

Just Plain Harry

by

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Chapter 1 The Twenty-Fourth of July

Harry lay on his bed and willed himself not to see it - not to think about it. But even when he closed his eyes and tried to think of something else - Quidditch, or Cho Chang - everything led back to Cedric, and the date. It was July 24th, exactly one month since Voldemort had killed Cedric and risen to his full power again, and that was all Harry could think about.

He had gotten quite good at not thinking about it all in the three weeks since he had arrived back at the Dursleys'. Hermione would be so proud of him - he had already finished all of his summer assignments, and was even going back and studying his old books again from the beginning, just to keep his mind occupied. Though, judging by her letters, she was more worried than proud.

But even thinking about his friends couldn't keep his mind from Cedric tonight. Not even remembering Ron's last letter, which seemed to Harry to be just one long scream of frustration over Hermione. She had gone to Bulgaria to visit Viktor Krum for a week, and she and Ron had been conducting a tremendous letter fight ever since. Usually, hearing about both sides of their arguments, especially since he had started figuring out their changing feelings for each other, could take his mind off his own problems. Not tonight. Harry supposed that was all right, though - it was appropriate that he couldn't think of anything but Cedric, one month after his death.

That wasn't the only thing to worry Harry, of course. He spent many hours, when he wasn't working on schoolwork, just staring out the window, waiting for letters to come. Ron, Hermione, Sirius, Hagrid - he worried about them all, and there was nothing he could do for any of them. Not stuck here at the Dursleys', anyway.

Although it was more bearable here this summer, mostly because the Dursleys had adopted the practice of simply ignoring Harry. They didn't call for him to wake up, they let him get his own meals, they didn't even make him do housework. Maybe they thought that if they just ignored him, he would go away. And he would, just as soon as Professor Dumbledore said he could. He was sending the Headmaster owls every week, and he knew Ron was, too. Harry wanted to be at the Burrow so much he could taste it - to laugh at the twins' jokes, to talk with Mr. Weasley about Muggle things, to be stuffed full to bursting by Mrs. Weasley, to spend time with Ron, to just feel the love that surrounded him there. The Weasleys loved him - Harry, not the Famous Harry Potter, just Harry. He would even like to be lectured by Percy right now, as long as he was *there*.

Harry groaned and pulled his pillow over his head. *Stop thinking about it*, he told himself. *Dumbledore will let you know as soon as it's safe. He knows how important it is to you. And you don't want to put the Weasleys in danger, just because of you, do you? Even more danger than they're already in, that is.* That thought made him groan again.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Harry couldn't believe it - Aunt Petunia hadn't even been coming in to clean.

"Erm...come in?" he said, taking the pillow off his head and staring at the door as it opened.

Aunt Petunia opened it just enough so that she could sneak in, and shut it quickly behind her. Harry didn't know why she did that - Uncle Vernon was away at some week-long meeting about drills for his company, Grunnings, and Dudley was completely engrossed in his favorite TV program - Harry could hear the TV from up here.

"Gracious, Harry, we've been leaving you alone all summer, the least you could have done was keep your room clean!" She stalked around, glaring at the quills, parchment, school books, and owl feathers that were scattered around the room. When she looked at Harry sitting there on the bed, though, her eyes softened.

"Are you...all right?" she said.

It was absolutely the last thing Harry had expected, and it shocked him so much that he told her the truth.

"No," was all he said, but he must have looked completely flabbergasted - he sure felt it - because she reddened.

"I was...I've been watching you," she said, but then she shook her head. She stared at him, and he stared back. Then she walked quickly over to his desk chair and sat down.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have Lily's eyes?"

"Erm...yeah, actually, lots of people," Harry said.

Aunt Petunia looked vaguely interested, which, since it was obvious that the only people who could have told Harry about his mother's eyes were wizards, Harry thought must mean that she was consumed with wonder.

"Um...my Headmaster told me once, and some of my mum and dad's friends from school..." Harry trailed off, because Aunt Petunia looked almost pathetically eager.

"Which ones?" she asked, but almost immediately shook her head sadly. "It doesn't matter, anyway. I -" she stopped again, while Harry just sat there and watched her. He had no idea what was going on here.

"One summer, Lily came home from school with the exact same look in her eyes that you have right now," Aunt Petunia said in a rush. "She didn't want to tell me why at first, and I know she never told my parents. But I was persistent, and eventually...she said that one of her friends had a secret that would alienate him from the rest of the wizarding world. She said that it probably wouldn't bother me more than any other type of wizard, but in *her* world..." Aunt Petunia stopped, swallowed, and went on. She was twisting her hands together in her lap. "In her world, it was a big deal. And one of her other friends had done something to jeopardize the secret, so that someone who wasn't their friend found out about it, all for some stupid joke. Of course, she was all proud of James, you could see that in her eyes, too - I suppose he did something terribly brave, as usual. But her main worry was the friend with the secret. He was in danger, she said, and there was nothing she could do about it, which haunted her. I could see it in her eyes, and that's the look I see in your eyes all the time, Harry."

All of that speech came out in a rush with barely time for breath, while Harry watched in wonder. It was definitely the longest speech Aunt Petunia had ever given to him, and she had *never* spoken of his mother before. It was weird to think of the two of them as sisters,

confiding in each other, even a little. His mum had obviously not told Aunt Petunia exactly what the secret was, but Harry knew. Professor Lupin, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher in Harry's third year at Hogwarts, and one of his parents' best friends, was a werewolf. Sirius had played a joke on Severus Snape, another of Harry's teachers, whom all of Harry's parents' friends hated. The joke would most likely have killed Snape, but Harry's dad had found out about it and stopped it, though not before Snape saw Lupin changing into his werewolf form. Harry had never really thought before about the fact that Sirius had risked Lupin's secret and future just for that joke. It shocked Harry, because he knew that Sirius and Lupin were so close they were almost brothers. How could Sirius have done that?

"And then later, at the wedding," Aunt Petunia said, which brought Harry out of his thoughts immediately. She almost seemed to be talking to herself.

"At the wedding, almost everybody had that look in their eyes. Oh, they all looked happy, and had lots of fun - lots of stupid, immature jokes -" her voice took on a scornful tone that sounded more like herself "but they all looked...I don't know. Like someone had murdered one of them, or was *going* to murder one of them, but they didn't know which. It was...it was very strange."

Harry just stared at her. He had never thought that Aunt Petunia had been at his parents' wedding - she wasn't in any of the pictures he had of it - though he supposed it made sense. But since when had she been so observant? The wedding had been at a time when Voldemort's power was starting to peak, so no wonder everyone had looked haunted. Voldemort *was* going to murder one of them - two of them, actually, Harry's parents. To stop himself from thinking about it, Harry forced his thoughts back to his aunt.

"But there was one man," Aunt Petunia was saying, still twisting her hands in her lap and looking at them, not Harry. "His name was...Remus. Strange name, but his eyes looked like they had always been haunted. We talked a lot - we were paired up as attendants. Lily hadn't asked me to be her maid of honor, of course, that was one of her magical friends, but I was a bridesmaid, and Remus was a groomsman." She hesitated, then pulled a picture out of her pocket, which Harry stared at, shocked again.

It was a wizard photograph. It was a formal pose, his parents in the middle, and three couples grouped around them, all in their wedding finery. But the people were moving, most of them waving at Harry, although the young Aunt Petunia in the photo did so almost sheepishly. Sirius was waving with one hand and giving Harry's dad bunny ears with the other. Harry stared at it, thinking about how the lives of the people in the picture had diverged so drastically soon after it was taken.

Aunt Petunia looked down at the picture in her hands.

"That's Remus," she said, pointing at the man who was standing next to her, smiling and waving up at Harry. "Do you...do you know him?"

"Um, yeah," Harry said. "He was one of my professors."

"Oh," Aunt Petunia said. "Is he...did he...oh, never mind. It isn't important." She stood up and thrust the picture into Harry's hands.

"You keep this. Just don't let your uncle see it," she said, shuffling to the door. She turned and looked Harry straight in the eye, for the first time since she had mentioned his

mother. She had tears in her eyes, which shocked Harry again. How many shocks was he going to get in one day?

"I just wanted to let you know that I know that you're hurting. If you need someone to talk to...well, I'll try."

And with that, Aunt Petunia sneaked out the door again.

Harry lay back on his bed again, looking at the picture, and trying to figure out what to make of all this. He recognized most of the people in the picture. There were his parents, of course, and Aunt Petunia with Professor Lupin. Harry's godfather, Sirius, was next to his father, with a woman that Harry didn't know. He supposed that she was his mother's maid of honor. He wondered who she was, and what had happened to her, but his attention was mostly drawn to the fourth man in the picture, Peter Pettigrew.

Peter had been one of his dad's best friends at Hogwarts, one of the boys who had become Animagi to keep Lupin company when he transformed. But later, he had betrayed them all the Voldemort, allowing Voldemort to kill Harry's parents and framing Sirius for the murders, so that Sirius had had to spend twelve years in Azkaban. Looking at the small, slight man waving up at him from the picture, Harry could hardly believe it, though he knew it was true. They all looked so happy, and so much the group of life-long friends. And yet, Pettigrew must have even then been working for Voldemort.

Harry put the picture on his bedside table, determined not to think about it. The other weird thing about the conversation, aside from it happening at all, that is, was Aunt Petunia's obvious interest in Remus Lupin. Harry knew a crush when he saw one - there was Ron's for Fleur Delacour as an example, or even his for Cho Chang. But to think of Aunt Petunia and Professor Lupin...it was just too strange, especially since she still seemed to think about him. *That almost goes from the crush stage to, oh, unrequited love*, Harry thought. *If it has lasted this long...*

Rolling over onto his stomach, Harry grabbed his quill and parchment from his table. He had to write to Ron about this - it was just too funny. But when he tried to write about it, he stopped. It really wasn't funny, it was almost pathetic. But it was real, and Harry found that he couldn't make fun of Aunt Petunia. Maybe he could write to Hermione, he thought, but then he reconsidered that, too. She would understand, and she wouldn't laugh, but somehow Harry just couldn't do it.

He found himself writing, "Dear Ginny," before he thought about it. She would definitely understand, she certainly wouldn't laugh, and somehow, he felt comfortable telling her about it. He got stuck half-way down the page, however. She might not laugh, he thought, but she would be embarrassed. It was too much like he was comparing it to her crush on him, and that might hurt her, which he would never want to do. He didn't return her feelings, but she was still his best friend's sister, and he didn't want to hurt her.

Harry crumpled up the parchment, put his glasses on the bedside table, turned off the light, and rolled over. He wouldn't write to anyone, but he certainly wanted to ask Professor Lupin if he remembered Aunt Petunia. Yet another thing to ask his parents' friends about, whenever he saw them again.

Chapter 2 - A Tolerable Birthday

Harry sped through the air on his Firebolt, enjoying the wind through his hair. He wasn't playing Quidditch, he was just flying, something he rarely did. But when he started to descend, without really meaning to, towards an old, ivy-covered house on a hill, he realized what was happening and whimpered in his sleep. He didn't want to go there again, but he didn't seem to have much choice, since he couldn't make himself wake up.

Without trying to, Harry circled the house once, then swooped down into a room...the same room as before...with the same arm chair, but this time it was facing a table, and Harry could see who was sitting in it. Voldemort. His face seemed to be paler than ever, his red eyes were narrowed even further than usual, and he was laughing. The other men in the room were laughing, too, but Harry couldn't make out who they were.

"Yes, it's better this way," Voldemort was saying, his high-pitched voice sounding positively gleeful. "He will think he is safe now, since he escaped from my clutches. But, one by one, the people he cares about will disappear, and die, and he will never know which will be next. Yes, imagine it...he will suffer as I suffered for thirteen years...until he is alone and friendless, praying for the end...yes..."

The other men in the room agreed with him, though Harry still couldn't tell who they were. He thought he recognized one laugh, but his dream self rejected that idea.

"And then," Voldemort continued. "Once he is bereft of everyone he ever cared about, he will get what he is praying for. Oh, yes, make no doubt about it. Harry Potter has no chance against me...he never did...and he knows it, too."

Harry heard agreeing voices, but, try as he would, he couldn't remain there. When Voldemort spoke his name, a pain more intense than he had felt before made him clutch his scar in his dream, which made him fall off his broom, which made him wake up.

Harry sat upright in bed, still clutching his scar, but already the pain was fading as he remembered what he had heard. "...the people he cares about will disappear...bereft of everyone he ever cared about..." He couldn't let that happen. He just couldn't. But what could he do? Voldemort knew about all his friends, he knew about Sirius and Professor Lupin, thanks to Wormtail, he knew about the Weasleys. He would want to kill them, anyway, since Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie were already working to bring him down, too. Percy would come around soon, Ron said in his letters, but for right now, he still believed the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, when he said that Voldemort hadn't returned. It hurt Harry that Percy didn't believe him, but that was yet another thing he couldn't do anything about.

Harry lay back down on the bed, the pain in his scar almost forgotten. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't stay with the Dursleys forever - setting aside that he didn't want to, they would never allow it. And staying away from those he loved wouldn't save them, not if Voldemort was already set on this course. What could he do to help if he was stuck at the Dursleys, unable to do any magic at all? What could he do to help if he was right there, though? He had no idea.

Well, there was one thing to do right away. He had promised Professor Dumbledore to write him if he had any dreams of Voldemort. Of course, he had had dreams of Voldemort every night since the third task, but he knew that this one was different. Those were just

nightmares - scary and horrible, but just nightmares. This one was different. He should write to Sirius, too.

The letter to Dumbledore was easily written, and set aside for when Hedwig came back. But Harry got stuck half-way through his letter to Sirius. How could he tell Sirius that he was in danger, all because of him? "Oh, by the way, godfather, you're in more danger now than you have been since you escaped Azkaban, all because you love me." *Yeah, that sounds about right.*

Harry threw his quill down and put his head in his hands. *Why me?* he thought. *All I ever wanted was a normal childhood, with parents and friends and...normal things. Why did I have to be The Boy Who Lived, so that even my friends are in awe when they think about it?* He always tried very hard not to think these things, but sometimes, like now, he just couldn't help himself.

As Harry sat there, allowing himself a few minutes of despair, he heard the familiar flap of wings. Then he heard more wings, and more. Hedwig appeared in his window, swooping in to land on his desk. She was followed by at least twenty other owls, all bearing packages and letters. Harry took Hedwig's first, of course. It was from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! I hope you don't mind that I kept Hedwig an extra day...I wanted to make sure that you got this on your birthday. I've been thinking about giving it to you for awhile, but wasn't sure you were ready. But you said you had been studying a lot, so I guess you are. Promise me you won't try it without me, though, I've been doing lots of research, and it could very easily go wrong. We'll work on it together, okay?

Ron is still being a complete and utter idiot. Harry, you have to make him see sense. It is nothing to him if I write to Viktor, is it? ~~Or if it is,~~

Well, I'm not going to spoil your birthday with my problems. I hope you'll be able to go to the Burrow, but, at any rate, I'll see you on September 1st.

With love from,

Hermione

Harry stared at the letter, thinking about his friends. How could he make Ron see sense? Ron never saw what he didn't want to see, and it was painfully obvious that he didn't want to see his feelings for Hermione. Oh, well, there was nothing he could do about it now. He turned to her present, which he could feel through the wrapping was a book. When he opened it, though, he gasped. *Animagi: A Guide to Finding Your Inner Animal*. How had Hermione known? Ever since he had found out that his father was an Animagus, he had wanted to do it, too. But it was very advanced magic, and he wasn't sure he was up to it. If Hermione helped him, though... *Wow, Hermione!*

Harry tore himself away from the book, and looked at the other owls perched around the room. Thinking about Aunt Petunia's face when she saw the mess in here made him smile,

but he set about removing all the letters and packages so that the owls could leave. He left Pigwidgeon for last, because he was flitting about the room, instead of waiting for Harry to remove his burden, like a proper post owl should. Hermes was there too, with a positively enormous parcel. Hermes was Percy's owl, and always reminded Harry of his owner, since he held himself very stiff and looked very proper. Harry was surprised to see him - usually he was out delivering yet another letter to Percy's girlfriend, Penelope. Hermes hooted softly at Harry, then took off again into the night, making Harry grin. Percy must have told him to come right back.

The enormous parcel Hermes had carried contained a large chocolate cake, a blue Weasley sweater (which was a good thing, because his old one was several inches too short now), a picture in a frame, and a letter.

Dear Harry, the letter read in a small, firm hand that Harry didn't recognize:

Happy Birthday! Mum sends along the cake and sweater, of course, and we all send our (here a word was heavily scratched out) best wishes. The pictures are from Fred, George and me. I got them from people around school, and Fred and George invented the frame to hold more than one. They should be real inventors, not just of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. **No, we shouldn't.** *Yeah, what does she mean, **real** inventors?* You just tap lightly on the upper right-hand corner of the frame to switch pictures. You can add more, too, but that's more complicated, and Fred and George will have to show you how.

Hope you had a tolerable birthday, Harry, even with the Dursleys. If I don't see you before, see you on the Hogwarts Express.

Ginny

Harry couldn't help but grin at the letter, especially at the twins' interjections. But he could guess what the word was that Ginny had scratched out. He hoped she wouldn't mope around after him again this year. Though she actually hadn't last year, come to think of it. He had been so busy with the Triwizard Tournament and watching Cho to realize it then, but now that he thought about it, he hadn't really seen much of her last year. Well, that was a good thing, wasn't it? She was probably just embarrassed about her old crush, that's why she scratched out 'love.' The rest of the letter was certainly just plain friendly.

He turned to the picture frame, which currently held a picture of Ron, Hermione, and himself, flopped down on the ground out by the lake at Hogwarts. He remembered when it was taken, after a particularly grueling Transfiguration class. Dean Thomas, another Gryffindor friend of theirs, had taken it, saying that he wanted to prove that even Hermione was overwhelmed sometimes. Harry grinned, and tapped the upper right-hand corner of the frame. Most of the rest of the pictures were also of Ron, Hermione, and himself, but there was one with all of the Weasleys outside their house, waving at him. It had obviously been taken this summer, because Ron was even taller than he remembered, and everyone, though waving furiously, looked a little sad and worried. He knew what Aunt Petunia had meant about everyone being happy but also looking haunted. Harry didn't want to see the Weasleys like that. He flipped to the last picture quickly.

This one, Harry didn't remember being taken. It was of Ron and himself at the Yule Ball last year, sitting at a table and talking. Their dates for the ball, Parvati and Padma Patil, weren't in the picture, which, considering how mad the Patils had been at them, was probably

a good thing. He and Ron were laughing, so they couldn't have been talking about Hermione or Hagrid, two things they had talked a lot about that evening. Behind them were the dancers, including Hermione and Viktor Krum, so it was also a good thing Ron wasn't looking around. Fred and Angelina were dancing, too, and so were Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, and poor Ginny and Neville, with Ginny wincing at every other step as Neville stepped on her feet. Remembering how carefree and happy they had been at the ball, and how many of the people in the picture were now in grave danger, Harry flipped the picture frame again, back to the first picture.

Trying not to think about it, Harry turned to Ron's letter and parcel.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday!

I have the best birthday present ever - Dumbledore says you can come here for the last week of the summer! I'm going to ask Hermione, too. Hopefully she can tear herself away from Vicky for that long.

Things are still weird here. I'm still doing my "internship" at Dad's office - it's a lot more interesting than I thought it would be. Muggles do come up with some useful things. Like your real birthday present - we've gotta think of some ways to get Malfoy with this!

Well, I'll see you soon. I can't wait!

Ron

Harry tore open the wrapping on Ron's gift to reveal a water gun. He had to grin, imagining Draco Malfoy's face when they hit him with a stream of water without using a wand. Ron was right, there were definite possibilities here. But the best news of all was that he could go to the Burrow. Maybe he could even help Ron out with his "internship" at the Ministry. In reality, Ron was helping his dad's assistant to run the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office while Mr. Weasley did things for Dumbledore. Ron had been enormously flattered when his dad asked him for help, even though he had complained again about his dad working in the most boring office. Harry was glad that it was turning out better than he had thought it would.

Harry put down the water gun, and set about opening the rest of his presents. Hagrid had sent him some fudge, which was actually good, so Harry suspected that maybe Madame Maxim had had a hand in making it (Hagrid mentioned he was still with her in the letter attached to the fudge). Colin Creevey gave him a picture, too, and Harry could certainly understand why he hadn't given it to Ginny for her present. It was a picture of the Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw match from Harry's third year, when Malfoy and his goons dressed up as dementors to try to scare Harry and sabotage the match. Harry had conjured a wonderful Patronus to charge down the "dementors," so the picture was of the four Slytherins down on the ground, tangled in their cloaks and obviously out of it.

Everyone, from Professor Lupin to Neville, sent him wonderful presents, but nothing compared to what Sirius sent him. It was a set of letters that his dad had written to Sirius - nothing earth-shattering in importance, but they were letters that his dad had written, and it

was the best birthday present Harry had ever gotten. He settled down to read them, forgetting, for the moment, about his dream and all that it meant.

Chapter 3 A Talk with Professor Moody

Three weeks later, Harry nervously paced his room. All of his things were packed, and he was just waiting for the Weasleys to pick him up. He wondered how they would do it - the last time, they had tried to use Floo Powder, but since the Dursleys had an electric fire, that hadn't worked well. Just then, Harry heard an enormous honking coming down the street. He poked his head out of his window and saw a large car coming towards the house. He recognized it - it was a Ministry car. Harry ran downstairs quickly - he wanted to see Uncle Vernon's face when he saw the impressive car.

He wasn't disappointed. Uncle Vernon stared with shock when he saw Mr. Weasley, still in his shabby robes, get out of the car. Ron, Fred and George piled out, too, and Harry could see the driver glare at the twins as he came to the door. They were most likely the ones who had been honking the horn.

Getting his stuff downstairs and into the car went smoothly, once Mr. Weasley told the twins sternly to behave themselves. So this time it was Ron who dropped a piece of candy in Harry's room, grinning as he did so. Just as he was about to leave, though, Aunt Petunia stopped him.

"I hope things work out for you, Harry," she said, not looking at her husband. "Try not to let everything get you down. And tell...never mind." At that, she did give a quick, scared look to Uncle Vernon, but then looked back at Harry.

"Yeah, thanks, Aunt Petunia," Harry said, not looking at Uncle Vernon either. "Well...bye."

As they all piled into the car, Ron, Fred, and George said with one breath, "What was *that* all about?"

"Um, nothing," Harry said. They started to ask him again, but both Mr. Weasley and the driver said, "Enough!" That made Harry look more closely at the driver.

"Professor Moody!" he said.

Moody winced. "I'm not a professor anymore, Harry," he said.

"Oh, yeah, sorry Prof-Mr. Moody," Harry said, trying to ignore Fred and George's snickering. It wasn't difficult to figure out why he was there - Mad-Eye Moody was one of the best Aurors ever, even if he had retired. And he had obviously come out of retirement, which Harry completely understood. If someone on the other side had stunned him and kept him locked up in his own trunk for ten months while they impersonated him, he'd want to fight again, too.

"So, is Hermione coming?" Harry asked Ron.

"Yeah," Ron said, but he obviously didn't want to say more in front of Fred and George, who were making kissy noises and batting their eye-lashes at him, which made Mr. Weasley say, "Boys!"

When they got to the Burrow, Ron still didn't seem to want to talk about it. He barely allowed his mother to greet Harry properly. Mrs. Weasley had hardly given Harry a big hug

and a cookie, before Ron suggested Quidditch. Even Fred and George agreed with that, so they all trooped upstairs for their broomsticks. But when they came back down again, Mad-Eye Moody was waiting for them.

"I need a word with Harry," he said. Harry wasn't sure he wanted a word with Moody, but the Auror obviously wasn't going to take no for an answer, so everybody else left the two of them alone.

Moody sat down at Mrs. Weasley's kitchen table, propped his wooden leg up on one of the other chairs, and turned both his natural and magical eyes on Harry.

"Dumbledore told me about your dream," he said.

"Oh," Harry said. Whatever he had been expecting, it wasn't this. "Is that why you're here, then?"

"No, although I'm glad to help out the Weasleys, too. But Harry, you know better than that. I'm here to help keep you safe. You're more important than all the Weasleys put together."

"NO, I'M NOT!" Harry yelled, jumping up from his seat. "How can you say that? How can one person be more important than nine? Especially...I mean...this is the WEASLEYS we're talking about here."

Moody chuckled, not fazed by the yelling at all. "Sit down, boy, sit down. I'm glad to see you've got heart as well as head. But right now you need to use your head. To the Weasleys, to Dumbledore, to Sirius, you are Harry, their friend, someone they care about. But to the rest of the wizarding world, you are a symbol. You're Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived. Imagine what a boost it would give Voldemort if he managed to kill you. That alone might win the day for him. And we can't let that happen, even if it means sacrificing many other people."

Harry thought about that. Logically, it did make sense. But he just couldn't think about losing Ron or Hermione, or even Percy. He could make himself think that he was more important than they were, but he couldn't make himself feel it. He stared at Moody, not sure what to say.

