love, a love so strong that she had been willing to give her life for him. In the end it was what had saved them both.

Someday, Harry decided, he would have to teach his own children about love and what it means to love and be loved. It was just like Dumbledore always said, love is in you and love can protect you from the worst of times. If you only let it.