Moody nodded at him. "I can tell you're your father's son, Harry, you want to save the world all by yourself. Sometimes that just isn't possible, especially when you're just fifteen years old. You're going to need help, and you're going to need to admit that you can't protect everybody, that you're going to have to let other people go into danger, deliberately into danger. And you're going to have to stop feeling guilty about it."

Harry stared down at the tabletop. How did this man, who had just met him today, after all, know so much about how he thought and felt?

"You're going to have to work through that on your own, Harry. I know it will be hard for you, living with the knowledge that you're so important to our side, and yet can't get out and fight like you want to. Because you can't, Harry, not yet, not until you're ready."

Harry did look up at that. "But I want to help - I need to help! How can I just go back to Hogwarts and go to classes, knowing that there's a war going on outside the school that I

can help win?"

"Well, for one thing, because you *are* that symbol to most people, Harry. You're The Boy Who Lived, so you have to do just that - live. That means living a normal life, not just surviving, and a normal life for a fifteen-year-old boy means going to school. For another, well, you won't just be going to classes. You, Ron, Hermione, some other students that either Voldemort knows about or that we think would be useful, will be trained for the coming war, in addition to your regular classes, of course."

"Trained how?"

"Well, you'll start off with some of the basic Auror training, as though you were apprenticing as an Auror after your seventh year. I don't know if you had thought about becoming an Auror after you graduated, but I'm afraid you won't get much choice for now. All of you that we've chosen will *need* this training, so it will be mandatory. But in addition, each of you will get trained in specific areas - areas that are already strengths, so you can be of most use to the effort."

"Strengths?" Harry said. He couldn't really think of any strengths that he had, except maybe flying. But he didn't think Moody meant Quidditch.

"Yes, so your friend Hermione, though she has the potential to be one of the best Aurors in a century, and a lot of other things besides, will not be trained as a Seer. You will. Ron, on the other hand, is one of the best chess players of his age that I have ever seen. He will be getting private tutoring from Dumbledore."

"Wow!" Harry said, amazed for his friend. "Wait a minute - I'll be trained as a Seer? But Professor Trelawney-"

"You will get your additional course schedules when you get to Hogwarts." Moody said, standing up. "Needless to say, Professor Trelawney will not be training you as a Seer, or as anything else. Various other people will be, you'll find out who when it happens. I'll be doing some of the basic Auror training, so I suppose you *can* call me Professor."

"Professor Moody," Harry said. "Um...is Professor Snape going to be one of those people?"

"Ah," Moody said. "Well, since he must appear to hate you and to be working against you and all that you stand for, I don't think that would be a good idea. And since he really does hate you, you shouldn't think it a good idea, either. To answer your real question, though...it is very hard to trust a double agent. Dumbledore trusts this one, but the rest of us must make up our minds, one by one."

He clumped to the door, but turned back at the last moment. Harry was still sitting at the table, staring in shock. He just couldn't take all this in.

"By the way, there's one more reason why you should go back to Hogwarts and try to lead a normal life, Harry," Moody said, once again fixing both eyes on him. "Because you *can*."

Chapter 4 Quidditch, Anyone?

"Oh, there you are, Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said, bustling into the kitchen where Harry still sat at the table. "Where's Ron? We're late at Hermione's."

"Ron? Ron's out playing Quidditch," Harry said, confused. He had thought that they were picking Hermione up tomorrow.

"Oh, well, never mind," Mrs. Weasley said, though she looked somewhat disappointed. "Would you mind going with me? I can't send Arthur - we'd never get him back, crises or no crises."

Harry had to laugh at the thought of Mr. Weasley so enthralled by Hermione's Muggle parents that he never came home. He thought that at least one of Hermione's friends should help get her, though, and since Ron was acting strangely, he was happy to go. His half-formed thought was that they would use the Ministry car again, but Mrs. Weasley got out the jar of Floo Powder.

"We've arranged for the Grangers' to be put on the Floo Network," she said as she peered into the jar. "Just in case..."

Harry didn't want to think about just in case, so he grabbed a handful of Floo Powder, threw it into the fire, and travelled to Hermione's. He stepped out of the fireplace and looked around. There was no question where Hermione got her love of reading - every wall had at least one bookcase, and they were all full. The room looked cozy and friendly, even with all the books, everything the Dursleys' wasn't. Of course, he knew there were Muggles like this, but, so far, the only people who had ever made him welcome were wizards. Then he saw Hermione.

She was standing near the doorway leading out of the room, and she had changed over the summer. Her hair, which Harry remembered as a bushy mass that spilled over her shoulders, was confined in an intricate braid, drawing attention to her face. And she was dressed Muggle style, in a bluish sundress. Harry couldn't even pretend that she had done all this for him - she was looking hopefully behind him, and her face fell when Mrs. Weasley stepped out of the fireplace. She hid it well, though, and came forward to hug first one of them and then the other.

Hermione's parents welcomed them, too, though Mrs. Granger, at least, looked a little disappointed as well. They hugged their daughter good-bye, but just as Harry was about to step back into the fireplace, Mrs. Granger said, "Wait."

She pulled a small box out of her pocket and gave it to Hermione, who opened it and gasped. Inside was a gold chain with a small pendant of some stone that looked white, but seemed to change color as it moved.

"Grandma's opal!" Hermione said, staring at it. "Oh, Mum, thank you so much!"

"You're old enough for it now," Mrs. Granger said. "And you're...I mean, we don't know...I mean, I just wanted you to have it. We're so proud of you, Hermione." She looked like she was about to cry, especially when Hermione flung her arms around her.

Back at the Burrow, Harry couldn't help but notice Hermione looking around again, and again seeming to deflate when the person she was looking for wasn't there.

"Fred, George, and Ron are out playing Quidditch," he said, as nonchalantly as he could. "Do you want to join them?"

"What? Oh, sure," Hermione said. "Let me just change my clothes." She reached behind her to undo her braid.

"Don't," Harry said, surprising both of them.

"Don't what?"

"Don't change, don't take your braid out," Harry said. "I like it."

"Oh," Hermione said. She thought for a moment, then smiled. "Okay. But let me get a book - I'm not getting on a broom."

When she came back down, Harry noticed that she was wearing the opal pendant, but he didn't say anything. They walked out to the field where sounds of Quidditch could be heard. All of a sudden, though, Harry stopped.

"Didn't Ginny want to come?" he asked.

Hermione stared at him. "Didn't Ron tell you? Ginny's spent the last two weeks at a friend's house. She'll be going straight to King's Cross from there."

"Oh," Harry said. "So that's why I haven't seen her yet. I wanted to thank her for her birthday present."

"You didn't thank her yet?" Hermione said. "Honestly, Harry, that present took a lot of effort, the least you could have done was write to her."

"Hang on, hang on, I did write to her," Harry said. "I just wanted to thank her in person."

"Oh," Hermione said. She walked in silence for a few moments, then stopped and turned to face him. "Harry, promise me you won't tell Ron who gave me this pendant," she said.

Harry instantly saw what she was getting at, but he didn't like it one bit. "Hermione, I can't lie to Ron, and I can't believe you're asking me to."

"You don't have to lie," she said. "Just don't tell him."

"What about when he asks if I know? You know he will."

"Just say that I didn't tell you who gave it to me. It's the truth - I haven't told you anything."

"Hermione. Why are you two always fighting? Why don't you tell him how you feel?"

"What do you mean? How do you - I mean, what am I supposed to say?"

"Say that you like him," Harry said, thinking how weird it was that he was giving one of his best friends advice about starting a relationship with his other best friend. "This is Ron we're talking about, he's going to need to be kicked in the head."

"Harry, please. He's being ridiculous, and I don't know what to do. Maybe this will bring things to a head...but I suppose I should have known you'd take his side." She started walking again, leaving him standing there.

"Hermione, wait," Harry said, catching up to her easily. "I promise, I won't tell him." He couldn't believe he was doing this, but he agreed with her - Ron was being ridiculous, and something needed to be done. He couldn't blame Hermione for not wanting to take the first step without at least a little encouragement.

"Thanks, Harry!" Hermione said, and hugged him. Harry just stood there, patting her back, and thinking about his friends. He could feel that she had changed in other ways than her hair and her clothes, but this was Hermione, so it didn't matter to him. He tried not to imagine holding Cho like this, just concentrating on Hermione until she let go, sniffing a little. Then he smiled at her.

"Ready to watch some Quidditch?"

When they got to the field where the Weasleys practiced Quidditch, there was a general outcry of greeting. Fred and George came down on their brooms to hover and say hi to Hermione, but Ron stayed aloft, just waving at them. Harry watched Hermione sort of deflate again. She sat down on the ground and took out her diary. He remembered how surprised he had been when he found out that she had one - Hermione just didn't seem the type. But he was glad she had it now, with Ron being such a prat. Suddenly, he couldn't stand the look on her face anymore. He mounted his broom and took off, heading straight for Ron.

"Oy!" Ron said as Harry got close. "I'm going to try out for Keeper this year, what do you think? We need to get practicing, though. What did Mad-Eye Moody want to talk to you about?"

Harry knew all about Ron trying out for Keeper - they had been writing all summer, after all - and though he knew that Ron did want to know what Moody had wanted, he really didn't think Ron wanted to know right now. Besides, this was getting worse than ridiculous.

"Ron, Hermione's supposedly one of your best friends, the least you could do is go down and say hi to her, even if you *are* fighting!" he said, glaring at his friend. "I think she was disappointed when you didn't come along to pick her up, too. What were you thinking?"

"You think so?" Ron said, looking down at her. "What did she do to her hair?"

"It's in some sort of braid," Harry said. "I like it, it suits her."

"I bet Vicky likes it, too," Ron said, but he headed down anyway. He tried to hover like Fred and George had, but he was staring at Hermione so much that he almost fell off his broom, so he dismounted. He didn't seem to notice what he had done, or the twins laughing so hard that they almost fell off their own brooms.

Harry grinned, and stopped watching them. He hoped everything would be all right between the two of them - he had a pretty good idea how they both felt, and he just wished they would admit it to each other. They were both pretty stubborn, though, especially Ron, so he wouldn't bet on it.

Besides, being on a broomstick again felt so wonderful. Flying was one of the things Harry missed most when he was at the Dursleys - it just felt so natural to him, like he could be up in the air for days without needing to come down. He tried some really steep dives, just for fun, though the dive was one of the most useful tactics for Seekers, so he did need to practice them. After one of the most spectacular, he looked down at Hermione. She and Ron were watching him, and waved. That was normal - even with a book in her hand, Hermione always looked up when she saw him go into a dive out of the corner of her eye. She said that she never got used to his dives; she always thought that he wouldn't be able to pull out of them in time.

This time, though, something felt wrong to Harry. It took a few more dives, with a few more looks at Hermione to realize what it was. He was expecting to see someone else sitting next to her, watching and waving at him. Ginny. She never missed one of these informal practice sessions, and he knew (because Lavender and Parvati had told him) that she often watched the Gryffindor practices from the tower window at school. He just hadn't realized how much he enjoyed having her there. No, that couldn't be right - relied on her being there? Was used to her being there? Well, whatever it was, Harry didn't like it that she wasn't there.

He put it out of his mind, though, as Ron came back up at that point, looking much happier. They had a good practice, and Harry thought that Ron probably would make the team as Keeper. He made some great saves, and he certainly had the mind for the strategies of Quidditch, like Oliver Wood, the Keeper who had graduated two years ago. Quidditch had been cancelled all last year, because of the Triwizard Tournament, and Harry, Fred, George, and Ron couldn't wait for it to start up again. Besides, even Mad-Eye Moody thought Ron had a head for strategy.

He remembered about Ginny, though, once they were back on the ground returning to the Burrow. Ron finally noticed the pendant, and he did ask Hermione about it, but all she would say was that it was a present, so he wasn't in the best of moods. To distract him, Harry asked about Ginny.

"So, Hermione said that Ginny's visiting a friend - anyone I know?" he said, trying to ignore Fred and George's exaggerated starts of surprise when he voluntarily brought up Ginny's name. He couldn't really remember Ginny having any friends, but he supposed that she must. She didn't spend *all* of her time sitting around waiting for him to notice her, after all. At least it made Ron smile.

"No, she's - get this - a *Muggle*. Dad's over the moon; it was all Mum could do to stop him from going on a visit, too. Ginny met her in Diagon Alley when she went shopping with Mum one day last month. I think Mum didn't want to leave her home alone."

Harry could definitely understand that, but he didn't want to think about it. "How did Ginny meet her in Diagon Alley, if she's a Muggle?" he asked instead.

"Oh, her younger brother is a wizard - he's starting at Hogwarts this year. But this girl's Muggle through and through, and she doesn't even mind that her brother's going to be doing all this cool stuff that she can't. Ginny says she's really smart; she's planning on going to University and graduate school and everything." Ron said the last sentence as though he couldn't imagine a worse fate. He pronounced 'University' wrong, too.

"Honestly, Ron, you say that as though it's a bad thing to be smart," Hermione said.

"Well, if that's all a person is, it gets dull," Ron said, ignoring Harry's head-shaking.

"Really! So I suppose you think I'm dull!" Hermione said.

"No! But you're not just smart, you're...you're...you're lots of other things, too." Ron started out well, but then he seemed to remember Fred and George behind them, so he trailed off.

Hermione still looked annoyed, but luckily they had reached Ron's room at the top of the house by this time, so another fight was averted. Instead, Hermione turned back around, muttering something about changing again. She was staying in Ginny's room. Ron stopped her before she got out the door.

"Don't take out your braid," he said, with a wicked smile on his face.

"Why not?" Hermione asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. When she turned back around, her braid flipped over to rest on her shoulder.

Ron tugged on it, and said, "It's too much fun this way."

Hermione, to Harry's great surprise, blushed, and rushed out the door. Harry turned to Ron, who looked as shocked as he did.

"Well, um..." he said, and stopped.

"Never mind," Harry said. "I don't want to know."

Chapter 5 In Diagon Alley

When Hermione came back, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, but with her hair still in the braid, Harry told his friends about the conversation with Mad-Eye Moody. Hermione looked uplifted at the thought of more school-work, especially the practical applications, and Ron tried really hard not to seem impressed that he would be tutored by Dumbledore.

"I wonder what about, exactly," he said. "I mean, I doubt You-Know-Who will ever challenge me to a chess game."

Harry had to laugh at that thought, but Hermione took his question seriously.

"Being good at chess might mean you could become a general," she said. "If you're one of those people who can figure out the best places to put our assets, the best battles to fight, that would be a great help to our side."

Ron couldn't think of anything to say to that other than, "Wow!", but Hermione wasn't done yet.

"I wonder who the other students will be. Ginny, at least, I would think, and most likely Fred and George, too, but who else? Guys? What's wrong?"

Harry and Ron were both staring at her as though she had grown two heads.

"Ginny? Why would she need this training? It's too dangerous," Ron said.

"Oh, honestly," Hermione said. "Ron, you have got to get over babying Ginny. You, too, Harry. She's got just as much right to be involved as you do, she's just as smart as you are, and she's a Weasley, so she's in as much danger, if not more. Besides, she's the only person besides Harry who has come in direct contact with Voldemort."

Ron flinched when she said Voldemort's name, but Harry thought about what she said. He supposed she was right, but that didn't mean he liked it. Somehow the thought of Ginny involved with all this made him uncomfortable, especially if she only had to be because of him.

"Did you tell Harry about Ginny's dream?" Hermione asked Ron, who was still sitting wide-eyed.

"What? Oh, yeah..." he said. "Hmm, maybe Ginny does belong...I mean, how else would she have had that dream...I mean, she couldn't have known about all that, could she?"

"All what?" Harry asked.

"Oh. Well, she dreamed about you, probably pretty common, truthfully-"
"Ron!"

"Anyway, you were in the forest, in a clearing. At first, she was sure it was you, but after a bit, she wasn't so sure...she said it was like flickering...first, it was you and then it was someone else who looked like you. And she was there, but it was the same thing, first it was her and then it was someone else with red hair. You were dancing with her - and, by the way,

if you ever dance with my sister in the middle of the forest, you'll regret it - okay, Hermione, I'm telling it. While you were dancing, three animals came out of the forest to circle around you...a wolf, a dog, and a rat. Ginny said that she knew she should be scared, but she wasn't, not at all. Then the rat ran away, but the dog went after him and brought him back in his mouth. She couldn't see if it was alive or dead. She said the dream ended after that, but I'm not so sure, because she stopped telling it pretty quick, and she blushed like crazy. *All right*, Hermione, I'm done."

"Well," Harry said, but then stopped.

"Yeah, there's really only one interpretation of that dream," Hermione said. "I mean the main part, the wolf, dog and rat circling around the two of you. The flickering between you and your dad, and Ginny and your mum, I'm not sure about. But the rest of it could only be Moony, Padfoot, and Wormtail, and there's absolutely no way Ginny could know about them. It's weird."

Harry thought it was weird, too. He didn't know what the flickering people meant, either, and he wasn't really sure he wanted to know. But one thing was certain. He wasn't going to be the only one trained as a Seer. If that dream was any indication, Ginny would be, too.

They couldn't talk about it any more just then, though, because Mrs. Weasley called them down to dinner, and the next morning, they all went to Diagon Alley to get their school things. Seeing Diagon Alley shocked Harry. The Weasleys had all been so cheerful, even Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Percy, who were all exhausted by the time they finally got home the night before, that Harry had almost allowed himself to forget the cloud that hung over the wizarding world. He couldn't forget it in Diagon Alley. Usually, in the week before the start of the Hogwarts term, Diagon Alley was filled with laughing, chattering students getting all their school things and meeting friends that they hadn't seen all summer. The students were still there, but all of them were accompanied by their parents, and no one was laughing.

Harry pulled on Ron and Hermione's arms so that they fell behind the others.

"Why didn't you tell me it was this bad? What's been going on?"

Ron just shook his head, but Hermione said, "But nothing's been going on. The Ministry is still denying Voldemort's return, and there haven't been any attacks." She saw Harry's look of disbelief. "There haven't been, Harry, really."

"Yeah," Ron said. "Dumbledore reckons both sides are gathering strength, Dad says. Probably want to make sure the first attacks actually succeed and are meaningful." Right after he said that, he looked like he wanted to take it back.

"Well, it certainly looks like people believed Dumbledore when he said Voldemort had returned."

"Stop saying the name, Hermione!" Ron said.

"Oh, Ron, don't be ridiculous. You're going to have to get over this. The first thing out of Professor Moody's mouth in our apprentice Auror classes is probably going to be-

"Constant vigilance," Harry muttered. The other two turned and stared at him, then looked away quickly.

"No," Hermione said, keeping her eyes straight ahead of her. "No, he's going to say that we need to say Voldemort instead of You-Know-Who. It's crazy that everyone's so scared of a *name*."

"Bet you he doesn't," Ron said.

Hermione sighed. "All right. What do you want to bet?"

Ron just stared at her for a moment, since Hermione never gambled, but then a wicked gleam came into his eyes.

"If he doesn't say that, you have to go to the ball that Mum's been hinting at with me."

Harry and Hermione stared at him. Harry thought for a second that Hermione would burst into tears, but she pulled herself together.

"All right," she said again. "But what do I get if he does say it?"

"Whatever you want," Ron said, waving his hand in the air. "I'll study all day in the library with you, or I'll let you practice charms on me, or-"

"I get the picture," Hermione said. "Okay, it's a deal."

They shook hands gravely, while Harry watched in amazement. Hermione then resumed the interrupted conversation.

"I've never seen so many tense parents. They probably can't wait for September 1st any more than we can," she said, still looking around at everybody.

"Hey, speak for yourself," Ron said, which made Hermione make a face at him, which made him make a face back, which made Harry say, "Knock it off, you two!"

Mrs. Weasley wouldn't let any of them out of her sight, not even Fred and George. So the shop they ended up spending the most time in wasn't the joke shop, or Quality Quidditch Supplies, or even Flourish and Botts. It was Madam Malkin's. Mrs. Weasley decreed that all of them needed new robes, including dress robes, because, "You never know." Harry, remembering the Yule Ball the year before, and the fight Ron and Hermione had had right after it, didn't look at his two friends. He hoped that wouldn't happen again this year. He hoped Ron would ask Hermione to the next ball, even if he lost that silly bet, before anyone else did. And he really hoped that when he asked Cho Chang this time, she would say yes.

Everyone grumbled a bit at Mrs. Weasley, but there was no denying that everyone needed new robes. Fred and George had finally grown a little - they were still short and stocky like Charlie, but they had grown some. And Ron, Harry had noticed the night before, was taller than Bill by this time. Even Harry had grown a couple of inches over the past year. Hermione needed new robes, too, and Mrs. Weasley said she had brought Ginny's measurements. That made Ron look puzzled.

"Why does Ginny need new robes?" he asked. "She hasn't grown any - she's going to be shorter than Harry here."

"There's other ways to grow than up," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Well, she hasn't gotten fat, either," Ron said. "Unless all that Muggle food has gotten to her in the last couple of weeks."

"Oh, Ron," was all Mrs. Weasley had to say to him. Harry had been confused at first, too, but after seeing Hermione trying desperately not to laugh, and hearing Fred and George not even trying, he caught on quick enough. Hermione hadn't been the only one to change over the summer, apparently. Ron still didn't get it, saying, "What is it? How has she grown?" to Hermione so many times that she finally lost control and went off into mad giggles. Ron just stared at her and gave up. Then he thought of something else, and turned to his mother.

"Why are we here, though? Usually...usually, we go to second-hand stores..." His ears turned pink, and Harry didn't think he would want anybody listening in on this conversation, so he went to the fabric counter with Hermione. But he could still hear, and he could tell that Hermione was listening, too.

"Well, your father is getting paid for two jobs, thanks to your help, dear, isn't he?" Mrs. Weasley said.

"Really? Dumbledore's paying him?" Ron said. "I mean...reckon Dad would've done it without being paid, y'know."

Mrs. Weasley smiled at him. "Of course he would have. But Dumbledore insisted, so now I can get my children the clothes I have always wanted to."

"Not maroon," Ron said, which made Harry and Hermione start snickering. They knew how much Ron hated maroon, and how much his mum liked to dress him in it.

Mrs. Weasley sighed. "Not maroon."

"All right," Ron said, bounding over to the fabric counter. He shocked everybody by entering enthusiastically into the decision-making process. He picked out navy blue dress robes for himself, dark green for Harry, and insisted on lavender for Hermione. She wanted to get robes identical in color and fabric to the ones she had worn last year, but Ron wouldn't hear of it, and she finally gave in, so bemused by his even caring that she didn't fight as much as she could have. Fred and George were the only ones who withstood this new Ron - he wanted them to get deep, deep purple, but they insisted on electric blue.

Harry was still laughing at the sight of the twins, flaming-haired and identical to the last freckle, in those shocking robes, when Ron asked him what color he thought Ginny looked best in. To his utter surprise, he blushed.

"Oh, I don't know...blue?" he said, trying not to show how silly he felt. "I don't even remember what she wore last year."

"Honestly, Harry, Ginny looked like an angel in white," Hermione said, glaring at him. "Boys never notice anything like that."

"Hey! *I* noticed that she wore white," Ron said. "Not that Ginny ever looked like an angel."

"Oh, yeah?" Hermione said. "Well then, what exactly was I wearing?"

Ron's ears got really red at that. He obviously didn't want to think about last year, so Harry stepped in.

"Don't you think a light blue would look good on Ginny?" he asked.

Ron turned gratefully to him, but Hermione glared. Harry sighed. This was going to be a long year if the two of them didn't cut it out soon.

Chapter 6 A Visit from Sirius Black

The next couple of days passed uneventfully at the Burrow. Harry and Ron played Quidditch, Ron and Hermione fought, and they all studied a little. Hermione studied more, of course, but she was able to convince Harry and Ron to do a little work.

"Think of all the extra work we're going to have this year, with the Auror training and the extra classes! Not to mention that we take the O.W.L.s at the end of the year. You don't want to fall behind before we even get there."

Harry groaned, and Ron called her crazy, but she had a point, so they did study some. But they also played lots of Quidditch and chess, and just plain talked. It was the most fun Harry had had in a long time, and he tried to enjoy every second of it.

One evening, the whole family - plus Harry and Hermione, but minus Ginny - was sitting around the dinner table, teasing Fred. Mrs. Weasley was planning a huge dinner for the last night before they all left for Hogwarts, and Fred had invited Angelina Johnson. Harry, Ron and Hermione couldn't stop teasing him about it, though they liked Angelina. Everyone did; she was a chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, really smart, and loads of fun. Just the thought of Fred with a girlfriend, though, kept them snickering throughout the meal.

Everyone stopped laughing, though, when a huge black dog bounded into the room, put its paws on Harry's chair, and growled at him. Pandemonium ensued, but that was nothing to what happened when the dog disappeared with a pop, and Sirius Black stood there, glaring at Harry. Fred and George leapt to their feet and pulled out their wands, Percy gave a huge yell, Mrs. Weasley gave a little shriek before she could muffle it, and even Ron and Hermione looked stunned. They had no idea why Sirius would act like that.

Harry did, though, so it was no surprise when Sirius began to yell at him.

"How could you not tell me, what were you thinking? You told Dumbledore, did you think I wouldn't want to know? I want to know everything about you, Harry, and *especially* when your scar hurts and you have dreams like that! Gods, Harry, how am I supposed to help you if you hold out on me?"

Harry just sat there, opening and closing his mouth, not sure what to say.

Mr. Weasley, though, tried to calm Sirius down.

"It's okay, Sirius, he's okay, we're all okay. You were in the field, maybe Harry couldn't get an owl to you-"

"And you!" Sirius yelled, turning on Mr. Weasley. "You knew - and you didn't tell me! Some friends I've got. Don't you realize what this means?"

Before Mr. Weasley could answer, though, Harry jumped up out of his chair and turned on him.

"You knew? You knew and you let Ginny go to those Muggles with no protection? How could you? I thought you didn't know, I was trying to figure out how to tell you that your whole family is in danger because of me, and all the time you were letting your only daughter step into a trap, maybe, and-" he broke off at the sight of Mr. Weasley's face. He took one look at Mrs. Weasley, and fled the room.

Half an hour later, Harry heard the door to Ron's room open.

"I don't want to talk right now, Ron," he said.

"Well, you're going to have to, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, shutting the door behind him and sitting on Ron's bed.

Harry turned over, sat up, and glared at Mr. Weasley. He supposed that he should apologize for yelling at him down there - he was a guest in this house, after all. But he didn't feel at all like apologizing. So he just glared. Mr. Weasley sighed.

"Harry, do you plan on having kids?"

That was probably the last thing Harry had expected him to say. "I suppose...eventually...I'd like a family, yeah."

"Well, then, when you do, you'll find out that probably the second most difficult thing as a parent is seeing your children in danger. The first is realizing when they're old enough to decide to put themselves into that danger."

After a moment, Harry realized what Mr. Weasley was saying. "She knows," he said.

"She knows. We had to tell her, because she was so insistent on going, and we always try to have good reasons for denying our children things. Then, too, Dumbledore had asked us if we would consider letting her be..."

"Bait."

Mr. Weasley gave him a small smile. "That's just what she said. She agreed to do it immediately, of course." He must have noticed the horrified look on Harry's face, because he continued, "Please don't think she's doing this for you. I mean, she's fond of you...we're all fond of you, and she might have done it for someone she cared about, or she might have done it in cold blood for The Boy Who Lived, but she didn't have to. Ginny has a very well developed sense of right and wrong, and she would do this for someone she didn't even know. Then, too, she knows exactly what evil we are all facing - she's faced it herself."

Harry thought about that, and remembered Hermione saying that Ginny's "the only person besides Harry who has come in direct contact with Voldemort." She was right, and he could certainly understand Ginny wanting to fight that evil any way she could. It was what he wanted to do, after all. He still meant to have a talk with her - there was no reason why she had to throw herself into danger, just for him. He wasn't worth it.

"So...do the rest of them know?" Harry said. "About the dream, and what it means?"

"Well, they certainly do now," Mr. Weasley said, chuckling ruefully. "But, no, we hadn't told them before. There was no real reason to, we wouldn't have done anything any differently."

"And Ginny has protection, right? There's people there - Aurors, or something?"

"Oh, yes, Ginny's probably safer than the rest of us. Or than we were before Alastor came. And that's because of you, Harry. If you hadn't come to visit us, we would already be in danger, but wouldn't have the extra protection. So don't go thinking that this is all your fault."

Harry couldn't think of anything to say to that. He didn't go back downstairs, though he knew he should go talk to Sirius. He just didn't want to face Ron and Hermione, now that they knew how much danger they were in, all because he cared about them. He should have told them before, and he knew it, but he had wanted to put off them knowing as long as he could. So he stayed up in Ron's room, and when Ron came up to go to bed, Harry pretended he was asleep.

He was wakened the next morning by Pigwidgeon flapping around and around his head. He had a letter attached to his leg, which Harry groggily opened. But then he saw "Dear Hermione," in a small, firm hand. It took a moment for him to recognize it, and another for him to realize that he shouldn't be reading Ginny's letter to Hermione. Why had Pig delivered it to him? He snapped it shut, but not before seeing his name on the page.

Looking down at the letter in his hand, Harry let out a small groan. He shouldn't read it - he wouldn't read it. But if he wasn't going to, he'd better take it to Hermione immediately. He didn't think his resolution would hold out very long. With a quick glance at Ron, still sleeping peacefully, Harry slipped out of the room and went to knock softly on Hermione's door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Harry, Hermione. Can I come in? I have something I'd better give you."

He heard a quick scrambling around, but then Hermione opened the door for him to come in. She was wearing slippers, and a bathrobe over her nightgown, and she sat on the bed, looking at him curiously.

"Pig delivered this to me by mistake," Harry said, holding the letter out to her. Her eyes widened when she realized who it was from, and she raised an eyebrow at him.

"I didn't read it," Harry said. She just looked at him. "But I was tempted," he added.

Hermione laughed. "Okay, I believe you that you didn't read it. Do you mind if I do right now? Ginny might need an answer, but I want to talk to you afterwards."

"Okay," Harry said, though he wasn't sure he wanted to hear what she had to say, if it was about last night. He sat down on the desk chair and looked around. He had never been in Ginny's room before, and didn't really know what he had expected. But it looked quite normal - no frills or ruffles, just neat and comfortable. The bedspread was white with a blue pattern, and the small fluffy rug was the same blue. The only unusual thing about the room was the number of candles scattered around. There was at least one on every surface, and Harry, staring in amazement, said the first thing that came into his head.

"Is Ginny afraid of the dark, or something?"

Hermione looked up from the letter. "No," she said. "But I'd advise you to ask her yourself about the candles. I'm not going to tell her secrets. But," she added, smiling slightly. "I am going to tell you what she said about you in her letter, since I'm pretty sure you saw your name."

Harry grinned at her, and didn't deny it.

"She said, 'I'm glad Harry is being so sympathetic about you and Ron,'" Hermione said.

"Sympathetic? Me?"

"Yes, you. You're helping a lot." Hermione looked down at the letter, but she didn't seem to be seeing it.

"Oh, Hermione," Harry said, leaning forward. "It'll work out. Ron can't ignore something like this forever."

"Can't he? He's very good at -"

Just then, Ron's voice could be heard through the door. "Hermione? Are you in there? Harry's not in his bed, and I'm worried about him."

"Ron, come on in," Hermione said, quickly hiding Ginny's letter and wiping her eyes.

But when Ron saw Harry, his expression changed from incredulous surprise to anger.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

Harry leaned back in his chair and grinned at him.

"This is what I do - visit girls in their rooms early in the morning. You'd just better get used to it."

Hermione said, "Harry!", but Ron's fists unclenched and he laughed.

"All right, you don't have to tell me," he said. He looked around for a place to sit, saw nothing but what was already taken, and plopped down next to Hermione.

"Don't be silly, Ron," Hermione said. "Pig delivered Ginny's letter to Harry by mistake, so he brought it to me."

"Really," Ron said, drawing out the word. "So, what did it say?"

Harry just grinned at Ron. "I didn't read it."

"Whaddya mean, of course you read it," Ron said, but then he looked at Harry again. "You really didn't, did you? Mr. Heroic doesn't want to tarnish his reputation." He shook his head.

Hermione opened her mouth, probably to demand to know if Ron would have read the letter, but Harry didn't want to watch them fight right now.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about, Hermione?" he asked.

"Oh," she said, shooting another look at Ron, but allowing herself to be distracted. "I've been writing to Professor Lupin."

"Really?" Harry said. "What about?"

"Well, I wanted to know what it was like, going to school the last time Voldemort coming to power. I thought he might have some ideas about how to deal with it." Even Ron was interested now. "Did he?"

Hermione shook her head. "He said that it was completely different from our situation. Sure, Voldemort was out there then, but he wasn't about to attack Hogwarts, and he wasn't targetting anyone specific in their group of friends. They had to worry about their families, of course." Here, she stopped and swallowed before going on. "But there wasn't the worry that..."

"That Voldemort would risk everything just to get one of them. And now, maybe, all of them," Harry said, bowing his head. He hadn't wanted to talk about it, but he knew that wasn't an option.

"Yeah," Ron said. He and Hermione exchanged a look, then he continued. "Actually, I'm kinda glad this has happened."

"What?" Harry said, snapping his head up to glare at his friend.

"See, now you know how we have felt ever since we became friends with you," Hermione said, her words tumbling out as though she had wanted to say this for a long time, and wasn't going to let anyone stop her now that she had started. "You've always been in danger, Harry. First year we thought it was Professor Snape, then second year was the Chamber of Secrets, then third year it was Sirius, and last year the Triwizard Tournament. We're always in this constant worry about you, and it's been hard, Harry, so hard..."

"So...you don't mind that I didn't tell you about the dream? I just couldn't..."

"Well, we do mind, actually," Ron said. "If you ever keep something like that back from us again, I don't know what we'll do to you, but we'll probably get Fred and George's help, so don't even think about it." He couldn't help grinning as he said this, but Harry could tell that he was serious.

"But we understand, Harry," Hermione said. "We know all about wanting to protect your friends, because that's how we feel about you. We want to do this together, though, no secrets, no keeping back things to protect us. Or you. Or..oh, you know what I mean."

Ron laughed, and Harry laughed with him. "Yeah, all for one and one for all, that's us."

"Ron!" Hermione said, finally laughing, too. "When did you read *The Three Musketeers*? It's a Muggle book."

"Ah, you forget that I'm now an important Ministry official, having to do all sorts of things that I don't want to, even reading -"

He was cut off as Hermione threw a pillow at him, and the three of them got up to get ready for the last day of the holiday. But as they clowned around, teasing each other, and feeling their friendship as an almost tangible thing, Harry still felt that something was missing.

No, *someone* was missing.

Chapter 7 On the Hogwarts Express

Harry sat alone in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, listening to the noisy students and thinking. Everyone seemed in much better spirits than the people Harry had seen in Diagon Alley; but then, Harry was both happy and relieved to be finally going back to Hogwarts, and he supposed others must be, too. He was glad to be alone right now, though - he had a lot to think about, starting with when he had gotten down to the breakfast table the day before.

Sirius was nowhere around, which surprised him. Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, and before Harry could say anything, Ron explained.

"After you left the room last night, everything got even more crazy," he said. "Percy wanted to call the Ministry on the spot, despite Dad and Mum trying to tell him that everything was okay, Sirius was innocent, they knew him, and all that. Bill and Mum were holding him back. Fred and George didn't say anything, they just stood there with their wands pointed at Sirius - I actually thought they seemed more dangerous than Percy, though they were at least listening to Dad."

Hermione nodded. "I'd never seen the twins look like that, Harry," she said. "But Percy was being just ridiculous, he wasn't listening to anyone, and he kept struggling. He finally got his wand arm free and..."

"And he probably would have cursed Sirius right there, but Hermione was too quick for him. She disarmed him easily. Course, she got an owl from the Improper Use of Magic Office, but worth it, I say," Ron said, looking so proud that Harry was hard put not to snicker at him, even as worried as he was.

"Sirius was so good, Harry," Hermione said. "I could tell that he wanted to just shut Percy up and go up to you, but he just stood there, not drawing his wand or making any threatening moves, until it all got straightened out. Unfortunately, it didn't."

"What?"

"Percy...Percy wouldn't hear reason. He just kept saying that he knew Sirius was guilty, and he wasn't going to let him get away, now that he was right there."

Ron muttered something that sounded like, "stupid git," but Harry wasn't paying attention to him.

"What did he do?" he said, not taking his eyes off Hermione.

"Nothing. It's...Mr. Weasley had to do a Memory Charm on him - you know, Obliviate."

Harry was so shocked he just sat there and stared at her. On his own child?

"Yeah, Dad was furious," Ron said. "He told Sirius to get out, that he'd done enough damage for one day. He wouldn't let Sirius come up to see you, even, just said that he'd better get out of his house, if he knew what was good for him. I've never seen Dad like that, even when he fought Lucius Malfoy in Flourish and Botts."

So Harry still hadn't seen Sirius, and he really wanted to. It was his own fault, though; if he hadn't run upstairs right away, he could have talked to him a little, at least. And maybe he would have been able to convince Percy. He had been so mad at Percy that he had hardly spoken to him the whole rest of the time at the Burrow, though he knew it was pointless, because Percy didn't remember a thing.

Then, as they walked out to the Quidditch field, Hermione told them that she had been asked to be a prefect. Neither Harry nor Ron had been surprised, but they reacted completely differently. Harry was really happy for her, and showed it, but Ron was more happy that now they could get away with lots more stuff. Hermione nixed that idea quickly.

"I can't let you guys get away with things just because you're my best friends," she said. "That wouldn't be fair."

"Hermione," Ron said, in a tone he obviously thought sounded sweetly reasonable. "Think of all the times we've been out of bounds or went against the rules, because it was necessary. We saved lives, Hermione."

Harry had to snicker at Ron's saintly expression, but Hermione didn't even smile.

"I know that, Ron," she said, looking seriously at both of them. "And if it is a matter of life and death, or something really serious, which I know it could be, then I won't say a word. But I'm not going to stand by and let you break rules just for a prank, or something."

Ron looked like he was about to explode, so Harry stepped in.

"I doubt we'll have time to get into too much trouble, truthfully," he said. "What with all these extra classes, and studying for the O.W.L.s, and all."

"Yes, and you'll both have Quidditch practices, right?" Hermione said.

It was the right thing to say, because Ron was so thrilled that Hermione just assumed that he would be on the team that he didn't say anything else.

So Hermione was out on the platform still, with Dean Thomas, the other Gryffindor prefect, looking out for first years and anyone else that might need help. She had promised to join them once she finished that, but Ron insisted on staying with her anyway. They had seen Draco Malfoy as they were coming through the barrier, and Ron didn't want Hermione's first day as a prefect ruined. Hermione just looked amused, but she did let Ron trail along after her.

Harry hoped that they came back before Ginny came in, though. Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnigan had already stopped by to chat, as had Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. They were all Gryffindor fifth years, and Harry had been glad to see them, especially since they all treated him like normal, which they hadn't at the end of last year, after the third task. They had all gone off to see Lee Jordan's new pet, though, so Harry was left alone again. And after the talk he had had with Angelina Johnson the evening before, Harry wasn't sure how to act around Ginny.

Harry liked Angelina, and he was glad that she had taken all the teasing she got at the Weasleys' in good part, even giving some back. He had been a little intimidated by her when they first met, because she was so self-possessed. But he could hardly practice Quidditch

together at all hours and in all conditions and stay intimidated. All the same, they weren't what you'd call close, so Harry had been surprised when she asked to talk to him after dinner. They had gone inside (dinner had been outside, because of the large number of people) and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Harry, I want to talk to you about Ginny," Angelina said.

"About Ginny? Why?"

"I don't know if anyone ever told you, but before Ron went to Hogwarts, he and Ginny were really close. They did everything together, sort of like Fred and George."
Harry was confused. Ron certainly hadn't mentioned anything like that.

"I think Ron was probably embarrassed to tell you," Angelina said. "Once he met you and Hermione, he seemed to stop thinking of Ginny as a friend, and started thinking of her only as his little sister. It hurt Ginny's feelings."

"How do you know all this?" Harry asked. He couldn't imagine that Ron told her about it, and he really couldn't picture Ginny going to Angelina, of all people.

"Fred, of course. He's worried about her. Harry, I'm going to ask you to do something that will probably be very difficult. I know that Ginny had that crush on you, and that probably embarrassed you. But that's in the past. Now, she just wants to be friends with all of you. Well, she and Hermione are already friends, and Ron used to be. That just leaves you, Harry."

Harry stared at her, thinking about Ginny. Maybe she did just want to be friends. And he always had fun when she was around; it was just her old crush getting in the way. But if Angelina thought that was over...

"Did Fred ask you to say all this?" he asked.

"No, of course not. He doesn't know I'm doing this. Ginny doesn't know I'm doing this, and please don't tell her. I just...wanted to let you know what's been going on."

So Harry had a lot to think about as he sat in his compartment on the Hogwarts Express. *What is it with people telling me what to do?* he thought. *First Professor Moody, then Mr. Weasley, then Angelina.* He just had to decide what advice to follow.

Just then, Ron and Hermione entered the compartment, putting an end to Harry's brooding. Hermione gave a huge sigh as she sank onto the seat.

"I think this might be more difficult than I thought," she said, leaning her head back against the seat. "Were we really that stupid as first years?"

Before Harry or Ron could answer her, Ginny came bursting into the compartment. She flung herself on Hermione, throwing her arms around her friend.

"Hermione, you would not believe the things I've been doing, Dad will be so pleased, like going to the cinema and using computers, they're so useful, don't you think? We've got to find a way to get them to work at Hogwarts, think of how much easier research would be if

everything were organized on the computer! How was your summer, did you have fun at Diagon Alley? And what color dress robes did you get me - Mum said she was going to let you pick them out. Oh, Hermione, it's so good to see you again!"

Harry just stared at her in bemusement - this was a Ginny he had never seen before, but Ron let out a great snort.

"I like that - it's so good to see Hermione, but what about Harry and me?"

Ginny said, "Oh, you!" but she stood up to give first Ron and then Harry hugs. That surprised Harry; she'd never done it before. But she certainly seemed to put no stock in it; she just did it, and then sank down on the seat next to him.

"So, what happened at the Burrow while I was in the Muggle world?"

"Oh, lots of yelling," Ron said, waving a languid hand at her. "Harry yelled at Dad, Percy yelled at Dad, Percy yelled at Si-Snuffles, Snuffles yelled at Harry." Ron's ears turned red as he realized that he almost said Sirius' name.

"Who's Snuffles?" Ginny asked, looking around at them all. "And why on earth did you yell at Dad, Harry?"

Harry just stared at her. He wasn't sure what to say. He wanted to tell her; it wasn't fair that her family knew and she didn't, but it wasn't just his secret. He looked over at Ron and Hermione, but they just looked back at him. Sirius wasn't here, so it was his decision.

Ginny didn't give him time to speak.

"Right," she said. "Well, if you guys aren't going to trust me, I'll just go." She stood up and put her hands on her hips, which brought her elbow very close to Harry's head. "Ron, I know it's hard for you to believe, but I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm almost as old as Harry, and I can handle quite a lot, you know. If you don't want to admit it, that's fine, but don't expect me to keep tagging along after you forever. That goes for you, too, Harry."

She turned to leave, almost whacking Harry in the head with her elbow, which he wasn't sure was an accident. He looked over at Ron and Hermione. Ron just looked stunned, but Hermione was glaring at him. He motioned for her to relax.

"Wait, Ginny," he said, standing up. He turned her around by her shoulders and looked straight into her eyes. She was still shorter than he was, but not by much. "You're right, you're absolutely right. We haven't been fair to you, but that's going to change. Come back here, sit down, and get ready for a long story."

Ginny's eyes filled with tears, but before Harry could say anything else, she brushed them aside and smiled at him. He led her back to their seats, where he turned to Ron and Hermione.

"So, who wants to do the honours?"

As the train sped north, the three of them filled Ginny in on everything that had happened to them from third year on. She looked so happy on hearing that Sirius Black was innocent and ready and willing to fulfill his godfatherly duties that a light seemed to shine inside her. When

Harry told her about the third task, though, the light went out. He told it haltingly - it got easier each time he told it, but he knew it would never be easy. Ron then jumped in with a description of the shouting matches of two evenings before, and Hermione told about the new classes they would be taking. Harry described his dream in detail, which made Ron and Hermione lean forward to listen hard, too, since they hadn't heard it before. When they were done, Ginny bowed her head so that her hair covered her face.

"Gin, you okay?" Ron asked, taking her hand. She raised her head and shook back her hair, revealing tears in her eyes again.

"No, but then I suspect none of us really are," she said. She turned to Harry. "Thank you for telling me this - for letting me in. I don't know what I can do to help, but I do want to help."

Harry smiled at her. "You've already helped. Didn't you go to those Muggles knowing the risks you were running? That takes a lot of courage, Ginny, to be bait. Did anything happen?"

"No," she said, ignoring the incredulous stares she was getting from Ron and Hermione, who hadn't known that she knew about the dream. "Nothing happened. I wish it had - it feels like I did it all for nothing. Though I did have fun." She grinned.

"I'm glad," Harry said. "Speaking of fun," he added. "Anyone up for a game of Exploding Snap?"

"Harry!" Hermione said.

"I think we've all had enough seriousness for right now, Hermione," Harry said. "Professor Moody told me to live a normal life, and right now, a normal life includes Exploding Snap."

Ron and Ginny laughed, and even Hermione smiled. They got out the cards, and as they played, Harry watched Ginny surreptitiously. Ron might think differently, but Harry thought Angelina was right. Ginny Weasley was no longer the slightest bit in love with him.

Chapter 8 The First Days Back

As they stepped off the Hogwarts Express, Harry looked around for Hagrid, the Hogwarts' groundskeeper, their Care of Magical Creatures professor, and one of Harry's best friends. Harry couldn't see him anywhere, and Hagrid was hard to hide, since he was about twelve feet tall. Usually, he escorted the first years across the lake in boats to the castle. Harry craned his neck, trying to see where he might be.

"First years! First years over here," he heard, but it wasn't Hagrid's voice. Instead, Fleur Delacour stood in Hagrid's usual place, motioning for the first years to gather around her.

"Hi, 'Arry!" she said, waving at him. "I'm just filling in, don't worry! 'Agrid's fine."

That made Harry feel much better, but when he looked at his friends, his heart sank a little again. Ron stared at Fleur as though he had never seen her before and couldn't wait to see her again, and Hermione looked close to tears. Harry was about to say something - really, Ron was being utterly ridiculous - but Ginny beat him to it. She reached up and whapped Ron on the back of his head.

"Snap out of it, you idiot!" she said.

Ron glared at her, but before he could retaliate, a drawling voice said, "Listen to her, Weasley, it sounds like she got all the brains in the family."

Draco Malfoy stood there, flanked by his goons, Crabbe and Goyle, as usual, his habitual sneer on his face. He slowly looked Ginny up and down.

"All the beauty, too, but then, that's not saying much. Are they finally allowing you into their little charmed circle, Weasel-girl?"

Harry and Ron almost launched themselves at him, but Hermione managed to hold them both back. Ginny, though, stalked out in front of them and deliberately turned her back on Malfoy.

"If you two idiots would just *ignore* him, he'd probably go away and pick on somebody else. He just wants attention - well, don't give it to him."

"Don't count on it," Malfoy said. He grabbed hold of Ginny's upper arms and turned her around to face him. "How dare you turn your back on me? You face me when I'm talking to you!"

At this, Harry and Ron both increased their efforts to get at him, and, while Hermione was able to hold Harry back, Ron slipped out of her grasp. He threw himself at Ginny and Malfoy, but before he reached them Ginny stopped him in his tracks with one of the most intense glares Harry had ever seen.

"Ron, I can handle this, believe me," she said firmly, before turning back to Malfoy. "I'm not one of your tagalongs, Draco, so I don't have to do what you say. Now, take your hands off me!"

Harry had never seen Ginny look like that before - she looked like she was about to curse Malfoy, then and there, even without her wand. Malfoy must have thought so, too, because he actually let go, turned around, and stalked away. Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles a bit, but Ginny just glared at them, and they slunk along after Malfoy.

"Come on, you guys, let's find a carriage so we can get to the feast," Ginny said, seemingly oblivious to the stares she was getting from all of the students gathered round. She walked over to one and climbed in; Harry, Ron, and Hermione following her in a daze.

"What's *he* doing here still?" Ron said.

"Probably spying for his dad," Hermione said.

Harry agreed with her, but there didn't seem to be much else to say. The carriage ride was quiet, which unfortunately gave Harry too much time to think. He had been dreading the Sorting Feast all summer; memories of last year's Leaving Feast and the speech Dumbledore had given then filling his mind. *Remember Cedric Diggory*. So even after he sat down at the Gryffindor table, he didn't say anything. Ron and Hermione were arguing again, but Harry didn't even pay enough attention to know what it was about this time.

Even the Sorting Hat's song couldn't distract him, because he noticed that when it mentioned Hufflepuffs being "steadfast, loyal, and true," all the Hufflepuffs looked woebegone, obviously thinking of Cedric. Harry bowed his head, too, feeling horrible. Ginny must have noticed, because she turned her head and gave him a sympathetic smile, which surprised him so much that he was able to regain his equilibrium. Harry found the sorting pretty boring this year, because none of his friends had any siblings in first year, so he didn't know any of them.

Until Professor McGonagall got to LONG, WILLIAM, anyway. He was Ginny's Muggle friend's brother. The Sorting Hat shouted out RAVENCLAW!, whereupon William gave Ginny such a look of disappointment that the Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione laughed so loudly that they almost drowned out the Ravenclaw table's cheers. Ron and Hermione stopped arguing long enough to tease Ginny, and Fred called out, "Be nice to him, Gin!"

Ginny just smiled and said that of course she would. Harry managed not to look at her, but he couldn't help but wonder if she was thinking that *he* hadn't been nice to *her* in the same situation. Thinking of Ginny made him think of Cho Chang, and he looked over to the Ravenclaw table to see her. He prepared himself for the sinking feeling in his stomach, the tingling in his arms and legs, but none of that happened. He stared at her, trying to figure out what was going on. She looked rather forlorn - nothing like she had looked at the Leaving Feast last year, of course, but still not happy. She was just as pretty as ever, though, and this was the girl, after all, that Harry had been dreaming about all summer. But try as he might to recapture that feeling, it was gone. How strange, he thought.

"You all right, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah," he said. He was, he just couldn't believe it.

Just then, the sorting ended, and Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet to give his usual speech. This was what Harry had really been dreading, but as he watched the Headmaster, whose eyes seemed to be looking straight at him from across the room, he realized that he had underestimated him. Dumbledore merely welcomed everyone back, reiterated that everyone was always welcome at Hogwarts, and introduced the new teachers. Fleur was there - Dumbledore said that she was Acting Care of Magical Creatures teacher - and so was the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Harry gave a huge gasp when he saw her - it was Mrs. Figg, the Dursleys' neighbour, who looked after him whenever the Dursleys went away. He didn't get a chance to talk to her, though, because she left before the feast was over.

Everyone was so tired from the emotionally draining day that they stumbled up to Gryffindor Tower and said good night. Harry heard Ron's snores two seconds after they had both climbed into their beds, and even he didn't stay awake as long as usual.

The next morning, Harry looked around for Mrs. Figg again, but she wasn't at the head table. Fleur was, and she waved at Harry. To distract Ron, Harry told him, Hermione, and Ginny about Mrs. Figg. They all looked at their schedules to see when they would be having Defense Against the Dark Arts. None of them had it until the next day, but they all noticed a note written on the bottom of their schedules.

"Please see me in the Transfiguration classroom tonight at 8:00." It was signed by Professor McGonagall, and after they read each one, it disappeared. They all looked at each other, then tried to unobtrusively watch the rest of the students to see who else got notes. They couldn't figure it out, though, so they all headed off to class still wondering who would be their fellow students.

The first day back passed uneventfully, and 8:00 found them in the Transfiguration classroom. Professor Dumbledore was there, along with Professor McGonagall and Mad-Eye Moody. Fred and George were already seated, but there was no one else in the room.

"Ah," Dumbledore said as they entered. "Come in, come in. We just have to wait for two more...yes, here they are."

Two more students entered the room, both of them completely unknown to Harry. One was a tiny, delicate girl wearing a Ravenclaw prefect badge, and the other a large, solid-looking Hufflepuff who looked like Harry should recognize him, but he didn't.

"I think introductions might be in order," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling at them all. "Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, Harry Potter, Brenna O'Keefe, and Theodore Black," he said, pointing to each of them in turn.

All the Weasleys, Harry and Hermione turned to stare at Theodore Black. *That's why he looks familiar*, Harry thought. *He must be related to Sirius.*

Theodore grinned at them all. "Yeah, I'm Sirius' cousin," he said. "I haven't seen him since I was four, though. I do just remember him - and I'm so glad he's innocent."

"Excuse me?" Brenna said. "Did you just say that Sirius Black is innocent? How is that possible?"

"Well," Dumbledore said. "I hadn't meant to get into this just yet, Miss O'Keefe, but yes, Sirius Black is innocent of conspiring with Lord Voldemort and killing thirteen people with a single curse. Those acts were actually committed by Peter Pettigrew, better known as Wormtail, who is even now supporting Voldemort once again. I am aware that this might be hard for you to believe at first, but I assure you that it is true."

"Oh, no, professor," Brenna said, her cheeks turning pink. "Of course, if you say so, then I believe you."

Dumbledore just smiled down at her before turning to Mad-Eye Moody.

"Alastor?"

"Yeah," Moody said. He had been leaning against Professor McGonagall's desk, but now he stood up straight. "There's one thing you should know straight away - some of you already do, but some of you don't. I am not the Professor Moody who taught you all last year." He went on to explain how he was stunned and locked up in his own trunk for ten months, while a Death Eater impersonated him, solely to get to Harry Potter.

"There's two things to learn from this," Moody said, glaring down at them. "The first is that even the best of us make mistakes, and the second is that only one thing will save you - **CONSTANT, NEVER-CEASING VIGILANCE!**"

Harry couldn't help it - he gave a huge, perfectly audible gasp and stared up at Moody. Hearing those words from the real Moody brought back so many memories he really didn't want to think about, that he almost felt his eyes watering. The words affected Ron differently, though - he gave a snorting laugh that he tried unsuccessfully to turn into a cough. Fred, George, and Theo joined in, and even Brenna looked like she was trying not to giggle. Hermione and Ginny both gasped in shock and glared at them until they stopped. Moody, though, just calmly watched.

"Right," he said once they all calmed down again. "Now that you've gotten that out of your systems, we can go on. You're here because we've determined that either you are in such danger from Voldemort that you must be better prepared to protect yourselves, or you can help our side once you have been properly trained. Or both." He smiled down at them, and Harry thought that this Moody's smile was no more comforting than the fake Moody's, which wasn't too surprising.

"These classes will be difficult, especially with all of your regular schoolwork," Dumbledore said. "You will be learning things that most wizards don't learn until they have chosen their professions and start apprenticing. They will also be dangerous. But we feel - and your parents agree with us - that it will be better to have you prepared than to have you face Voldemort unready."

"You need to stop flinching every time someone mentions Voldemort, Mr. Weasley," Moody said, both of his eyes fixed on Ron. "You will be learning to fight him, and the first thing you'll need to do is to fight the fear he instills in everyone."

Harry turned to look at Hermione, and saw her grinning at Ron. Ron grinned back, and Harry stifled a groan. He had a feeling their bet wouldn't be settled too easily.

He was right. When they left the room, carrying their revised, and much fuller, schedules, Ron was still grinning at Hermione.

"So, looking forward to going to the ball with me?" he asked her.

"What do you mean? Professor Moody did say that we should say Voldemort's name," Hermione said.

"Yeah, but it wasn't the *first* thing he said, now was it?" Ron said. "The first thing he said was **CONSTANT VIGILANCE** - Harry was right."

"Well, then, maybe you should go to the ball with Harry!" Hermione said before sprinting up the hall. Ginny followed her, after a seething glance at Ron.

Ron turned to Harry. "What was *that* all about?" he said. But Harry wasn't about to get into the middle of this one, so he just shrugged, and they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

Chapter 9 Miss October Stuart

Life settled into its usual routine at Hogwarts, though it was slightly busier than normal. The Auror classes intrigued Harry, since they were half learning new jinxes, curses, and counter-curses, and half learning new ways of thinking. Hermione seemed uplifted after every one, and both she and Ginny came back from their extra Charms classes excited but exhausted. Professor Flitwick was teaching them the theory behind creating new Charms, which even Hermione admitted was one of the hardest things she'd ever tried. She also said that both Ginny and Brenna O'Keefe were better than she was at it, but Harry had a hard time believing that, and Ron flat-out refused to try, which Harry noticed made Hermione somewhat misty-eyed.

Ron came back from his lessons with Professor Dumbledore more involved than Harry had ever seen him about anything, even Quidditch. They *were* playing chess, and after every one, Ron challenged someone to a game, trying to figure out ways to beat the headmaster. He would have completely neglected his homework for his regular classes if Hermione hadn't tricked him. She got everyone in Gryffindor to promise that they wouldn't play chess with Ron until she said it was all right, and she only said it if he had done his school work. It surprised Harry that Ron put up with this - it would have been fairly easy to circumvent - but he did. His friends had been fighting less, too, but that was probably just because there was less time in which to fight, since they were all so busy.

Besides the Auror training, Harry had one class a week with Professor Vector, who was Hermione's Arithmancy teacher. Harry wasn't learning Arithmancy, though. Instead, Professor Vector was trying to teach Harry to tap into his extra reserves of power. Everyone knew he had them - he wouldn't have survived against Professor Quirrel in first year if he hadn't, just to name one example - but calling them up intentionally was proving to be more difficult than Harry could have imagined. Theo Black joined him in these classes, not because he also had reserves of power, but because he had the ability to augment others' power, which everyone thought would help Harry immensely. Of course, the theory was once again much easier than the practice. Harry came back from these lessons both physically and mentally drained.

The hardest extra class for Harry to deal with, though, was his Seer training. He and Ginny had gone to the first one late Thursday night, not sure what to expect. Neither one of them enjoyed their usual Divination classes - Ginny confessed that she usually fell asleep in them - and they weren't exactly comfortable with the visions they had already received. They entered the room timidly, and were greeted by Dumbledore and a very pretty witch with long, curly brown hair, of about Sirius and Professor Lupin's age.

"Ah, Miss Weasley, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, as they came in and took their seats.

Harry had never been in this room before. It was smaller than most of the classrooms, with six comfy-looking armchairs gathered around a table by the fireplace. On the table was a crystal ball, a mirror, a large bowl full of water, a few pieces of crystalline rock, and several candelabra. Harry looked at them with trepidation, but then turned his attention back to the headmaster.

"This is Miss October Stuart," Dumbledore said to them. "She is one of the most talented Seers I have ever known. I know that you both are somewhat skeptical of Divination, but I ask that you give this an honest try."

His blue eyes twinkled at Harry and Ginny over his half-moon glasses. They exchanged glances. Did they even have a choice?

"Professor, if this is something we can do to help, we want to do it," Ginny said, turning back to the teachers. "We'll try to keep our skepticism to a minimum."

Dumbledore and Miss Stuart both chuckled, but Harry just stared at Ginny in amazement. Really, where had *this* Ginny Weasley been hiding for all those years?

"All right, then," Dumbledore said, getting to his feet. "I'll leave you to it. Good luck." With one last smile, he was gone.

Miss Stuart took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

"There are a few things you should know about me before we begin," she said. "When Professor Dumbledore said that I'm one of the most talented Seers he has ever known, he was about fifteen years too late. I used to be a Seer, and he was right, I was talented - I never had a vision that didn't come true. The problem is, I had one that, well, ruined my life, and I haven't been able to have one ever since."

Harry and Ginny exchanged glances again, but before they could say anything, Miss Stuart continued.

"I understand that you are in contact with Sirius Black, Harry," she said. "Has he ever mentioned me?"

Harry shook his head, but as soon as she mentioned Sirius' name, Harry realized that he recognized her. She looked much older, of course, but she was the woman in the picture Aunt Petunia had given him - his mother's maid of honour.

"I'm not surprised. Sirius and I were...close. So close that people expected us to marry some day, though we hadn't really talked about it. Your parents thought we would, too, Harry, and they wanted to name me your godmother when you were born. Nothing would have made me happier, except that..." She trailed off, then took another deep breath and continued. "I had a vision a couple of months before you were born. In it, I saw that Sirius would be the cause of your parents' deaths. I...couldn't face that. I did something very cowardly - I broke up with Sirius, without telling him about the vision, and went and hid myself away on my family's estate. I never even saw you when you were a baby, Harry, and I had to watch from afar as my vision came true."

Harry sat in shock. *One of these days, he thought, the revelations about my parents and their friends will just stop, won't they? Some day, I'll know everything I need to know about them, right? Because I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.* He looked over at Ginny, to see that she had tears in her eyes. She wasn't looking at him, though, she was looking at Miss Stuart.

"And you haven't had a vision ever since?" she asked.

"No. For many years, I didn't even try. Finding out that Sirius betrayed James and Lily was...devastating. I hope neither of you ever have to go through that kind of experience."

When Remus wrote me last year to tell me that Sirius was innocent, I did try again, but nothing came then, and nothing has ever come since."

"Professor Lupin wrote to you last year?" Harry said.

"Yes, we were good friends, once, and he thought I should know. Sirius hasn't written, of course - I certainly don't expect him to. And you know, my vision *was* true - Sirius was the cause of your parents' deaths, Harry. If he hadn't persuaded them to name Peter their Secret Keeper, Peter couldn't have betrayed them."

Harry bowed his head, staring at his hands. He knew that, and he also knew that Sirius still blamed himself, but hearing it from this woman somehow made it sound worse. Ginny, though, was furious.

"How dare you say that?" she said, glaring at Miss Stuart. "Sirius loved Harry's parents! And at least he stuck with them, instead of running away. Maybe if you had told them about the vision, things would have been different!"

Miss Stuart smiled sadly at Ginny, not fazed at all by her anger. "I know. Why do you think I cannot call a vision now, when I desperately want to? I've developed a block, which is something that happens to most Seers at one time or another during their lives."

She leaned forward in her chair, fixing both of them with a piercing stare. "Now that we've gotten the family history out of the way, I want you two to know something. True Seers are very rare. What you have learned in your Divination classes is...not exactly useless, but it is just preliminary. Students always begin with the methods of Divination that are most grounded in every-day things, that have the most concrete signs. When someone reads your palm," she said, reaching out and taking Ginny's, "she can look at the lines on it and try to interpret them. According to this, you come from a large family, you have an episode in your past that you are very ashamed of, your fate is intimately entwined with another person's, and you will have five children."

She dropped Ginny's hand and chuckled at the amazed stares Harry and Ginny were giving her. "I take it some of that was right, anyway. That sort of thing can be useful, and it does take some talent, but it is nothing like what a true Seer does. Professor Dumbledore told me that you both have had true visions. Would you mind describing them to me?"

Harry looked at Ginny to see if she wanted to go first, but she was staring down at her palm, so he described each of his dreams of Voldemort. Miss Stuart kept asking for more and more detail, and he tried to oblige. When he finished, Ginny was staring at him, and Miss Stuart leaned back in her chair and shook her head.

"Those are some of the clearest visions I have ever heard about," she said. "You don't even need to interpret them; it's almost as though you were right there in the room with him. Professor Dumbledore thinks that your scar links you to Voldemort, enabling you to have these visions, and I agree. What we will need to do is see if there is any way we can induce them, so that we can find out what he's planning even when it doesn't involve his intense hatred for you." She shook her head again, then turned to Ginny.

Ginny told the dream that Ron had already described to Harry haltingly, not looking at Harry. When she mentioned the flickering between Harry and herself and Harry's parents, Miss Stuart gave both of them sharp looks. Harry tried not to blush, forcing himself to concentrate

on the details of the dream. Miss Stuart didn't look at all surprised at the wolf, dog, and rat, so Harry guessed that she now knew, even if she hadn't before, about Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail, and Prongs. She pressed Ginny for more detail, too, especially about the status of the rat when the dog brought him back, but Ginny really couldn't add any more. Then Miss Stuart asked Ginny how she had induced the vision. Ginny flushed.

"I was in my room, staring into my crystal ball, practising for Divination," Ginny said. "I had a candle close by, but off to the side, and the flickering made interesting patterns in the crystal ball. I just stared at the patterns, then I seemed to fall asleep. That's when I had the dream."

Miss Stuart gave her a keen look. "Did you try to reproduce the conditions?"

"Of course," Ginny said, and Harry thought back to her room with all the candles on every surface. "But I couldn't. It was so frustrating!"

To Harry's surprise, Miss Stuart reached out and patted Ginny's hand.

"I know," she said. "And it will probably be frustrating for awhile, until you learn how to induce the proper state of mind. But I have no doubt that you'll be able to do it."

Ginny looked much calmer after that statement.

"Now, we seem to have two different situations here. Ginny, I think you are a true Seer, and hopefully you'll be able to tap into your talents fully, with my help. Harry, I think you're a bit different. Your dreams are not visions per se, they just seem to be tied into Voldemort. But that can be most helpful, especially if we can induce them when we want - think of the advantage that will give us!"

"You say you think," Harry said. "You don't know?"

"No," Miss Stuart said, smiling at him. "I know Professor McGonagall calls Divination guesswork, and in some ways it is. But the better trained you two get, the clearer your visions will be, and the easier they will be to interpret. Now, here are the basic ways of inducing visions." She indicated the items on the table in front of her.

The rest of the lesson was just taking notes about different ways of scrying. Both Harry and Ginny were very interested, but Harry couldn't help watching Miss Stuart and thinking about her and Sirius. He knew Sirius was very busy, helping Dumbledore and his Order of the Phoenix, but he also knew that Sirius was lonely. He couldn't help smiling - maybe he could do something about that. Suddenly, he realized that Miss Stuart had mentioned Voldemort several times, and each time she had used his name. Well, if she had been his mother's maid of honour, she had probably been in Gryffindor, so she valued bravery, and maybe having had her life ruined once by cowardice, she would want to make sure she didn't fall into that trap again. It's what he would want to do.

After the lesson was over, while they were packing up, Miss Stuart turned to Harry, looking almost shy.

"If you write to Sirius, tell him...tell him Toby says hi," she said. Then she reached out and smoothed Harry's wayward hair. "You do look so like James," she said, and practically fled the room.

Harry and Ginny just stared at each other, finished packing up, and returned to Gryffindor Tower.

Chapter 10 Scheduling Fun

The next few weeks were the busiest of Harry's life, and he had a feeling that it would only get busier from here. All the teachers piled on work - the fifth years had thought it bad last year, but this was much worse. The teachers were all increasingly testy, too, and never missed an opportunity to mention the O.W.L.s

"Longbottom, if you cannot master a simple Hair Growth Potion, perhaps the only O.W.L. you will receive will be in Herbology," Professor Snape said during one particularly trying class. Hermione had been a little inattentive, and Neville had melted another cauldron as a result.

"That is an interesting color combination, Weasley, but I don't remember asking for ribbons on the cat, since they won't be on the O.W.L.s," Professor McGonagall said, when Ron managed to transfigure a sculpture of a cat into a live one, which unfortunately looked much like Crookshanks and had a big pink bow around its neck. The entire class rolled on the floor laughing, except Hermione. That class was just before the class on Hair Growth Potions.

Fleur Delacour was still teaching Care of Magical Creatures, since Hagrid was still away, presumably still on his mission for Dumbledore. Even Hermione enjoyed Fleur's classes; they were studying centaurs, but Fleur wouldn't let them actually see one until they had had weeks of class. She said, with a look at Draco Malfoy, that she didn't want to risk it.

Even Professor Binns seemed to be paying attention to the essays they were turning in for him on the goblin rebellions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - at least, he commented on how some students seemed to be confusing goblins with house-elves, which wouldn't be on the O.W.L.s. Luckily, though, he couldn't seem to remember who had done it.

Hermione, of course, was in her element. She drew up study schedules for herself, Harry, Ron, and Neville, and even Ron tried to follow his, once she added in time for chess and Quidditch. She even offered to draw one up for Ginny, though Ginny didn't have nearly as much work as the fifth years.

"I know you probably don't need it, and I trust you to do your work, anyway, not like these lazy things," Hermione said, poking Ron with her foot. They were all in one corner of the common room, Ginny and Ron on the floor in front of the fire, and Harry and Hermione working at a table nearby.

Ginny had been stretched out on her stomach, her feet in the air, twirling a strand of her hair around one finger as she wrote in a book, but at this she sat up and asked to look at one of the schedules. Harry handed her his, which she took with a smile. Then she let out a very un-Ginny-like snort of laughter.

"What is this? You can't schedule fun!" she said.

"Gin, how long have you known Hermione?" Ron said, not looking up from his work.

"Besides, just wait until next year, when we'll be done with all this, and she'll have no one left to nag except you."

Hermione threw a pillow at him, but just said, "Do you want to fail your O.W.L.s?" before going back to her own work.

Ron didn't even answer, and quiet descended on them again. Harry couldn't concentrate, though, because he was worried about Ginny. She kept writing in that book, then pausing as though reading, then writing again. Sometimes she smiled, and once she almost laughed, before containing herself. It looked to Harry like it was an enchanted diary, and he couldn't help but be concerned, after the Tom Riddle fiasco in her first year. As unobtrusively as he could, he stood up, stretched, then went and sat down near her head.

"Ginny, can I ask you something?" he said, trying to keep it quiet so Ron and Hermione wouldn't notice.

She looked up at him and grinned. "You just did, but you can ask me something else."

"Very funny. No, I wanted to ask...is that an enchanted diary?"

So much for keeping things quiet. Ginny sat up, slammed the book closed, and glared at him. Ron and Hermione couldn't help but look up at that.

"Why, yes, it is, Harry," Ginny said. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, it's just...I just...Ginny, I'm just worried about you!" Harry said, completely surprised by her response.

Her face softened a little at that, but she still looked extremely annoyed. "Well, I'm fine. If you must know, Mum got this for me in Diagon Alley, from the same place that Hermione got hers. But if I start killing roosters again, I promise, you'll be the first to know!"

She jumped up, whirled around, glared at Ron and Hermione, both of whom were staring open-mouthed at her, and stormed up the girls' dormitory steps.

"What was that all about?" Ron asked, staring after her.

Even Hermione looked confused. "I'm really surprised she reacted like that - she didn't when I asked her about it."

All of a sudden, though, Harry thought he knew what Ginny's problem was. Miss Stuart had read in her hand that Ginny had a time in her past that she was ashamed of, and Harry suspected that that had opened some old wounds. He just wished he had thought of that before he had opened them some more. He was about to tell Ron and Hermione what he thought, when a large grey owl swooped in the window and landed by Hermione. They all recognized the owl - it was Viktor Krum's. Hermione removed the letter from the owl's leg, while Ron hurriedly gathered up his books and disappeared as quickly as Ginny had. He did this every time Hermione got a letter from Viktor, and, though it had amused Harry at first, now it just annoyed him.

"Hermione, when are you going to tell Ron that you and Viktor are just friends?" he asked, watching her as she read the letter.

"When he asks," she said, not looking up.

Harry opened his mouth to say something else, but then he thought about what she had just said. That actually made sense. Besides, he really should just stay out of this. He went back to his seat, where he still had a long essay to write for Defense Against the Dark Arts.

That class was the hardest of all. Professor Figg seemed to be trying to make up for the two years that they hadn't had good teachers in a few short months. She did

surprise Harry, though, by inviting him and any friends he wanted to bring to tea in her office. Harry had glared at her all through her first class, because she had acted like she had never met him before when she said his name in roll call. He was really getting sick of all these new revelations about his life. If she wanted to pretend she didn't know him, that was fine by him. But when he tried to sweep by her on his way out the door, she stopped him.

"Hagrid tells me that you all are used to having tea with professors, so I assume you'll know how to behave?" she said.

Harry just continued to glare at her, while Ron and Hermione looked on, unsure what to say.

Professor Figg sighed. "Please let me prove to you that I do know how to bake a cake, when I use magic," she said. "I'll explain everything then."

Harry was still angry, but he nodded once before leading the way out of the room. He knew he'd surprised Ron and Hermione by asking Ginny to go with them, but he just didn't want to have to keep them from bickering in front of a teacher without help. Though they actually behaved well, probably because they were both so interested in what Professor Figg had to say.

One thing hadn't changed about her from the Muggle world to the wizard one - she had five cats in her office. Each one was soon curled up in somebody's lap, which made drinking tea rather difficult, though Hermione and Ginny, at least, didn't seem to mind. Professor Figg told them that Dumbledore had asked her to live near Harry and help keep him safe. She had had to live as a Muggle, to keep a low profile, which was, she said, the hardest thing she had ever done.

"The worst, though, was spending time with you, Harry, and not being able to say anything. I hadn't expected that - I certainly didn't expect the Dursleys to be so horrible, or that they would actually *like* my Muggle persona."

Even after the explanations, Harry was still a little annoyed at her. *She could have given me a hint, or something*, he thought. *Or at least been a little nicer to me.*

All in all, it was a good thing he had Quidditch to take his mind off his studies once in awhile. In the first week of the term, the Gryffindor Quidditch team met with Professor McGonagall to select a new captain and to arrange tryouts for the vacant Keeper position. The team had almost unanimously voted for Angelina Johnson to be captain, with Angelina herself as the lone nay vote. Harry thought Fred and George were horrified thinking that one of them might get it. What with their N.E.W.T.s and the extra classes, which for them included Advanced Potions classes from Professor Snape, adding the responsibility of Quidditch captain, or co-captains, would put a serious cramp in their work on Weasley's Wizard Weezes. The tryouts were set for the end of the week, because the team wanted to get as much

practice in as they could with the new Keeper, and to get his insights into new strategies. Most of them just assumed Ron would make the team.

They were right. The only person who even came close in the tryouts was, to Harry's surprise, Colin Creevey. Harry had no idea when Colin had found the time to get that good, especially being a Muggle-born, but he certainly had. Luckily, Ron's mind for strategy was well-known, and he made one save more than Colin in the tryouts, or Harry would have worried that people might think there was favoritism going on, what with two of Ron's brothers and his best friend on the team. But not even Colin or his brother Dennis seemed to take his defeat too badly.

So, what with intensive studying, exhausting sessions of trying to tap into his reserves of power with Professor Vector and Theo Black, even more exhausting sessions of trying to induce visions with Miss Stuart and Ginny, and draining Quidditch practices, Harry was really looking forward to the first Hogsmeade weekend of the term.

Chapter 11 Hogsmeade

Dear Sirius,

How are you and Professor Lupin doing? *What* are you doing? I wish people would tell me what's going on - it's very hard to be stuck here and have no idea what's happening in the outside world, and I'm not a kid anymore, you know.

I'm really enjoying the Auror classes - Professor Moody is trying to teach us how dark wizards think, so we can decide which spells to use fighting them. And Theo and I are starting to scare Professor Vector - the amount of power we're putting out is unreal! The only thing that's annoying is that neither Ginny nor I have been able to produce any kind of vision, but Miss Stuart says that's to be expected. She mentioned that she knew you years ago - Miss October Stuart. She said to tell you hi.

Ron still hasn't beaten Professor Dumbledore in chess, and the only person he'll play in the common room anymore is Ginny - he says she's the only one who actually gives him a game. At least he made the Quidditch team - what with chess and Hermione, he would have been unbearable if he hadn't.

Do you have any idea how to break the Furious Curse? Professor Moody won't tell us - he says that we have to work it out for ourselves, or it won't work. Hermione and Brenna can both do it, but the rest of us are still having problems.

See you!

Harry

Harry -

Moody's right - that one you have to work out for yourself. Listen to him - he's one of the best Aurors ever.

Remus and I are going to come to see you on the first Hogsmeade weekend. Send me the date. I think Remus wants to tell you off for not telling him about your dream, either.

See you then.

Sirius

Harry had to grin at Sirius' first paragraph. He knew he had to work the Furious Curse out himself, he had just hoped to get a few hints. The Furious Curse was just what it sounded like; it made you so angry that you couldn't think straight. It didn't surprise Harry that Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny couldn't break it, because the Weasley temper was legendary. And Theo Black, though he seemed so laid back and easy-going, could certainly be roused to anger - Harry had seen it in their classes with Professor Vector, when things weren't going well. But Harry was surprised that he himself couldn't fight it, and he had no idea how to work on it.

Harry lost his grin, though, when he read the rest of the letter, and when he showed it to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, they were as taken aback as he was.

"What, is he crazy?" Ron said. "Anybody could see him in Hogsmeade!"

"Ron, calm down," Hermione said, though she looked just as concerned as he did. "He'll come as Padfoot, I'm sure, and the teachers will all be there this time-"

"That's what I mean!" Ron said. "*Snape* will be there! You know he hates Sirius - he'd like nothing better than to let slip about Padfoot - he did it about Professor Lupin being a werewolf, didn't he?"

"I wonder why Professor Lupin is going along with this," Ginny said. "It's not like him to let a friend go into danger."

That was a good question, Harry thought. While he disagreed with Ginny that Professor Lupin wouldn't let a friend go into danger, he thought that there would have to be a pretty good reason, but he couldn't think of what that might be. Then he remembered a part of his letter that Sirius had totally ignored. Maybe Sirius really wanted to see Miss Stuart again, and Professor Lupin, knowing how lonely Sirius was, and wanting to cheer him up, agreed to do it. Harry looked over at Ginny, about to say something about it, but she smiled at him and shook her head. She obviously knew what he was thinking, and she either didn't agree or didn't want to talk about it. Harry would just have to wait until Hogsmeade to find out what was going on.

On the way into Hogsmeade, Ginny asked Harry if he had visited Dobby yet this year.

"I've been down in the kitchens visiting Winky, and I think Dobby misses you," she said.

Ron snorted. "You've been down in the kitchens? Taking over spew, are you?"

"It's not *spew*, Ron," Hermione said. "And why do you think Ginny has to take it over?"

"Because you haven't been bugging us about it," Ron said. "Giving up? Willing to admit that house-elves live to serve?"

Hermione looked furious, but Ginny put a hand on her arm.

"Hermione is just really busy, Ron," she said, glaring at her brother. "Besides, I haven't been going down there to agitate for S.P.E.W, I've just been visiting Winky. She still hasn't recovered from last year." She turned to Harry. "Dobby would really love a visit from you."

Harry saw Ron giving Ginny a grin, and looked down at his feet, trying not to blush. Ron obviously thought that Ginny was doing this to spend more time with Harry, but Harry knew that wasn't the case. He did feel bad, though, about neglecting Dobby, so he said that he would go visit him soon.

As they wandered around Hogsmeade, Harry thought about Winky and Dobby. They had reacted to freedom so differently, and yet they had both needed to find something to obsess about once free - Winky was still hung up on Mr. Crouch, and Dobby...well, Dobby was hung up on *him*. When Ginny and Hermione went into Gladrags Wizardwear to buy a new blouse for Winky, Harry bought new socks for Dobby. Dobby loved socks.

When they emerged from Gladrags, the four friends looked at each other.

"Sirius didn't say where we were to meet them, did he?" Hermione asked Harry, while searching the crowded streets with her eyes.

"No," Harry said. "Well, let's go to the Three Broomsticks - they're sure to find us there."

They found an empty table in the Three Broomsticks, and settled down with their butterbeers. They were so tired from all the extra classes and studying, that it felt good to just sit there and hang out with friends. Ginny asked Ron a question about the chess game he had played against Professor McGonagall's giant chess set in first year, and he was more than happy to give her a blow-by-blow account, though he grimaced at the memory of some of his moves. Harry spotted Lavender Brown and Seamus Finnigan alone at a table in the corner. They were quite oblivious to the rest of the crowded pub, and Harry couldn't help but watch, slightly envious. Not that he was interested in Lavender, but... He heard Hermione sigh, beside him, and turned to see her watching them, too. Ron, of course, was oblivious, and if he did notice, he certainly wouldn't just watch. Harry was about to say something to Hermione, when he saw Professor Lupin enter the pub, leading a large, black dog.

Ron and Ginny stopped talking, and all four friends watched Sirius and Professor Lupin make their way across to them, all four of them grinning widely. Even knowing how dangerous it was for Sirius to do this, the sight of the two friends in this situation couldn't help but make them smile.

"Hi, Professor Lupin," Harry said as soon as they were near enough.

"Harry, since I'm not your professor anymore, I think you can all call me Remus."

Ginny was having a hard time keeping a straight face as she looked down at Sirius, who stood in between her and Harry, ears perked and tail wagging. She reached out to pet him, almost as though she couldn't help it, but he turned her head towards her and gave a slight yip. She withdrew her hand, but lost control of herself, going into silent giggles.

Remus chuckled at her, but before he could say anything, Harry heard another laugh behind them.

"Oh, Remus, what an adorable dog!" Miss Stuart said, coming around the table and patting Sirius on the head. "It's so good to see you again and - can this be the same Padfoot?" She knelt down to tug on Sirius' ears and looked up at Remus, her eyes alight with mischief.

Hermione gasped, but Harry, Ron, and Ginny couldn't help it - they burst into laughter. Miss Stuart obviously knew exactly whom she was petting. Even Hermione lost it when Sirius gave a little growl.

"Yes, Toby, this is the same old Padfoot," Remus said. He wasn't laughing, but his eyes reflected Miss Stuart's mischief. "I think he's missed you, haven't you, Padfoot, old man?"

Sirius whipped his head around to growl at Remus, which just mad everyone laugh harder.

"Well, it's lovely to see you all in such wonderful spirits," Madam Rosmerta, the owner of the Three Broomsticks, said as she approached the table. She put a large picnic basket down, puffing a little as she did so. "Here's your picnic, Remus. I hope you enjoy it - oh, and I

included some treats for your dog." She patted Sirius on the head, then walked away, her turquoise heels winking.

"I think we'd better get outside before someone decides that they want Padfoot for stud," Remus said. He was the only one who could still talk. "Toby, will you be joining us on our picnic?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Stuart, do please come," Ginny said, in between gasps of laughter.

Miss Stuart looked sharply at her, but Ginny preserved her best look of angelic innocence - she was really good at that look. So Miss Stuart agreed to come, Ron grabbed the picnic basket, and they all trooped outside.

Chapter 12 Padfoot's Cave

"It's a bit chilly for a picnic," Remus said, as they left the village and headed out into the countryside. "But we thought it would be better to be outside than in, considering." He led the way up to the cave where Sirius had lived the year before. Hermione and Ron unpacked the lunch, and Sirius transformed with a pop. He glared at them all, then turned to Miss Stuart.

"Yes, it is nice to see you again, Toby," he said, practically spitting his words. "Do you mind if we go somewhere and talk?"

Harry was disappointed, but he knew that this was a conversation that had to happen, so he didn't say anything to keep Sirius back. When Miss Stuart sighed and nodded, Harry just watched them go, before turning to Remus.

"So, I understand you want to tell me off for something," he said, smiling at his old teacher.

"What?" Remus said. "Oh, the dream. No, Harry, I understand wanting to keep things from people in order not to hurt them."

"Remus, what has been happening out in the world?" Ron asked.

"Yes, why haven't there been any attacks?" Hermione added. "Or have there been, but we just haven't heard about them?"

Remus shook his head. "No, there haven't been. From what we have heard, Voldemort doesn't trust his Death Eaters - he is testing them very strenuously before letting them back into his confidence."

"Get that from Snape, did you?" Ron said, grinning. "I wonder what he had to do to prove himself - I'd like to have seen that."

Remus just looked at him. It was a mild look, but it made Ron stop grinning and drop his eyes to his plate. Before anyone could say anything else, though, Miss Stuart stalked back into the cave.

"You'd better go to *your friend*, Remus," she said, her face set. "He might need some help."

Remus gave a small sigh, but he got up and left the cave. Harry followed him - if Sirius was in trouble, he wanted to be there to help. Remus walked quickly, though, so it took Harry a few moments to catch up, and he came to the edge of the clearing to find the conversation already started.

"She's changed, Moony," Sirius said. He was sitting on a tree stump, his head in his hands.

"We've all changed, Padfoot," Remus said. He stood in front of his friend, looking down at him.

Sirius shook his head. "She has matured, you have matured - your experiences have changed you. You've both had fifteen years to live, and I've spent twelve of those in Azkaban."

"That's matured you, too," Remus said.

"Not in the same way. I didn't live those years, not really. I wasn't out in the world, making decisions and living with the consequences. Sometimes, I feel so old, because of everything that has happened, but then sometimes, I feel so young."

Harry stood at the edge of the clearing, frozen to the spot. He knew he shouldn't be here - it wasn't his place to be listening to this. They obviously didn't know he was here, or they wouldn't be talking like this. He turned to leave, but not before he heard Remus ask, "What did she do?"

"Well, first she slapped me," Sirius said, his voice growing fainter as Harry moved away. "And then, she-"

But Harry could hear no more. He couldn't help grinning, thinking of the possibilities, but he knew it was best that he didn't know for sure.

When Harry reentered the cave, he heard Ginny say, "I wonder why one of Voldemort's 'tests' wasn't killing Muggles?" She was lying on her stomach, nibbling on some crisps.

"That would probably be too easy a test," Ron said. "Anyone who wants to be a Death Eater must have no problem killing Muggles."

"Except Professor Snape," Hermione said. She and Ron had been sitting very close to each other, and now she leaned against him slightly, without seeming to notice what she was doing. Ron's ears turned bright red, but he, too, tried to act like he hadn't noticed. Ginny stared at them both, then seemed to notice that Harry had come back.

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

Harry sat down next to her. "I think that if the only way Snape could prove to Voldemort that he was really a Death Eater was to kill a Muggle, he would do it."

Ginny nodded, but Hermione looked shocked. "Professor Snape would never-"

"He'd have to, Hermione," Ron said, which made her lean away from him. "His mission as a spy is more important - in a war like this, you have to make sacrifices."

"Is that what Professor Dumbledore is teaching you?" Hermione asked, glaring at him. "Because I have a hard time believing it."

Ron's ears turned red again. He never talked about what Dumbledore was teaching him, except chess. Luckily, before he could get Hermione even angrier at him, Sirius and Remus returned.

"Did Toby leave, then?" Remus asked, as he looked around and saw she wasn't there. Everyone else just stared at him.

"I wanted to talk to her about her interpretation of your dream, Harry," he continued, apparently unaware that everyone else thought he was crazy. "She wrote me that she was going to try to help you relive the memory. Did she?"

Harry had been sitting cross-legged, but at this question he swung his legs around and lay down on his stomach like Ginny. He looked down at the ground.

"Yeah, she did," he said. This was not something he liked to think about. Neither he nor Ginny had succeeded in inducing any new visions, so Miss Stuart asked them if they would mind being put into trances so that she could help them relive the visions they had had, to try to get more details. Ginny hadn't seemed to mind, though she hadn't remembered any more details, so Harry hadn't liked to refuse, though he had wanted to. He had actually managed to remember more - he now recognized Wormtail's laugh, and Lucius Malfoy's, and Snape's, among the laughter at Voldemort's threats against him. But since they knew already that those three were among Voldemort's closest supporters, that didn't tell them much. Harry also remembered that there were two other people there whose laughter he didn't recognize. He really didn't think that this information was worth the way he came out of the trance, though.

The first thing he had realized wasn't Miss Stuart on one side of him, one hand on his shoulder to hold him down, and the other holding his hand so he couldn't reach his scar. It wasn't even the pain in his scar, so intense that he thought his head would split. No, it was the fact that Ginny was on his other side, one hand on his shoulder, and the other holding his hand, just like Miss Stuart. When he realized what was happening, Harry froze, staring up at Ginny. All he could see in her eyes was concern for him, so he was able to pull himself together and convince both of them that he was all right. But he still didn't like thinking about it.

While telling Remus and Sirius about the trance, Harry didn't mention how he came out of it, and he didn't look at Ginny. She didn't seem to notice, and she entered into the subsequent conversation about who those other two men might be with no problem. Harry tried to follow her example, and once Remus mentioned that Snape being there didn't mean that Voldemort completely trusted him, he didn't have any more trouble.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Harry, everyone knows that Voldemort is after you," Sirius said. "So, letting Snape know that he is doesn't hurt him at all."

"And letting Snape know that he's going after you by going after us isn't a bad idea, either," Ron said.

Harry must have looked confused, because Hermione added, "First of all, it might change what Sirius and Remus do - make them more cautious, and less likely to trust. Then, too, if he does succeed in...getting to one of us, when we know he's trying and are on our guard, it could really hurt our morale."

"But we won't let it, will we?" Ginny said.

Everyone was quiet for a moment after that. Of course, they would try to keep the loss of someone they cared about from bothering them, but how could it not? This was a war, and they knew it, but they were human, too.

"When do you think Voldemort will decide he trusts his Death Eaters enough to make a strike?" Ginny asked, breaking the silence.

She had directed the question at Sirius and Remus, but Ron shifted slightly, so Remus indicated that he should answer.

"Professor Dumbledore and I have been talking about that," he said, not looking at anyone. "The most obvious day would, of course, be Halloween." He cocked an eyebrow at Remus.

"We don't think he'll be ready quite that soon," Remus said, smiling slightly at him. He was obviously enjoying being lectured to by an old student.

"Well, then, the next time, if he's aiming for Hogwarts, would be the first Quidditch match. If he's not, there's Guy Fawke's Day, though that's not terribly likely. It really could be anytime after he thinks he's ready, but..." he took a deep breath. "The most likely day is Christmas."

Harry thought about that, about the Dark Mark floating above some house on Christmas Day. The air in the cave seemed colder all of a sudden. He noticed Ginny shiver, and reached out to touch her hand.

"We'll just have to have a vision to tell us what he's going to do," he said, which surprised a reluctant giggle out of her. They had had such luck with that so far.

Chapter 13 A Vision in White

All in all, it had been a disquieting visit with Sirius and Remus and, as day after day passed with no news; Harry found it more and more difficult to concentrate on his studies. Everyone in the school, except, of course, Malfoy and his Slytherin cronies, seemed to feel the continued silence from Voldemort oppressive. Time seemed almost tangible - they could feel it creep by, moment by moment, waiting for the time when he would finally strike. Hermione even said that she wished Lockhart was back, to give them all a morale booster, but Harry suspected that she said that more to get a rise out of Ron than anything else. The one good thing about the gloom that had settled over the castle was that hardly any Gryffindors felt in the mood for pranks, so Hermione was having a relatively easy time as prefect. Ron's birthday gift to Harry - the Muggle water gun - remained at the bottom of Harry's trunk, unused even on Malfoy. Even Fred and George were restrained, for them, though they had found out somehow that Fleur Delacour was corresponding with Bill. Luckily, Fleur was quite used to dealing with teasing from boys.

She was still teaching Care of Magical Creatures, since Hagrid was still away. He wrote to Harry pretty frequently, and Harry wrote back, though he certainly hadn't told Hagrid that he enjoyed Fleur's classes more than Hagrid's.

Halloween passed with no incident, and so did Gryffindor's first Quidditch match, against Ravenclaw. Gryffindor won, 300 to 20, and, though Harry was happy for Ron's sake, he felt badly for Cho Chang. She was obviously not at her best, and he really could have caught the Snitch a couple of times before he did, but he wanted to give her a chance. One time, she had looked so out of it that she almost fell off her broom while diving, and Harry was so busy watching her to make sure she didn't, that the Snitch got away again. Angelina told him off after the game, but Harry could tell her heart wasn't really in it. She was worried about Cho, too.

The most frustrating thing for Harry, though - even more than knowing that Sirius and Remus were in so much danger and refusing to adequately protect themselves - was that he and Ginny still hadn't managed to induce a vision. They supposedly had this weapon that could give them Voldemort's plans, and yet they couldn't use it. The two of them reacted very differently. Harry tried a different method of scrying every session - first the crystal ball, then water scrying, then a crystal - while Ginny kept using her crystal ball every time, constantly trying to find the right combination of crystal and light. Her dogged determination got on Harry's nerves occasionally, but she was the only one who would let him talk about his frustration with the whole thing. Ron only wanted to talk chess and Hermione, and Hermione, besides having no real faith in visions, thought that Ginny would be better off spending her time working on Professor Flitwick's Advanced Charms classwork. Harry heard them talking about it one night in the common room when they thought he had fallen asleep on his books.

"Ginny, you shouldn't be wasting your time! You know you have that Protection Charm to work out completely for Professor Flitwick," Hermione said.

Ginny was poring over an ancient Divination book.

"Oh, Hermione, be reasonable," she said, sounding completely exasperated, as though she had had this conversation many times before. "If you would set aside your prejudices for one second, you would see that a useful vision could be just as important as a Protection Charm that won't even work!"

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. It won't work one way, Hermione, how many times do I have to tell you that? It has to be mutual, and you know as well as I do that that will never be! So, if you want to talk about completely pointless -"

She slammed the book shut so hard that Harry jumped. He wished he hadn't - they stopped talking once they realized he was awake, and he hadn't figured out what they meant yet.

He was starting to agree with Hermione, though. Try as they might, no visions came, and they tried everything - all times, all conditions. They even tried three o'clock in the morning, which nearly caused Harry and Ginny to get a detention from Snape for being out of bounds after hours. They had no idea why he was wandering the halls at three in the morning, but of course they couldn't ask him about it. Luckily, just as he was working his way sneerily towards a detention, Miss Stuart came along.

"Harry, Ginny," she said. "Good. I thought you might have forgotten about our appointment and fallen asleep. Oh, hello, Severus," she added, nodding at him slightly.

Snape just curled his lip at her and stalked away, leaving Miss Stuart smiling faintly. The look on her face reminded Harry of Remus Lupin, when he had succeeded in annoying Snape by being in the right place at the right time, doing something completely legitimate.

But even the eerie hour of three in the morning hadn't been enough to draw visions. Miss Stuart's next idea was to try hunger, so one day at dinnertime, Harry sat in one of the big, comfortable armchairs in her classroom, staring into a scrying crystal and trying to ignore the growls coming from his stomach.

This is so stupid, he thought. Every time I've had a vision was when I was asleep - maybe I should just go to sleep, like Ginny. He glanced over to where she sat, still in the same position as always, gazing into the crystal ball, but definitely asleep. Her hair looks so warm in the firelight, warmer than the firelight...wait a minute - Ginny's asleep?

Harry sat bolt upright in his chair. He must have been almost asleep himself not to have noticed before. Ginny *never* slept in Miss Stuart's lessons, she took them much too seriously. *If she's asleep now, that must mean she's having a vision.*

Harry was halfway out of his chair before he noticed Miss Stuart signaling to him to stay where he was. She put one finger on her lips and shook her head at him, but she was smiling. Well, Harry was, too. Finally! After all this time, one of them finally had a vision. His happy mood didn't last long, though, because soon Ginny began to shift uncomfortably in her seat and moan a little.

Suddenly, she yelled out, "No!" and sat straight up, her eyes wide open. Harry was at her side in a moment, followed closely by Miss Stuart.

"Ginny, you're all right, everything's all right, it's just a vision," Harry said. He wanted to take her hand to comfort her, but somehow he didn't feel comfortable doing that. His words seemed to reach her, though, because she let out an indignant sound.

"Just a vision - if that's what you think, Harry, you're in the wrong place. And everything is *definitely* not all right." She glared up at him, her brown eyes hard. "You're not supposed to be talking to me just now, remember? Why don't you go sit down?"

Harry just kept looking down at her, hurt beyond belief. When he had woken up from the reliving of his vision, she had been there, and, as jumpy as that made him, it had also comforted him. He wanted to do the same for her, but it seemed she didn't want him to. He knew he wasn't supposed to be talking to her; Miss Stuart had drilled them in that over and over. When the Seer awoke from her trance, she should tell what she saw with as little outside intervention as possible. But this was *Ginny*, and he just couldn't help himself. He looked over at Miss Stuart guiltily. She had returned to her desk, ready to take notes on what Ginny said, but when she looked up at him, all he saw in her eyes was understanding. Somehow, that was worse than all the rest. He returned to his chair as Ginny started talking.

"I saw a house with the Dark Mark over it," she began. "It was a Muggle house - not Hermione's, and not the Longs'. I didn't recognize it. It was small, but well kept. There was snow on the ground, and more snow coming down. It was so cold." She rubbed her arms quickly. "Then the scene flickered, and it was another house, and another, and another - all with the Dark Mark. But it kept coming back to the first one." Her voice had been soft, but decisive until then, and she stopped abruptly.

"Did you get any sense of time?" Miss Stuart asked.

"Time?"

"Did it feel like the past, the present, or the future?"

"Oh...the future, but not far into the future. But...I don't know how far. Oh, this is silly!" Ginny exploded suddenly, standing up, turning around, and sitting back down again. "We wait all this time for a vision, and now it tells us nothing we didn't already know. Voldemort's going to attack a Muggle - well, there's a news flash! And then, he's going to attack more people. I never would have guessed that!" She pulled her knees up under her chin and hugged her legs.

Harry wanted to go to her, but she had made it quite clear that she didn't want him. Miss Stuart didn't seem to notice how Ginny was acting. She asked many more questions, trying to pry every last shred of information from the vision, but even Ginny's opinion that the Muggle house would be the first attacked lacked conviction. At first, she was sure, but then she wasn't. The only other thing that came out was that whenever Ginny saw the Muggle house, she thought of white. Harry suggested that was because of the snow, but Ginny waved away that idea.

"Another white, a different white," she said. It was the most animated she became after her outburst. But she couldn't be more specific.

After what seemed like a long time to Harry, Miss Stuart finally said that she thought they had gotten everything out of the vision that they could. She stood up, stretched, and looked down at Ginny, her eyes softening.

"I would recommend that the two of you go for a walk outside, to clear your heads, and then get some dinner. I'd tell you the way to the kitchens, though of course I shouldn't, but I suspect that you know how to get there already."

Harry grinned at her, but Ginny just stood and walked slowly to the door. She looked drained. He was tempted just to take her down to the kitchens directly, but he figured Miss Stuart knew what to do after visions, so he followed her outside.

Once outside, Ginny started walking so fast that Harry could barely keep up. She headed for the lake, and the bench that stood near a little stand of trees, commanding a wonderful view across the lake. Before they got there, though, Harry got tired of running after her.

"Ginny, what are you doing?" he asked, between puffing breaths.

"Clearing my head - isn't that what Miss Stuart told me to do?" she said, whirling around to face him. "When I close my eyes, all I can see is the Dark Mark, hanging over house after house. If taking a walk outside will get rid of that, I'll walk until midnight." She took off again. Harry followed her; he didn't know what else to do.

When she got to the bench, though, someone else was already there.

Chapter 14 Five Months Afterwards

It was Cho Chang. She was crying.

She still looked pretty, of course. She wasn't making any noise; tears were just pouring down her face. Harry just stood there with no idea what to do, but Ginny dropped down onto the bench beside Cho. Harry thought that Ginny wanted to hug the older girl, but didn't feel quite comfortable doing that, so she settled for looking supportive.

"Can we help you, Cho?" she asked.

Cho removed her gaze from the other side of the lake and looked at Ginny. "Help me? Cedric died five months ago, do you realize that? And a year ago today, he was fighting a dragon right over there." She pointed across the lake to the area near the Forbidden Forest where the dragon enclosure had been last year for the first task. "You probably forgot all about it being today," she said, looking up at Harry, who had. "But I haven't. I haven't forgotten Cedric, like everyone else has. I'll remember him forever..." She started crying again.

Ginny put a hand on her arm. "We haven't forgotten Cedric, Cho, no one has -"

"Yes, they have," Cho broke in, shaking off Ginny's hand. "You have," she added, glaring up at Harry. "You go about your everyday life, never thinking about the people who died to give that life to you. How do you do it? How do you live with the blood on your hands?"

"Cho, that is not fair!" Ginny said, putting her hand back onto the older girl's arm firmly. "Harry -" She broke off for a moment, giving him a questioning look, but as he had no idea what she wanted from him, he just looked back down at her. She shook her head slightly, then continued, "Harry thinks about those things a lot - probably more than is good for him. He *does* have to live with that knowledge every day of his life - can you imagine what that's like? You've lost Cedric, and that's a horrible thing, but Harry's lost his mother and his father, and will probably -" She broke off again, giving Harry an apologetic look.

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was glad that Ginny had answered Cho's accusations, because he never could have, but how did she know so much about him? It was as though she could read his mind. And she was so passionate about it! He knew what she had been about to say, too - that he would probably lose more people he cared about, which Cho most likely wouldn't, but he was glad Ginny hadn't finished the thought. The fewer times that was said out loud the better.

Cho's reaction to Ginny's speech surprised him even more than the speech itself. She started crying harder, and turned to bury her head in Ginny's shoulder.

"Oh, I know!" she wailed. "I'm so sorry, Harry, I know you think about these things, anyone can see...I just...I get so frustrated when everyone else is having fun, and all I can think about is that Cedric's *dead*...and I have to lash out at somebody...but it wasn't fair to take it out on you..." She said all this between fresh bouts of tears, and a lot of it was muffled in Ginny's shoulder.

Harry couldn't help but think how strange this whole situation was - here was the girl whom he'd had a crush on crying on the girl who had had a crush on him. Ginny obviously wasn't thinking about any of that, though; she just patted Cho's back and made soothing noises,

letting the other girl quiet down. Just as she did, though, Harry's stomach gave a huge growl. Ginny gave him a scandalized look, but then she burst into giggles. Even Cho gave him a watery smile, so he supposed it was a good thing he had an embarrassing stomach.

"Have you had dinner, Cho?" Ginny asked. "We haven't - obviously - we had a class. We're going down to the kitchens to get some food from the house elves - would you like to come?"

Cho sighed, and looked out across the lake again. "Well, I'm not particularly hungry, but I suppose I should eat," she said. She didn't get up from the bench, though.

"Cho, I didn't know Cedric as well as you did, obviously," Harry said. "But...would he have wanted you to be so sad? I think he would have wanted you to..." He trailed off. He probably shouldn't say this.

"Get on with my life?" Cho asked, saying it for him. "Yes, of course he would. But he's not here, is he? And I can wallow in misery if I want to." But she said the last sentence with a slight smile, and she did stand up.

Ginny did, too, giving Harry one of the light-turned-on-inside-her smiles that he liked so much. She linked her arm with Cho's and led the way to the kitchens.

When they got there, Harry and Ginny were each hit by a flying cannon ball.

"Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter, sir!" said one.

"Miss Ginny! Miss Ginny!" said the other.

"Dobby is wearing his new socks, Harry Potter, sir!" said the first. He lifted up first one leg and then the other to show them the mismatching socks Harry had bought in Hogsmeade.

"Winky is wearing her new blouse, too, Miss Ginny!" said the second. She puffed out her chest a little, showing off the snowy white, perfectly clean blouse. Harry had to stare. The last time he had seen her, she had still worn the stained and wrinkled blouse Mr. Crouch had given her when he set her free. She had been nowhere near this animated, either.

Ginny laughed softly, but she got down on her knees to hug Winky. "I'm glad you like it," she said. "How are you doing?"

"Winky is doing much better, Miss Ginny," Winky said. She looked like she was going to say more, but then she looked at Cho and didn't. Harry wondered what that was about, and why Dobby was staring at him with even more intensity than usual, but then he noticed that they weren't alone in the kitchen. George Weasley sat at one of the long tables, with an enormous feast set out in front of him, and Brenna O'Keefe beside him. Brenna's face looked unusually flushed as she nodded to Cho. George didn't look happy.

"I'd forgotten that you knew how to get into the kitchens, too," he said. "Are you here for dinner?"

"No, we just thought we'd like a midnight snack at seven in the evening," Ginny said, grinning, as her eyes went back and forth between Brenna and her brother. "Harry and I were working with Miss Stuart over dinner, and Cho hadn't had any, either, so we made her come along."

Brenna looked sharply at Cho, who blushed and sat down. She reached out to take one of the bowls in front of George, but he batted her hand away.

"Hey! That's all for me." He stuffed a large bite of roast beef in his mouth, but then grinned at her shocked expression. Somehow, he managed to swallow. "Just kidding. Besides, there's always more where that came from."

Sure enough, the house elves were rapidly assembling even more food for the three newcomers. Winky and Dobby didn't help; they hovered over Ginny and Harry, instead.

"So," Ginny said, as she dished herself out some Yorkshire pudding, "what made you two miss dinner?"

George and Brenna exchanged glances. He seemed to be asking her something, and, after a moment, she nodded.

"You know I've been working on a Communication Charm, Ginny," she said. "I thought I had made a breakthrough this afternoon, so I asked George if he would let me try it out with him. It was supposed to make it so that we could project thoughts into each other's minds."

"Wow!" Harry said. "I didn't know you could do that."

"Well, you can't," George said. "At least that's what we've always been taught. But Brenna thought she could design a charm to do it."

"If anyone could do that, it's you, Brenna," Ginny said, smiling at the older girl. Brenna gave her a slightly tremulous smile in return.

"It didn't work, though. Instead of projecting just one, specific thought into George's mind, he got everything...all my thoughts, all my feelings..." She trailed off, staring at her plate.

"The only way to describe it is psychedelic," George said. His grin almost looked normal. "All of a sudden, I couldn't see or hear anything; everything was just...weird. Then I passed out."

"I couldn't wake him up," Brenna said, still staring at her plate, her cheeks getting redder and redder. "And I didn't want to go get a teacher, because I knew that I shouldn't have tried that without Professor Flitwick there, so I just waited for George to wake up on his own. And when he did -" She leapt up and practically ran out of the room.

George muttered something Harry couldn't hear and followed her. Harry, Ginny, and Cho just stared at each other.

"I didn't know you knew Brenna, Ginny," Cho said after a moment. She wasn't eating much, just pushing the food around on her plate.

"Oh," Ginny said. She looked at Harry pleadingly. He smiled at her.

"She and George have been hanging out a lot," he said. "And you know how close all the Weasleys are."

Ginny smothered a grin at that - the last thing either George or Fred wanted was their little

brother or sister tagging along with them - but Cho was watching her fork move her food into little piles, and didn't notice.

"Do you know Brenna well?" Harry asked Cho. He didn't like seeing her like this.

"Oh, sure," she said. "We're in the same year, after all. But Brenna's quiet, even for a Ravenclaw, and I'm not, so we're not especially good friends." She sighed. "Although she's been one of the nicer people this year. Most people just tell me to snap out of it. As if I could..." She shook her head and stood up. "Sorry, you two, I'm just not that hungry. Thanks for being here, though." Before either Harry or Ginny could say anything, she left the room.

"I'm worried about her," Ginny said, staring after Cho. "I hope she has someone she can talk to, since she didn't seem to want to talk to us."

Harry didn't really want to talk about Cho, or Cedric, any more. Besides, that reminded him of something he had wanted to ask Ginny for a while.

"Ginny, can I ask you a question about your diary?"

Ginny whipped her eyes back from the door to glare at Harry.

"Are you going to keep bugging me about that, too? Because I've had more than enough from Ron. I'm not a little girl anymore, I learned my lesson, and, besides, *Mum* got this diary for me -"

"Whoa, whoa," Harry said, trying to stem the tide of impassioned words. "I know all that, Ginny. I just wanted to ask about enchanted diaries in general. I've obviously never had one, and I don't know anything about them."

"Oh," Ginny said. "Sorry, Harry, I guess I'm just too defensive about the whole thing." She sighed. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, what does it mean, exactly, having an enchanted diary? When you're writing in it, and it talks back, who is it doing the talking?"

"Well, any witch or wizard who wants to can put their thoughts and memories into a diary. Usually, they do it at the end of their lives, when they want to share what they've learned in life with younger people."

"Share what they've learned?"

"Yeah," Ginny looked down at her plate. She looked uncertain whether or not to continue, but then she nodded her head and looked back up at Harry. "My diary's name is Joanna. She was a base-born daughter of King John of England, who was married at age fourteen to Llewellyn, a prince in Wales. She made a lot of mistakes in her life, and she wanted to help prevent other girls from making those same mistakes."

Harry wanted to ask what the mistakes were, but he could tell that Ginny wasn't going to tell him. Besides, he could probably look it up in a history book if he really wanted to know.

"So, she really talks to you? Responds to what you say, and gives you advice and stuff?" he asked instead.

Ginny nodded, smiling slightly. "Sometimes I don't like her advice, but yes, she always gives it."

"Wow," Harry said. He thought for a moment that it might be useful to have an enchanted diary to turn to when he needed help, but then he remembered that he had enough people giving him advice right now; he didn't need another one. He had another thought.

"So, Hermione's been getting advice from some old lady in a diary? I wonder what she has to say about Ron," he said.

"I don't know," Ginny said. "A diary is *private*, Harry." She glared at him, then her eyes became thoughtful. "Have you noticed something funny about Hermione? Doesn't it seem like the teachers all push her really hard?"

"They push all of us, Ginny."

"I know, but they push her more."

"Hermione likes being pushed - she lives for it," Harry said. He wasn't really thinking about what Ginny was saying, he was concentrating on the treacle tart Dobby had just put in front of him.

Ginny let out an exasperated sigh. "It's what she's being pushed to *do*," she said. "Professor Moody especially - he's always having her try things out first, and most especially the offensive spells. Professor Flitwick too. That's what Hermione's special assignment is for our Advanced Charms class, the offensive spells."

"Hmm," Harry said. "I wouldn't have thought that that would be Hermione's specialty."

"It's not, and that's what's worrying me," Ginny said. "You know Hermione, she'll try to do anything a teacher tells her to do, but she's not enjoying this. Do you think Professor Moody is trying to push her to become an Auror?"

Harry finally brought his thoughts fully into the conversation. "Well, he did tell me once that she had the potential to be one of the best Aurors in a century. But I think he's concentrating more on the problems here and now than on our future careers." He laughed shortly. "He told me something else at the same time; he said to try to live a normal life, because I could. Nothing could feel less normal than today, that's for sure."

Chapter 15 Up to Something

Life became even stranger for Harry a week later. Practically all of Gryffindor was in the common room one evening, studying. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were working on Potions. This year, Snape told them exactly what was going to be on the end-of-term practical exam, but it didn't help. He was going to give each of them a Fear Potion, and the antidote was so tricky, even without having to concoct it while under the influence of the Fear Potion, that even Hermione was worried about it. Ginny pored over another Divination book, trying to find references to white to give her a clue to what her vision had meant. George was about the only person in the common room not studying; he was just staring into the fire, while Fred gave him concerned looks over his History of Magic textbook. George hadn't been himself since Brenna had tried out her Communication Charm.

Into this almost complete silence, Professor McGonagall entered the room. Everyone stared at her; usually, her entrance meant something dire had happened. She took a look around, then came straight over to Harry and Ginny, who were sitting next to each other, with Ron and Hermione across from them.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, Professor Dumbledore would like a word with the two of you." She smiled as their faces took on almost identical looks of horror. "You're not in trouble, but perhaps you should be if you're that worried about it. He has an...interesting proposition to put to you. The password is Sugar Quill." She gave each of them a piercing stare. "I'm going to be making an announcement to the rest of Gryffindor, but I'm sure you'll hear all about that when you get back."

Harry and Ginny left immediately. When Professor McGonagall said to jump, all anyone could say was "How high?". They practically ran up to Professor Dumbledore's office.

On the way, Harry said, "What do you suppose he wants?"

"I don't know," Ginny said. She gave him a sidelong glance. "Have you been up to anything I should know about?"

Harry gave a short, barking laugh. "When have I had the time?"

"There is that," Ginny said. "Do you suppose it's about my vision?"

"It could be...but it's been a week, and I really think we've hashed out everything that can be gotten from it with Miss Stuart. So, what about you? Have you been up to anything that *I* should know about?"

"Nope. My conscience is absolutely clear," Ginny said, grinning. "This time, anyway."

Even with such remarkably clear consciences, they hesitated a minute before giving the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's staircase the password. Finally, Ginny gave an exasperated sigh, and said, "Well, it can't be that bad, can it? Sugar Quill."

"Ah, Miss Weasley, Mr. Potter," Professor Dumbledore said as they entered. "Come in, sit down." His eyes twinkled over his spectacles as he saw the looks on their faces. "Nothing to worry about, I just have a slightly odd favor to ask the two of you. I believe that you have been visiting Winky and Dobby in the kitchens from time to time."

This was so far from what they had been expecting to hear that neither Harry nor Ginny responded immediately. Then Harry gave a slight gasp - they weren't supposed to be visiting the kitchens, after all - and said, "Well, Dobby has been a really good friend to me -" at the same time that Ginny said, "I've been really worried about Winky, Professor -"

They both stopped and looked at each other. Dumbledore chuckled.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "We must never forget our friends, or ignore people who are in distress, just because they aren't prestigious or powerful. But I'm also glad to hear it, because I'm having some problems with the house elves in general, and Winky and Dobby in particular, that I hope you two will be able to help me solve."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other again, and Ginny said, "Of course, Professor, we'll do whatever we can to help."

"You see, much as I, and I think Miss Granger, would like to believe otherwise, having Dobby here is not helping the other house elves desire freedom. They are also prejudiced against him, so I'm afraid that he doesn't have many friends. Winky, though she is doing much better lately, has not settled down since her arrival here. I think she needs to have just one master; being here at Hogwarts is too nebulous for her." He stopped and looked at Harry and Ginny as though expecting something, but they just stared back at him.

"Well, you see, Harry, Dobby has asked if he could work for you. He would want paying, of course, but if you can get him to take more than he's earning now, which isn't much, I will be very surprised. Ginny, Winky has formed an attachment to you. I know that you also don't believe in the enslavement of house elves, but it would really be a kindness to allow her to work for you. She won't take paying - I've tried - but perhaps you could come up with some way to pay her that she doesn't see as payment. Presents, perhaps."

Now Harry and Ginny were staring with eyes completely wide open. Ginny's mouth was open, too, but she obviously wasn't going to say anything just then.

Dumbledore chuckled again, as he watched them, and continued. "This would be a responsibility, of course. House elves, as you may have noticed, tend to be a bit, well, obsessive about their owners, and I don't think the fact that you would pay Dobby would change that, Harry. I did take the liberty of talking to your parents, Ginny, and, though they think you're a bit young for the responsibility, they have agreed to abide by your decision." At that, Ginny shut her mouth with a snap, then opened it again.

"I think it's a wonderful idea, Professor. Every time I've gone down to the kitchens, Winky has seemed better, and I'm certain that if I have her with me more of the time, she'll become herself again."

"Good, good," Dumbledore said. "And you, Harry?"

Harry thought for a moment. Truthfully, he found Dobby rather trying, most of the time. The thought of having a virtual slave around to do his bidding might be nice in the abstract, but when it was accompanied by "Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter, sir!" all the time, it might not be so good. But Dumbledore was right; Dobby wasn't happy, and if he worked for Harry, he would be.

"All right, Professor," he said. "When will they start?"

"I'll tell them as soon as you leave," Dumbledore said. "They might even be waiting for you when you get back to your dormitories. Thank you, both; you've taken a load off my mind."

When they got outside Dumbledore's tower, Ginny let loose.

"How dare he go to my parents, as though I couldn't make up my own mind? Why does everyone always treat me like a child? He didn't say anything about asking Sirius, I noticed!" Even while confronted with a very angry Ginny, Harry had to laugh at that.

"Can you imagine Sirius' response? He'll love it, you know he will! He's been wanting to meet Dobby ever since I told him about the enchanted Bludger."

"That's not the point! If you're old enough to make a decision like this, so am I." She was about to continue, but both of them heard footsteps thundering down the hall. They waited anxiously, but the person who came running around a corner was just Colin Creevey.

"Hi Harry, Ginny," he said, panting. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Harry?"

"Uh, sure, Colin," Harry said, watching the younger boy in bewilderment. What could be important enough for Colin to run through the halls, just to talk to him?

Ginny looked equally confused, and even more so once it was clear that Colin wasn't going to say what he wanted to in front of her. She let out a huffing sigh that sounded suspiciously like, "Boys!" to Harry, and stalked away. Both Harry and Colin watched her until she turned the corner. Then Harry had to prompt Colin, because he didn't seem anxious to start.

"Erm, what is it, Colin?" he asked.

Colin stared apprehensively up at Harry for a moment, then burst out, "I suppose you've already asked her, and she's already said yes, but I just thought that I would see, because if you *haven't*, I want to, but I wanted to make sure you hadn't before, I mean, that you're not planning to, because if you *are*, then I won't."

He said all this very quickly, in one breath. Harry just stared at him for a moment, completely confused. Colin watched him anxiously.

"Uh, ask who what?" Harry finally managed to say.

Colin's eyes got even wider. "Asked Ginny to the Yule Ball! I figured Professor McGonagall must have told you two first, and you wanted to ask her right away, so you took her for a walk. And if you asked her, Harry, I'm sure she said yes."

Harry continued to stare at him, his mind catching up with events. Why Colin would think Professor McGonagall would tell him something like this first, he had no idea, but that was Colin all over. It wasn't important, anyway. What was important was that there was going to be another Yule Ball, that he'd have to go through asking a girl to it again, and that he suddenly realized that the only girl he wanted to ask was Ginny Weasley.

Whatever the hero-worshipping Colin might think, Harry wasn't convinced that if he asked her, she would say yes. They had certainly become friends this year, but he hadn't seen any

indication that she wanted anything more. For all he knew, she would prefer to go with Colin, or Neville, or that boy from Hufflepuff who kept sending her funny cards and things. She was smart, fun to be around, generous, the best listener he had ever known - she could have anyone she wanted. It didn't hurt that she was beautiful, too, much prettier than Cho, with her soft, warm brown eyes, adorable freckles, and that hair that Harry longed to touch.

And he never could. That realization came to him almost as swiftly as the first. She was in enough danger right now, simply because she was a Weasley and his friend - imagine if Voldemort knew that he loved her. He just couldn't put her in that kind of danger. He would have to bury his feelings, and act the same as usual around her. It wouldn't be easy, especially because she was so good at reading him, but he would have to do it. He couldn't lose her friendship, now that he finally had it, even if he could have nothing more.

Colin had been waiting patiently through Harry's silence. Any other person would think Harry was losing it, but Colin thought so highly of him that even acting like an idiot didn't make any impression. His hopeful eyes were still fixed on Harry's face.

"Ginny and I are just friends, Colin," Harry said, speaking each word very clearly, as though by doing so he could make them true. "You can certainly ask her to the ball. I hope she goes with you - I'd rather see her with you than with some of the other boys."

"Really?" Colin said, practically jumping up and down in his excitement. "Harry, d'you think I should ask Ron, or Fred, as well?"

"What are you going to do, ask all of Gryffindor?" Harry asked.

"No, but I thought, you know, they're her brothers."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said, smiling slightly. That was one worry he wouldn't have, at least.

"I don't think they'll mind and, if they do, you can tell them I said it was okay."

"Oh, thanks, Harry -"

"Giving your little tag-alongs permission to date each other, Potter?" a sneering voice said.

Harry and Colin both turned around to see Draco Malfoy leaning against the wall a little ways away. Before they could say anything, though, he straightened up and laughed.

"Don't think I'll ask permission, Potter," he said, before stalking around the corner.

Since Harry couldn't think of a comeback, it was a good thing he had left. Colin turned to him in anguish.

"You don't think he'll ask her, do you?"

"No," Harry said. "But I rather hope he does - I'd like to see what he looks like afterwards."

That made Colin grin, and the two of them started back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry couldn't stand the younger boy's chatter, though, in his current state of mind.

"Colin, do you mind telling Ron when you get back that I'm going to the Owlery to send a letter," he said, hardly giving Colin time to say, "Of course, Harry," before walking away from him.

How he reached the Owlery, he never knew, for his mind was full of Ginny. It was amazing - all that time that she had had that crush on him, and he never really thought of her as a girl. She was just Ron's sister, the person who couldn't speak to him, and who blushed every time he looked at her. And now...she did look like Ron, but somehow it all looked better on her. Of course, her nose wasn't as long as his, it was small and dainty and cute, just like her. Harry put his head in his hands and groaned. He couldn't believe he was obsessing about someone's nose. *What am I going to do?* he thought. *Well, for starters, she can't ever know. If she did, she'd...hmm...she'd probably laugh and say that I missed my chance. No, Ginny would never say that, not Ginny. But I did miss my chance - all that time she loved me, and I just took it for granted. I just assumed it would always be there, and now that I want it, it's not. This is what I was missing back at the Burrow - Ginny. Then, it wasn't that I loved her, I just expected her to be there, I was so sure that she should be there, that when she wasn't, it was like my leg was missing, or something. And, now...now I'm going to have to spend each day with her, pretending to be just friends, watching her go to the ball with Colin...okay, Potter, the only way this is going to work is if you don't think about her at all. That's right, starting right now.*

He stared out of the window, stroking Hedwig's feathers, and thought about Ginny.

"There you are - what are you doing sitting here all alone?"

Harry turned from the window to see Ron bound into the room, looking happier than he had seen him in awhile. *Ah, he must have asked Hermione to the ball*, he thought.

"I just got a letter from Dad - you can come to the Burrow for Christmas!"

Then again, maybe not. Oh, God, Christmas at the Burrow with Ginny. Somehow, Harry managed to smile. "That's great, Ron, but are you sure it'll be safe?"

"Yeah, because of everything Dumbledore did this summer. Moody'll be there, too," Ron said, making a face.

"And Hermione?" Harry couldn't picture a Christmas without Hermione, any more than he could picture one without Ron. *This might cause problems later on, once we've graduated*, he thought suddenly.

"Oh, well, she said that her parents want her for Christmas, since she hasn't been home for three years. But I sent Pig back to Mum, she'll invite all the Grangers, I know she will."

Harry had to grin. Mrs. Weasley probably would, and how they would all fit in the Burrow, he had no idea.

"This is going to be great, Harry," Ron continued. "You've never had a wizard family Christmas - we're going to have so much fun. Oh, did you hear about the ball?"

"Yeah, Colin told me," Harry said, with a smile. He wasn't about to tell Ron that Colin wanted to ask Ginny, much less that he wanted to. That was a task he didn't want, and maybe Ginny would turn Colin down. "Wait a minute, how can we go to the Burrow for Christmas if we're going to be here for the ball?" Maybe he wouldn't have to see Ginny go with someone else, after all.

"They've moved it up - it's going to be on the last night before the holidays," Ron said. "So, are you going to ask Cho again? I don't have to ask anyone, of course - I have a date."

Harry stared at him. Ron looked smugly satisfied, and it was all Harry could do not to mimic Ginny and smack him on the back of the head. He might not know much about girls, but he knew better than this. Of course, he didn't really want to give Ron romantic advice, either, but then, it was Hermione...

"Uh, Ron, maybe you should ask her to go with you," he said.

"Why? She has to go with me, because of the bet."

"I know, but she'd probably like it if you asked her anyway."

"Really? Hermione? You think so?" Ron looked so hopeful, Harry was hard put not to laugh.

"Yeah, I mean, you're friends, it shouldn't be so hard, right?" He couldn't help teasing Ron, even though that question hit almost too close to home. Well, it was immaterial - he couldn't ask Ginny even though he wanted to. A wave of envy of his best friend hit him so suddenly he was glad he was already sitting down. Yet another thing Voldemort had taken away from him: a normal teenage love life.

"Right...friends," Ron said vacantly, then turned around and left the room. Harry hoped that would all be settled soon; sometimes life was like a battlefield around Ron and Hermione, and sometimes it was so emotionally charged Harry was surprised the air didn't burst into flames. Maybe once they finally admitted their feelings for each other, things would calm down a bit. Of course, that would only throw him and Ginny together even more. Harry dropped his head back onto his hands and groaned.

Chapter 16 Repercussions

When Harry finally forced himself to go back to Gryffindor tower, he found Hermione alone in the common room. She was writing in her diary, and he didn't know if that was a good sign or a bad one.

"So, excited about the Yule Ball?" he asked, as he stood in front of her. She didn't look up. This whole situation just kept getting stranger and stranger, and he really didn't want to get caught in the middle, but he suspected that he would.

"Oh, sure," she said. "I'm very excited about going to the ball with my *friend*."

"Erm, you are talking about Ron, right?"

"Yes, he asked me *as a friend*," she said.

Harry opened his mouth to say something - he wasn't sure what, but an apology seemed appropriate - when he heard a gasp behind him.

"He did *what*?" It was Ginny. Harry didn't turn around, but he could see out of the corner of his eye that she had her hands on her hips and looked furious. *Okay, just act like normal*, he thought. *Uh...what would be normal?*

"I know, can you believe it?" he said, turning sharply to face her, which unfortunately brought her elbow into contact with his stomach. He doubled up in pain.

"Oh, Harry, are you all right?" Hermione asked, but Ginny didn't even seem to notice.

"Where is that boy? I need to talk some sense into him," she said, looking around the common room.

"No, Ginny, please don't, I'm all right, it will be fine," Hermione said, but Ginny wasn't really listening to her, either.

"And speaking of talking sense into people," she said, turning to Harry, "who gave you the right to approve my dates?" Her hair, which had been twisted up into a knot to be out of her way while studying, was coming loose, and her eyes flashed. Harry caught his breath at the sight of her, and stood up straight, drinking it in. How could he live like this, so close to her, but with no right to reach out and touch her? Oh, right, she had asked a question.

"Well, you couldn't expect Colin to go to Ron, or Fred or George, could you? I was the next best thing," he said, in what he hoped was a reasonable tone.

She had already had her mouth open, probably to yell at him some more, but at that she looked confused. "You mean Colin asked you as...as my brother?"

"Of course, what else would it be?"

"Hmm..." she said, eyeing him sharply. He must have looked innocent enough, because she just added, "Then you'll be happy to hear that I've accepted him," before turning and walking back up the stairs to her dormitory.

Harry watched her all the way up the stairs, until even her feet disappeared. When he turned back to Hermione, she was watching him with narrow eyes. He sank down onto the sofa next to her.

"You're right, of course," he said, trying to school his features and his voice into not giving himself away. "Colin didn't ask me as Ginny's brother. He wanted to make sure that I wasn't planning on asking her to the ball before he did. Can you believe that boy? I really hope he'll grow out of this...thing he has about me soon." Harry realized he was babbling, and shut his mouth with a slight snap.

"And what did you say?" Hermione asked, still watching him closely.

"I told him to go for it! I mean, aside from his attitude towards me, Colin's a great guy. Of course, no one's really good enough for Ginny, but he comes close." There. If that didn't convince her, he didn't know what would.

Apparently it did, because she just said, "You're right, no one's good enough," before turning back to her diary. Harry wasn't going to let her get away that easily, though.

"So, Ron asked you as a friend?" he prompted.

Hermione sighed. "I really don't want to talk about this right now, Harry," she said.

"But, Hermione, we're friends! Who can you talk to if not to me? Besides, I might be able to talk some sense into him."

"No one can talk sense into Ron," Hermione said, her eyes slightly unfocused as she stared off into space. "He needs to come around to sense all on his own, or it just won't happen. And when you start opening up to me, perhaps I'll open up to you."

Harry was so shocked by what she said that he just stared at her. Hermione watched him for a moment, gave a short nod, and packed up her things before following Ginny up the stairs. After a moment, Harry remembered that there was someone else he could ask about Ron being an idiot, so he went up to his own dormitory to find Ron himself.

He didn't make it two steps into the room before he was knocked flat onto his back on the floor. He slowly recovered his breath and his vision, but he didn't need either to figure out who was sitting on his chest.

"Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter is the greatest, the kindest, the best wizard ever! Harry Potter says that Dobby can work for him! Dobby will tell all house elves about your greatness and goodness, Harry Potter, sir!"

Harry also didn't need vision to know who else was in the room, sniggering at his predicament. He pushed Dobby off of him, stood up, and glared at Ron and Dean. Before he could say anything, though, Dobby threw his arms around both of Harry's knees, so he had to deal with him first.

"Thank you for coming to work for me, Dobby," he said, his annoyance at what would probably be a common greeting melting as he saw the radiant look on the house elf's face. "We need to talk about your wages and days off - I want you to take more than you let

Professor Dumbledore give you."

Dobby looked horrified. "Oh, but Harry Potter, sir -"

"Dobby, I insist," Harry said, trying to look stern. "But we'll talk specifics later. It's late, and I'm tired. Was there anything else you needed to do here tonight?"

"No, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said, looking shocked. "Sir won't even know I is here!" He disappeared with a pop.

Harry turned to his roommates, who had both collapsed with laughter again.

"Look, guys, Dumbledore insisted, I didn't have much choice, it won't be so bad, will it? Besides, I'm not the only one - Winky's going to be working for Ginny, and -"

Ron's laughter ended suddenly, and he sat up on his bed. "Ginny's getting a house elf?"

Harry and Dean both stared at him, surprised at his change in mood.

"Dumbledore says that Winky needs to work for just one person, and Ginny's the person who's been nicest to her. She's been going down to the kitchens to visit Winky, and try to cheer her up, since she hasn't taken to freedom well," Harry said, adding the last bit for Dean's benefit, because he couldn't imagine what Dean was thinking about all this. Dean knew about last year's Moody really being Crouch, of course, because the real Moody told all of his classes, along with the obligatory lecture on constant vigilance. But no one knew about Winky's part in all that, except Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys.

Ron obviously wasn't thinking of that. "I should have known that Ginny would be the one to get a house elf," he muttered.

Harry and Dean looked at each other, not sure what to say. Harry wasn't about to remind Ron that he had known all about Winky, too, and he hadn't done anything to help her.

"But I'm sure Winky will help all of you when you're at home, and Dobby will probably help all of us here, right, Harry?" Dean said after a moment.

"Oh, yes, of course, I'm sure he won't mind," Harry said.

Ron wasn't listening, though. "And how is Ginny going to pay Winky? I mean, I know she probably won't take much, but Ginny doesn't really have anything." His ears turned pink, and he avoided looking at Dean.

Harry knew it would come to this eventually. "She won't be paying her," he said.

"What? I wonder what Hermione'll say to that? One of the charter members of spew owning a house elf?"

"She'll probably be glad that the person who owns Winky will treat her well. Can you imagine Ginny mistreating anyone?" Dean asked. He was an only child, and Harry knew that he didn't like it when siblings undervalued each other.

"Besides, Ginny's going to try to get Winky to accept some form of payment, even if it's just presents," Harry added.

"Yeah, whatever," Ron said, perking up a bit. "It's still slavery, and I can't wait to hear what Hermione has to say about it."

He started getting ready for bed then, but Harry wasn't about to let him get away with that.

"So, did you ask her?" he said.

Ron and Dean both looked at each other, as though they weren't sure who he was talking to. At least, Dean wasn't sure - Harry could tell that Ron knew quite well, he just didn't want to talk about it. "Ron?" he prompted.

"Well, yeah, I asked her - that's what I came back here to do, remember? And she said yes, which she had to do anyway, so I don't see what all this fuss is about." Ron didn't meet Harry's eyes, though.

"Whoa, does this mean what I think it means?" Dean said, looking back and forth between the two of them, grinning like a maniac. "Did you actually ask Hermione to the Yule Ball already?"

"What do you mean, already?" Ron said belligerently. "I didn't really have to ask her, anyway, because -"

He broke off as Harry went into a coughing fit and glared at him significantly. Dean was a good friend, but Harry didn't think that Hermione would want anyone else to know that she was going to the Yule Ball with Ron because of a bet. Luckily, by the time his fake coughing stopped, Dean had put another interpretation on Ron's words.

"Well, of course you didn't," he said, chuckling a little. "Everyone knows about the two of you - probably no one else would have asked Hermione, just because we all knew you would. I'm just surprised you were this quick, but I suppose you didn't want to miss out." He grinned at Ron's outraged face.

"So, who are *you* going to ask, Dean, if it's not Hermione?" Ron asked, trying to make a recovery. Dean was so dark that it was hard to tell when he blushed, but Harry thought he did at that question.

"I was actually thinking of asking Ginny," he said. Now it was his turn not to meet the other boys' eyes.

"What? My little sister Ginny?"

"What other Ginny do you know?"

"Why would you ask Ginny? How do you even know her?"

"Ron. Hello! We're both in Gryffindor, of course I know her. And...well, you know when you go to Hermione with a question, and she's a little impatient because you don't understand as quickly as she wants you to?"

"What do you mean? Hermione's not impatient."

"Maybe she's not impatient with you -" Dean broke off for a moment. "Or maybe you've got it really bad. Whatever. Anyway, she's impatient with the rest of us, and it makes us feel a little stupid, you know? But this year, Ginny's been with her a lot of the time, and when Hermione goes too fast, or says something really incomprehensible and expects me to understand instantly, Ginny always says something to make me feel better. Sometimes she asks Hermione to go slower so *she* can understand. And sometimes, it's just something friendly with a smile. She's got a wonderful smile, your sister."

Ron just sat in a stunned silence. Dean gave a slight chuckle.

"So I thought I'd ask her, anyway. Can't hurt, can it?"

"She can't go with you," Harry said. He didn't want to get in the middle of this, but he simply couldn't sit there and listen to Dean praise Ginny any longer. He agreed with every word Dean had said, even the part about Hermione being impatient when interrupted, but it was just too painful.

"Why not? Did *you* ask her? Please tell me you didn't ask her, too," Ron said.

Harry had to laugh at that. "No, but Colin did, and she accepted."

Ron groaned and threw himself onto his bed, his head in his arms. "I can't take it, I just can't!"

Harry and Dean both laughed at him, but Harry could tell that Dean really was disappointed. *Well, what did you expect?* Harry thought. *Even though you just realized how wonderful Ginny is, it doesn't mean that other guys didn't notice long ago. And you have no right to be jealous, none at all.*

As he got ready for bed, he kept telling himself that, but it didn't help. He still wanted to hex Dean into next week for daring to dream of his girl.

Chapter 17 The Old and the New

The next week seemed to Harry to be filled with nothing but the Yule Ball. He remembered what it had been like the year before, and this was better, but at the same time worse. It was better, because he didn't have to ask a girl to be his date. A few girls did ask him, and he thought that if anyone who he was actually friends with did, he might even say yes. Since he couldn't go with Ginny, it didn't really matter if he went with someone or alone. But he didn't want to spend the whole evening with a girl he barely knew. Of course, now that he was forced to think about it, he realized that he didn't really have many girl friends. There was Hermione, of course, and Ginny, but that was about it. He knew Lavender and Parvati pretty well, since they were in his year, but they weren't really friends. Besides, Lavender was going with Seamus, of course, and Parvati was telling everybody who stood still long enough about the seventh year Ravenclaw who had asked her. So Harry resigned himself to going alone, thinking that he would probably spend a lot of the evening staring at Ginny and trying to make the time go faster so that they would all be at the Burrow.

This year was worse than last, though, because of Ginny. Not that she was flaunting her status of having a date, like Parvati was, but just the knowledge that she was going with someone else wore on Harry. He found himself thinking up excuses not to be alone with her, and he could tell that she had noticed, but she didn't say anything. Harry wasn't sure whether that was a good thing, or a bad thing.

Another vexing problem - as though Voldemort, end-of-term exams, a Yule Ball, and unrequited love weren't enough - was presents for Christmas. Harry didn't know why it was, maybe the impending war with Voldemort, maybe the knowledge that they would sacrifice themselves for him if necessary, maybe just growing up, but he felt closer to all of his friends than he ever had before. He wanted to get them something better for Christmas than the usual candy or luxury eagle quills, but he didn't know what. He also wasn't sure who exactly he should be getting presents for. Ron was right - he had never been to a wizard family Christmas, so he didn't know what to expect. But then, he had never been to a Muggle family Christmas, either. The Dursleys had a tree - artificial, of course, since Aunt Petunia thought that needles were too messy - and they had presents under it, but not for Harry. They went out for most of the day, too. Was he supposed to be getting presents for Bill and Charlie? Even Percy? The Grangers, who were coming for Christmas Day?

He finally broke down and asked Ginny. He thought about asking Ron, but he didn't want to make Ron feel badly about money even more than usual. Besides, he hadn't asked Ginny yet how Hermione had reacted to Winky. She hadn't said anything to Ginny in public, but Harry had a feeling that she wouldn't, anyway. They had become quite close in the past year, and Harry thought that they would present a united front to most people, and, in this case, especially Ron. So, after their session with Miss Stuart that Thursday, he asked if he could talk to her.

"Harry, you know you don't have to ask! What is it? You've been distant ever since the day the Yule Ball was announced - is it because I yelled at you? I'm sorry about that, I completely misunderstood the situation." They had stayed behind in Miss Stuart's classroom, and Ginny curled her feet under her in her armchair and leaned forward.

"Oh, no, that's okay," Harry said, but he didn't look her in the eye. After all, she really hadn't misunderstood the situation.

"There is one thing, Harry. See, I already have six brothers, who all fill their positions quite well. I was really hoping we could be more like..." She trailed off, and Harry felt that he physically couldn't lift his head to look at her. He also stopped breathing.

"Friends," she finished.

"Oh," Harry said, letting his breath out in a puff. "Right. I'll try to remember that, and not be too brotherly." He somehow managed to smile, and was rewarded by Ginny's own smile. He hadn't needed Dean pointing it out to realize that she had a wonderful smile.

"Now, what did you want to talk to me about?" Ginny asked, after he had stared at her for a few moments.

"Erm...actually, it's about Christmas. I obviously don't have too much experience with this family Christmas thing, so I was wondering who I'm supposed to get presents for."

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said, reaching out and touching his hand. "It's awfully sweet of you to worry, but Mum invited you to our Christmas so that you can enjoy yourself. You get presents for the people you want to, and you don't for the people you don't. Simple as that."

"Right," Harry said. Then he could get presents for everybody, and if Ron complained, he could just say that he had wanted to. That would go over well.

"Speaking of Christmas, Mum wrote to ask if you were planning on bringing Dobby with you."

Harry made a grimace. "He's planning on coming, I can tell you that."

Ginny giggled. "I know how you feel. I thought that having Winky around would be nice for her and for me, but I hadn't reckoned on how much she was going to order me around! It's "Miss Ginny must do this!" and "Miss Ginny must not do that!" all day long. But it'll be nice for Winky to have Dobby around at Christmas."

"Yeah. By the way, how did Hermione react to your...adoption of Winky?"

"Not as badly as I'd thought she would. I think I've convinced her that it's best for Winky, individually, as opposed to house elves in general. But she's not happy. She even offered to pay Winky's wages, but of course I couldn't let her do that." Ginny turned a bit pink as she said this. It was the first time that Harry had ever noticed her being embarrassed by her poverty, except for what Tom Riddle had said down in the Chamber of Secrets. He did what he normally did when Ron acted like that; he ignored it.

"I think Ron was hoping for a big blowup," he said instead.

"I'm sure," Ginny said. "And he'd better be ready for one, if he doesn't behave himself at the ball."

Thinking about the ball annoyed Harry, so he got up and said that they should head back to Gryffindor.

Two days later found him in Hogsmeade, standing in the jewelry shop, trying to decide on a present for Ginny. He had actually found most of his shopping quite easy - once he'd decided to get something for absolutely everyone, he had a lot of fun. Not that he'd bought anything really elaborate, but he thought that everyone would like their gifts.

Ginny was a problem, though. He'd found exactly what he wanted to get her, but as he stared down at it in the display case, his courage failed him. It was a small, clear quartz crystal pendant on a delicate gold chain. He thought it would suit her, and it reminded him of all of their sessions with Miss Stuart. But was it too much to give to a girl, when he was determined not to show how much he cared about her? He just wasn't sure. Luckily, as he stood there deliberating, and seeing only the crystal, he felt a touch on his arm.

"Harry? Can I talk to you for a minute?"

It was Cho Chang. She had obviously just come into the shop from outside, because the snow was still melting into her black hair. She twisted her mittened hands together in front of her, gazing anxiously at him.

"Sure, Cho," he said, surprised. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing's the matter," she said, but then didn't seem to want to go on. She looked down at where he had been staring before she interrupted him, and smiled. "So, who's it for?"

"What? Oh, the crystal. Say," Harry said, suddenly realizing that here was the perfect opportunity to get an unbiased opinion. "You're a girl, Cho. Tell me, if I gave that to a girl, would she think it meant...well, more than friendship?"

Cho looked like she was trying not to laugh, but she answered him perfectly seriously. "Well, it would depend on the girl, and on your relationship with her. I take it you don't feel more than friendship towards her?"

Harry looked away from her, back down at the crystal pendant. He tried to cool down his cheeks by sheer willpower. "I don't want her to think that I do," he muttered finally.

"Oh," Cho said, looking down at the pendant, too. "Well, if the fact that it's a crystal means something - something to just the two of you, but not anything romantic, then I think it's a great gift. She'll love it, whoever she is."

"Really - you think so?" Harry said, turning back to her with a smile. "Then I'll get it." He motioned the shop assistant over from where she had gone once she'd given up on him making up his mind. She looked very relieved, and smiled thankfully at Cho, who did, finally, let out a little giggle.

Only after Harry had paid for Ginny's gift and left the shop, with Cho following after, did he remember that she had wanted to talk to him, not the other way round.

"Erm, Cho, what was it you wanted to talk about?" he asked.

She looked down at her feet, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Then she looked back up at him, sideways through her lashes, as they walked along the street.

"Are you looking forward to the Yule Ball?" she asked.

Now it was Harry's turn to look down at his feet. "Not really."

"Me, either. All of my friends seem to think that it's a great opportunity for me to get some...well, closure." She gave a half-snort, half-sigh. "That I should go with one of the boys who's asked me, enjoy myself, and just get over Cedric."

Harry stopped walking. "That sound a little...insensitive," he said. He didn't want to say that it sounded really rude and mean, because, well, they were her friends.

"I know, but, Harry, they are only sixteen, and most of them haven't lost anyone really close to them. I'm trying to be understanding, and I do see where they're coming from. It's been more than six months, I should be able to go on a simple date by now."

Harry shook his head. "You shouldn't do anything you're not comfortable doing."

Cho stared up at him, shaking her own head in disbelief. "How do you do it? How do you deal with all the grief you have to, and still be understanding and nice towards other people? That girl who's only a friend doesn't know what she's missing."

Now, Harry shuffled his feet, again feeling his cheeks going red.

Cho laughed, a genuinely happy laugh that Harry hadn't heard since before Cedric died.

"Well, anyway, I suppose that's really why I wanted to ask you if you'd go to the Yule Ball with me," she said. "I don't want to go with someone who wants more from me than I can give, and I know you'll understand. And if I talk about Cedric some, you won't mind too much, will you?"

Harry wasn't sure what to say. First of all, how did she know that he'd understand if all she wanted was to be friends? He didn't have a sign saying "I love Ginny Weasley" around his neck, did he? And he wasn't sure that he wanted to spend the Yule Ball thinking and talking about Cedric. On the other hand, Cho sounded like she really needed him, and he could never resist that.

They had reached the door of The Three Broomsticks by now, which they had gravitated towards without mentioning where they were going. Cho stopped just outside, and put her hand on Harry's arm.

"If you already have a date, or don't want to go, just say so, Harry. It's no big deal, obviously, but I thought we could have a nice, friendly time together."

Harry had to grin, thinking of Ron asking Hermione as a friend, but he put his hand over hers on his arm.

"I'd love to go to the ball with you, Cho," he said. "And if you'd rather talk about Cedric than dance, that's fine with me. I don't dance very well, anyway."

"Oh, we'll dance, don't you worry about that," Cho said, returning his grin. "You won't get out of it that easily."

They were still smiling at each other as Harry opened the door to the pub and motioned for her to precede him. They split up then, giving each other small waves as Cho went to join her Ravenclaw friends, including Brenna, and Harry followed the sound of arguing to find Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

On his way there, he passed the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, sitting at a table planning strategy. Angelina saw him and, raising both arms over her head, pointed rather ostentatiously at her watch. They had a practice later that evening. Then she turned back to whatever the rest of them were discussing. At least, everyone except George and Katie Bell was planning strategy. They seemed to be having a very animated conversation apart from the others. Harry didn't know what that was about, but they both seemed to look over at Brenna pretty often.

As Harry threaded his way through the crowded pub, he noticed that Ginny's eyes were on him. She didn't look away when his eyes met hers, instead she gave him a welcoming smile, and he had to chuckle. She was probably overjoyed to see him, since she had been putting up with Ron and Hermione all on her own for most of the afternoon. Her first words confirmed his impression.

"Thank goodness you're here, Harry, so I can hear some sensible conversation for once," she said, pulling him down next to her on the bench. She leaned in to whisper in his ear. "They haven't stopped fighting at all. I really hope this gets better after the ball."

"Here's hoping," Harry whispered back, then turned to the other two and raised his voice. "Oi! Think you two can lay off for a few minutes?"

Ron just glared at him, but Hermione said serenely, "There's nothing to 'lay off' of, Harry. Did you find everything you needed?"

"Yeah," Harry muttered, trying not to blush. He thought he could feel the package with the crystal burning a hole in his pocket.

Ron must have noticed the blush, or else he just wanted to get back at Harry. "So...was one of those things a date to the ball?"

"I think that's another thing you need to lay off, Ron," Ginny started to say, but Harry put a hand on her arm, which felt wonderful, to interrupt.

"Actually, Ron, I do have a date for the ball. Cho Chang just asked me, and I said yes." He didn't look at Ginny, but he also didn't remove his hand from her arm. He didn't think he could have if he tried.

"Nice work, mate!" Ron said. "The exact girl you wanted to go with, and she asked you. How do you do it, so I can learn?"

He didn't seem to notice Hermione stiffening beside him, and Harry could feel Ginny stiffen as well - she was always protective of her friends. Harry didn't want to look at anyone at his table during the ensuing argument, so he looked around the pub. Katie Bell had joined the Quidditch conversation, but George wasn't at their table anymore. Harry looked around for him, and spotted him next to Brenna at the Ravenclaw table. *Interesting*, he thought. *I wonder if Katie had been telling him off, or urging him to go?* As the argument proceeded without

him, he continued to look around until he met Dean's eyes. At that point, he realized that he still had his hand on Ginny's arm, and jerked it away as though he'd scalded it. She didn't even seem to notice; she was too busy telling Ron that it wasn't his business whom she went to the ball with. *How had the conversation turned in that direction?* Harry wondered. He looked back over at Dean, who was still watching their table. Then, he noticed why - Lavender and Seamus were enjoying some not-so-discreet snogging, and Dean and Parvati Patil, who were at the table with them, were obviously uncomfortable. Harry gave a small, snorting laugh, and waved at Dean to come join them. He'd felt like a third wheel often enough with Ron and Hermione, who hadn't even reached the snogging stage yet, to know how Dean and Parvati were feeling. Ginny noticed his gesture, followed his eyes to where he was looking, and then turned to him with her wonderful, lit from within smile. Harry smiled back, but as he did so, he couldn't help but mentally kick himself. *If she's that happy at seeing Dean now, you certainly don't want to do things to encourage it*, he told himself.

By that time, though, Dean and Parvati had reached their table.

"D'you guys mind if we join you? We're not feeling exactly welcome over there." Dean gestured back at Lavender and Seamus with his mug.

Ron and Hermione finally stopped arguing - "Honestly, Ron, what makes you think that's who Harry wanted to ask?" was the last zinger that Hermione got in, making Harry blush again - and looked where Dean was pointing. Ron stared, actually open mouthed, until Ginny reached over and gently shut his mouth. Hermione made a 'tsk' sound, and then smiled in welcome.

"Of course you can," she said, pushing out a bench for Parvati with her foot.

"Thanks," Parvati said. "You have no idea what those two are like."

Everyone nodded, but no one said anything after that. They all knew each other, of course, and they were more than acquaintances, but that particular group had never been together just for fun before. It was Ginny who stepped into the breach.

"So, has everyone found all of their Christmas presents yet?"

"Oh, yes," Dean said, turning to her. "And I wanted to thank you for your wonderful idea! I'm giving Fred and George's picture frames - filled with pictures, of course - to my parents and both sets of my grandparents. They're going to love them!"

"Fred and George's picture frames?" Parvati asked. "What do they do, blow up when you try to look at the picture? Why would your family love that?"

Everyone else at the table laughed.

"Believe it or not," Ginny said, "Fred and George have actually invented something that doesn't go bang, bump, or pop. It's a picture frame that holds lots of pictures, and all you do is tap one corner of the frame to change from one picture to the next. And it wasn't my idea," she added, turning to Dean. "They invented it long before I needed it for Harry's birthday present."

"That sounds wonderful," Parvati said. "It would make a great present for my parents, and for Padma. I'll have to talk to Fred and George when we get back."

Harry smiled. Fred and George had been busy making lots of picture frames, and they'd made quite a bit of money because of this Christmas. Hermione had bought one for her parents, Ginny had made one herself for Miss Stuart, and Seamus was giving one to Lavender. He himself had bought one for Ron, and one for Hermione - Ron's had only pictures of Hermione, and Hermione's only of Ron. They were joke presents really, in addition to his real presents for his friends, but if they brought things to a head between them, so much the better. Ginny, who was in on the plot, seemed to be holding back giggles as well. Harry had even considered getting one for Aunt Petunia, who had really been quite decent to him during the summer holidays, but then he couldn't figure out what pictures to put in it. The only ones he thought she would like - of Remus Lupin - would be too cruel, and probably get her in trouble with Uncle Vernon, as well. He'd fallen back on a scarf that Ginny had helped him pick out - whenever it snowed, the scarf seemed to glow. He didn't know if she'd actually wear it, but at least he would send it to her.

Ron seemed to be sick of talking about Christmas presents, because he asked Dean his now standby question.

"Who're you going to the ball with? We all know Parvati's date," he added, rolling his eyes. Everyone except Parvati laughed.

"I'm going with Susan Bones," Dean said. "She was actually supposed to come with us today, but she had a bit of a cold, and Madam Pomfrey ordered her to stay inside. I'm not sure I understand exactly how Pepperup Potion works, but apparently it helps to stay inside." He shrugged, looking fairly indifferent.

"That's great - now we've all got dates," Ron said, smiling slightly maliciously at Harry, who knew what was coming next.

"Really? Harry, you've got a date? Which of the many girls who've asked you did you finally accept?" Dean asked.

"And will you treat her better than you treated me last year?" Parvati added, but she smiled at Harry to show that there were no hard feelings.

"Erm...yes, Cho, and yes, definitely," Harry said, smiling back. "Not that I could possibly treat her worse."

"Wow!" Dean said. "Cho Chang, huh? I actually thought you were over her."

Harry looked around. "We're going as friends. She said that she needed someone who could understand that she didn't want a real date, because of Cedric, and she thought that I would understand. We're just going to try to enjoy ourselves as friends."

Parvati and Ginny smiled at him, Ginny a little misty-eyed he thought. Hermione did more than smile, she reached over and hugged him.

"Hermione!" Harry and Ron both said.

"Oh, stuff it, you two," Hermione said. "I can hug one of my best friends when I think he's being sweet, can't I?" Ignoring the looks on Harry and Ron's faces, as well as Dean, Ginny, and Parvati's laughter, she stood up. "Come on, we need to get back. You two have Quidditch practice, and I'm getting so excited for this ball, I think I'll...I'll try different hairstyles! Ginny, Parvati, want to help?"

"Can't I help, too?" Dean asked plaintively, which made everyone's shocked expressions at Hermione's words dissolve into laughter again. The six of them trooped back to Hogwarts, enjoying the day to the fullest.

Chapter 18 True Gryffindors

Harry sat in his last class of the term, watching his classmates struggle, and smirking a little. He knew he shouldn't - they were all having so much trouble, but he couldn't help it. It was Potions, and everyone except him was in the grip of Snape's Fear Potion. To Harry's surprise, and certainly to Snape's, he had had no problem brewing the antidote to the potion while under its effects, and he wished Ginny had been here to see it. He suspected that she would have had a similar ease with the task - they both certainly had experience living with fear and continuing with whatever they had to do. He had no idea what it must have been like for Ginny during her first year, constantly being afraid of herself, feeling that the only person that she could turn to was the one controlling her, and somehow managing to get on with her everyday life. Hermione had told him that Ginny's grades had been the best in her year that year, too. Every new thing Harry heard about Ginny impressed him more than the last.

He was a little surprised that Ron and Hermione were having such trouble, though. *They've certainly lived with fear*, he thought. *If not for themselves, then for me, according to Hermione. And back in our first year, with the Sorcerer's Stone, they managed to do what they had to do, even though they must have been terrified. I was. Of course, we were all much younger then, and maybe, deep down, they didn't take it quite as seriously. Now, we all know exactly what's at risk.*

The rest of the class was even worse off. Lavender Brown had had to sit down at her desk for about five minutes, her head in her hands, before she could get up and work on her antidote. Seamus Finnigan had taken one look at her and, after a deep breath, resolutely turned his back to get to work on his. Luckily, she didn't see that. Millicent Bulstrode actually fled the room, and Snape had just watched her go, his usual sneer on his face. And almost everyone was drenched in sweat. There were only two other people in the class who were doing at all well with the antidote, and both of them surprised Harry. Draco Malfoy was almost done, his eyes focused with blind intensity on his cauldron. He didn't look at Snape, who stood close by him almost protectively, but Harry felt that he knew he was there. And as Harry watched, Neville Longbottom dipped his bone ladle into his cauldron and poured his antidote into a cup, his hands trembling. Neville didn't look quite convinced that he'd done everything right, but Harry wasn't at all surprised that the antidote worked perfectly. He smiled at Neville when he looked around with a wondrous look on his face, and Neville made his way over to Harry and collapsed into a chair next to him.

"I can't believe I just did that," he said, wiping sweat off of his forehead. "I mean, I'm not surprised that you did fine, and Draco," he nodded at Malfoy, who was just measuring out his dose, "must have been taught to deal with fear, but I'm always so afraid..." His voice trailed off.

"Bravery means living with fear and carrying on anyway, not never being afraid," Harry said, then grinned. "I got that out of a book, I think, but don't tell Hermione." Neville gave a little, halfhearted snort of laughter, so Harry said what he really wanted to. "You're a true Gryffindor, Neville." He looked away so he wouldn't have to admit to seeing Neville's tears.

Snape was watching them. Harry was surprised to see the impressed look on his face - not surprised that Snape was impressed with Neville, but that he would let Harry see it. Then Malfoy looked up, no longer under the influence of the potion, and his eyes narrowed when he saw that Harry and Neville had both beaten his time. He didn't say anything, though, just collapsed into his own seat. Snape made sure he was all right, then stalked towards them.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Longbottom?" he asked.

Neville nodded and smiled weakly, looking more afraid right then than he had under the influence of the potion.

Snape leaned forward and murmured quietly, "That was most impressive, Mr. Longbottom, and quite gratifying." He immediately straightened up and went back to supervising the rest of the class.

Harry and Neville stared at each other.

"What did he mean, gratifying?" Neville asked.

"I have no idea," Harry said. He watched Snape as he patrolled the classroom, offering neither criticism nor encouragement to the students. He suspected that he would never truly understand his Potions master.

After another few minutes, during which Harry watched both Ron and Hermione make quite a bit of progress, Snape suddenly turned on him.

"Potter! In my office, now," he said, stalking over to the door of his office and sweeping it open.

Harry just stared at him. He had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to have done. It wasn't as though he could have actually helped anyone, and Snape would have been able to hear him, anyway. He had no choice, though, so, ignoring Neville's slight whimper, he followed his teacher into his office.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Snape stalked over to the mantelpiece, reached into a jar for some powder, and threw it into the fire.

"Sirius Black," he snarled. Harry stared at him in wonderment, then grinned as he saw his godfather's head appear in the flames. But his good mood vanished when he saw the look on Sirius' face.

"What's happened?" he said, reaching the fireplace in two steps and throwing himself down on his knees, so his face was more on level with Sirius'. "It's not...it's not Professor Lupin, is it?"

Sirius gave him a small, tight smile. "No, no, Remus is fine. In fact, nothing has happened yet."

"Yet. You think it will?"

"We have reason to believe that Voldemort is planning an attack," Sirius said, his voice sounding oddly formal. "Our sources indicate that it will most likely be on Christmas."

Christmas. Oh, Harry knew that it was the most likely day - Ron's analysis had been spot on, and he believed it - but it was still a horrible thought. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and looked Sirius in the eye.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No!" Sirius said, his face softening, and his voice losing the formality. "Harry, I'm telling you precisely because there's nothing you can do. We didn't want you to hear something - some rumor - and go off in your harebrained way." He grinned to take the sting out of that statement. "You are going to the Weasleys' for Christmas, and that's the safest place for you, even with everybody knowing you'll be there." His eyes slid to where Snape stood near his desk for a moment, then back to Harry. "We have things well in hand. You're to enjoy yourself, and not think of these things."

Harry just stared at him. He hadn't known his godfather very long, but surely Sirius knew him better than that. Of course he would think of these things - how could he not? But before he could protest, Sirius spoke again.

"Thank you for the use of your office, Snape," he said, not looking at the Potions Master. "I have to go, Harry, but I may see you sooner than you think." With a last, warm smile, he was gone.

Harry sat back on his knees and tried to take it all in. There was most likely going to be an attack on Christmas, and Sirius had made sure to tell him of it, because he didn't trust Harry to be...well, to be mature about it. He knew that there was nothing he could do right now. He knew it, but it didn't make him happy.

"Potter, we should be getting back to your classmates. I shudder to think of what's going on out there. Of course, Black would demand to meet with you during *my* class time."

Harry stood up. "Thank you for letting me talk to him here," he said, trying to make himself meet Snape's gaze. He knew he should treat Snape with more respect, but it was hard to ignore the hatred in his voice whenever he spoke of Sirius.

Snape didn't seem to notice, though, he just turned away from Harry, and opened the door to the classroom. Harry saw him actually shudder before he walked through. He rushed to the door himself, expecting something horrible, but everything was fine. Ron and Hermione had finished, and were sitting very near to each other, as though drawing strength from being close. Most of the rest of the class were also done, but luckily, none of them seemed to remark on Harry's having been in Snape's office.

Ron and Hermione, of course, wanted to hear all about it, but they waited until lunch, when Ginny was there, too. After Harry explained, all four of them sat in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Ron broke it.

"It's a shame," he said, staring at his plate. "I mean, you've never had a wizard Christmas before, Harry, and now you can, and this happens."

"Yeah," Harry said. "But then, that's about normal for me, isn't it?"

Ginny lifted her eyes from her plate and fixed them intently on Harry. "You can't think of it like that," she said, almost biting off the words. "If you do, you're letting Voldemort win. Remember what Professor Moody said - live a normal life because you can. You have to enjoy this Christmas, Harry, you just have to."

Harry couldn't hold her gaze. "I'd like to, Ginny," he said, swallowing a lump in his throat. "I'll try."

Hermione reached over and rested her hand on Harry's for a moment in sympathy, but then she seemed to think that that was enough seriousness for right then.

"I do hope Fleur's exam won't take very long," she said, glancing back down at her Care of Magical Creatures notes, which were spread out before her plate. "I need lots of time to get ready for the ball tonight."

Ginny gave a watery giggle, but Harry almost gasped. "You're not still thinking of going to the ball, are you?"

Hermione and Ginny both stared at him.

"Why shouldn't I?" Hermione asked.

"Because Voldemort's going to attack! We know it now, and we know when - how can you think of celebrating, and dancing, and having a good time, when..." He trailed off, not wanting to remind Hermione of the constant danger to her parents.

"Harry, there's nothing we can do about the attack," Hermione said, her face serious as she looked into his eyes. "All we can do is try to put it out of our minds and get on with our lives. Sirius and Remus, not to mention Professor Dumbledore, are doing their best to outwit Voldemort." She gave an apologetic look at Ron, but he didn't seem to notice that's she'd said the name. He didn't seem to notice much of anything, actually, he was just staring at her. "There's nothing we can do from here, and everyone needs a break from tension, Harry, even you."

"It's like Christmas, Harry," Ginny said. "If we don't have the ball, and don't do our best to enjoy ourselves, it's letting Voldemort win. And we can't do that, can we?"

Harry shook his head, but he couldn't hold her gaze. He could understand their point, but he knew that he wouldn't be in any sort of mood to dance this evening. He looked over to Ron to see what he thought, but Ron was still a conversation behind.

"You need hours to get ready?" he asked Hermione, his ears turning pink.

Hermione appeared to be looking for a particular fact in her notes. "Of course. I did last year, too, remember? It's this hair." She reached up and pulled on a curl.

Ron made a peculiar sound. "Yeah, but that was for Vick - Viktor Krum," he said, not taking her eyes off of Hermione.

She lifted her own to meet his gaze. "Was it?" she asked, then looked back down at her notes, a smile lifting one corner of her mouth.

Ron was utterly speechless, and so was Harry. Ginny looked extremely pleased, but she took pity on her brother.

"Speaking of the ball," she said, "Bill's coming as Fleur's date. She told me in class this morning."

"What?" Ron's head snapped towards his sister. "They must be getting serious."

"I think they are," Ginny said, looking over to the head table, where Fleur was talking to Professor McGonagall. "It seems so unfair..." She said the last sentence under her breath, but Harry heard.

"What's unfair?" he asked.

"What? Oh, it's just that she's...so beautiful," Ginny said, her cheeks turning pink.

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. He didn't know if he should say something, or if that would compromise his secret, but he couldn't let that go.

"You don't have anything to worry about, Ginny," he said, slightly more forcefully than he meant to. When Ron and Hermione turned to stare at him, he added, "I'm sure Colin would love to tell you so, too."

Ginny's eyes had filled with wonder at his first statement, but she looked away and blushed at his second. Still, when she left to go to her own Potions final, she murmured, "Thanks, Harry," in his ear, so Harry couldn't be sorry he had said it.

That night, Harry got ready as quickly as he could, mostly because he didn't want to go to the ball in the first place, and he still didn't feel like celebrating anything. And it was partly to get rid of Dobby, whose comments ("Harry Potter will be the most handsome wizard at the ball! Harry Potter will have young witches falling all over him!") were quite embarrassing, though they practically caused Ron, Seamus, Dean and Neville to roll on the floor with laughter. It was also partly because he was just going to the ball with a friend, and didn't really care what he looked like. But in addition, it was because he wanted to watch his friends get ready. They were all nervous, though to varying degrees - ranging from Dean's "I really hope she's gotten over her cold, or neither one of us will have fun," to Ron's "Harry, you're just going to have to tell her I'm sick. No, I died. I just can't do this."

Neville, though he was apprehensive, actually seemed the happiest. He had had a quiet crush on Hannah Abbot from Hufflepuff for most of the term, to Ron's great happiness, as it meant that he was no longer interested in either Hermione or Ginny. The two of them had been spending a lot of time in the library discussing Herbology, and they had met up in Hogsmeade the previous weekend for a bit, but this was their first official date. He didn't talk much, but his happiness almost seemed to make him glow.

Seamus, who should have been the least nervous about his date with Lavender, was actually quite pale, and he kept checking on something in his pocket. Harry didn't know what that was about, but every time Seamus did it, Dean looked at him and shook his head. *Surely everything is all right between him and Lavender*, Harry thought. *They sure looked comfortable at the Leaky Cauldron last weekend.*

Dean didn't look too nervous, though he did smooth down his dark orange robes a couple of times too often. Harry thought that those robes would look rather odd next to Susan Bones' bright red hair, but then, they would have looked even stranger with Ginny's darker red. Harry was glad he didn't have to worry about that.

Watching his friends, Harry couldn't help feeling slightly lonely. None of them, except Ron, knew what he knew, and none of them felt the almost bone-crushing responsibility he felt. He knew that people like Sirius and Ginny would tell him that he shouldn't feel that responsibility, but he did, and it made him even more glad that he was just going to the ball

with a friend. He didn't feel up to much tonight, and Cho's mood would probably match his perfectly. Ginny was right, though - everyone needed to relax sometimes, and he enjoyed watching it, even if he couldn't join in.

Ron was so pale that his freckles looked almost black. The dark blue robes he had picked out looked distinguished, but the look on his face was almost sheer misery. Harry was trying really hard not to laugh at his best friend. *Imagine if you were preparing for your first date with Ginny*, he told himself sternly, and a bit wistfully. *Your face would probably match your robes right about now*. In order to hide his blush at that thought, he got up from his vantage point on his bed, and went over to Ron.

"So, you ready to head down now?" he asked, as Ron ran his fingers through his hair and surveyed the result in the mirror yet again.

"Erm, not quite," Ron said. He glanced over at the rest of the boys, but they were all busy with their own preparations. Then, he took out his wand, and reached for a stick of wood that was lying on his bedside table. A few muttered words later, and he was holding three stalks of forget-me-nots.

"They should look good with her robes," he said, blushing and not looking at Harry.

Trying not to stare, Harry followed him down the stairs to the common room. When they got there, neither Hermione nor Ginny was down yet, though Lavender and Parvati were, Lavender tapping one foot impatiently, Parvati looking amused. Her smile broadened when she saw Ron and his flowers.

"Hermione and Ginny will be down in a few minutes," she told them, which surprised Harry, since he wasn't Ginny's date. Looking around, he spotted Colin talking to some other fourth-year boys, looking much too relaxed for Harry's taste. Seamus, Dean, and Neville came down the stairs behind them, and, after Lavender attached herself to Seamus' side, all five of them went out the portrait hole. Harry was torn between thinking he should follow them, since Cho was probably already waiting for him, and he knew he shouldn't want to watch Ron and Hermione's meeting as much as he did, and wanting to be one of the first to see Ginny when she made her appearance. His better self won out.

"I should get down to the entrance hall, Cho's probably waiting for me," he said to Ron.

"No! You have to be here when...what if she doesn't come down?" Ron said, wide-eyed.

A loud bray of laughter came from behind them. Ron didn't take his eyes off of the girls' staircase, but Harry turned around to see Fred, George, and Lee Jordan coming from the boys' dormitories. George dug an elbow into both Fred and Lee, who were still laughing, but he did grin at Ron's hopeful expression. The grin still didn't look quite right, but it was much closer, and Harry had to close his eyes against the sight of the twins in their electric blue robes. Lee didn't help, either - he was in canary yellow.

"What did you boys do, plan this so that you can find each other in a dark alley?" Alicia Spinnet said, as she came down the girls' staircase. Harry opened his eyes to see Ron straining to see around Alicia, Angelina, and Katie as they joined the boys. Fred handed Angelina a red rose, which made both Alicia and Katie take a couple of steps away from her.

Angelina, though, held the rose up to her neck, so that when the perfume sprayed out of it, it went where she wanted it to. She grinned, and linked her arm through Fred's.

"You even got the right scent," she said, patting him on the head. "Well done."

Fred actually blushed, and whispered something in her ear, while George and Lee both shook their heads.

"We knew it would happen," Lee said.

"He fell, and fell hard," George added, looking mournful. "He'll never be the same again."

Alicia walked over to Lee and punched him in the arm. "You could learn a few tricks from him, you know."

Lee looked immensely shocked. "I thought you didn't want me to act like the Weasley twins!" he said, trying to maintain a straight face, but dissolving into laughter as Alicia realized what she had said.

George watched the two couples, his grin melting off his face.

"Hey," Katie said, linking her arm with his and smiling up at him. "Walk me down?"

George looked down at her and smiled. As they climbed out of the portrait hole, Harry thought he heard him say, "Thanks for everything, Katie."
Harry turned back to Ron just as Ron covered his face with his hands.

"That's it. She's not coming down. I suppose I'll just go back up to the dormitory, then. Have fun at the ball, Harry.

"Of course she's coming down, you prat!" Harry said. Of all the people who would have fun at the ball, he knew he wouldn't be one of them. And he knew that Hermione wouldn't miss this, not even to study for the O.W.L.s. "She -" But he was interrupted by the sight of feet coming down the girls' dormitory steps.

Harry and Ron both watched as Hermione descended. Her hair was up again, like last year, and her robes seemed to float around her as she walked. Her eyes were bright, and, it seemed to Harry, locked on Ron's. Harry glanced at his friend to see what he thought.

"Wow," Ron breathed, so softly that Harry wasn't sure that Hermione could hear him. "You look...wow." Hermione blushed slightly, so she must have heard. Ron took a step towards her, and shyly held out the forget-me-nots. "These are for you." He seemed to be having a hard time looking her in the eye.

Hermione's face lit up when she saw the flowers; Harry had never seen her look so happy.

"Thanks, Ron," was all that she said. She tucked the flowers into several places in her hair, and turned to Ginny to ask if they looked all right. Harry had known that Ginny had followed Hermione down, but he hadn't let his eyes seek her out, like they wanted to. Now, he could look at her safely, while she was busy with Hermione. The soft blue robes looked wonderful on her, making her skin look creamy, her eyes even deeper than usual, and her hair, part of

which was in a knot on top of her head, while the rest spilled over her shoulders, bright and warm. But Harry couldn't help thinking that they didn't capture her personality, her soul. It was just too insipid a color for a person as vibrant as Ginny.

Colin evidently didn't think so, as he stepped forward to claim his date. Harry had to look away as she turned towards him, smiling. That wasn't something he could have, and he knew it, but that didn't mean he wanted to watch. Instead, he looked back to Ron and Hermione, who were standing very close to each other, but they weren't speaking - at least not out loud. Harry cleared his throat pointedly, which caused Hermione to blush and Ron to look around, slightly annoyed. Harry almost laughed in his face; Ron had insisted that he stay with him, but now he was in the way. They all climbed through the portrait hole and made their way down to the entrance hall, Harry trailing behind the two couples.

Before they got there, they passed Professor McGonagall.

"There you are, Harry," she said. "Professor Dumbledore asked me to check on you, he seemed -" She broke off as she noticed that Colin was there. "Well, he asked me to check on you.

Harry knew what she was going to say, though. Everyone seemed to think that he couldn't handle the stress of knowing that there was going to be an attack. Well, he could.

"I'm fine, Professor McGonagall," he said, meeting her eyes steadily. "I do need to get down to my date, though."

"Oh, yes, of course," she said, looking slightly flustered. "Enjoy yourselves tonight, all of you."

Harry noticed Ginny looking at him. *See*, her look seemed to say. *Even the teachers know we need to relax sometimes*. Harry knew she was right, but he looked away. He knew that he wouldn't have fun tonight, and that he would hate balls forever.

Chapter 19 The Yule Ball Again

When they reached to the entrance hall, Harry found Cho easily, as most people had already entered the Great Hall.

"Sorry I'm late," he said as he reached her. "Ron needed some moral support."

Cho smiled. "He doesn't look like he needs any now," she said, her eyes following Ron and Hermione as they crossed the hall. "Do you think they'll notice anyone else the whole night?"

"Probably not," Harry said, taking her arm lightly. "But I think I should be near by, just in case a blowup happens." Cho didn't look too happy at that - no one wanted to be near Ron and Hermione when they argued - but she didn't protest, so they went into the Great Hall as well. The tables were set up for dinner, like last year, and like last year, there were menus to order from. Hermione did look a bit upset at that, but Ginny, who sat beside her, put her hand on her arm and said something in her ear that made her calm down.

The only problem with the seating arrangements that Harry could see was that he was opposite Ginny. Try as he might to pay the proper amount of attention to Cho, he kept watching Ginny out of the corner of his eye. Cho noticed, of course, but all she said was, "Hmm...I wonder if Ginny likes crystals?" which did have the effect, besides making Harry blush, of getting more of his attention. True to Cho's prediction, Ron and Hermione mostly talked to each other, so Harry hoped that they would finally settle things, and the atmosphere around them might become a little less tense.

Cho seemed fine throughout dinner, and Harry was glad that she was putting her demons behind her. They didn't talk all that much, but he did try to act normally, and to be a more attentive date to Cho than he had been last year to Parvati. At one point, he caught Parvati's eye from where she sat at the next table over, and gave her a deliberate salute. She laughed, but just shook her head before turning to her own date. Harry hoped she had fun this year. Cho saw the little bit of play and, once he explained what it was about, seemed thankful for the opportunity to talk about last year. They were just two friends, supporting each other through a tough time.

Harry realized that Cho hadn't recovered completely, though, when the supper tables were removed, and the room cleared for dancing. Everyone walked to the edge of the dance floor, but then stopped, looking around.

"Who's going to lead the dancing?" Fred said, asking the question on everyone's mind. The champions had, last year. He turned to Angelina. "Interested?"

Before she could answer, Dumbledore stepped out into the middle of the floor.

"The faculty will dance the first dance, and then all the students may join in," he said. His voice sounded like he wanted to laugh. "It's a Sadie Hawkins dance."

"What's a Sadie Hawkins dance?" Ron asked.

"It means the women ask the men," Hermione said, then sucked in her breath. They all followed her gaze to see Miss Stuart leading Professor Snape out onto the dance floor.

Hermione looked like she was having trouble breathing, and Ron just managed a "Blimey!", but Harry and Ginny laughed so hard they had to hold onto each other for support.

Finally, Ginny managed to take a breath. "Oh, that's so like Miss Stuart!" she said. "I wish Remus were here to see it, he'd approve wholeheartedly."

"Yeah," Harry said. "But I'm glad Sirius *isn't* here." He gave another chuckle, then realized that he was still holding onto Ginny's arm. He let go quickly, glancing around. Cho was watching him, a half-smile on her face, but Colin was glaring at him. He took a step towards Cho just as the music started.

"No!" Hermione said after a few bars. "It can't be...it is! Oh, this has *got* to be Dumbledore's idea."

Everyone else looked at her in confusion.

"You don't recognize it? Honestly - am I the only one who listens to classical music?"

Everyone else nodded.

"It's the Grandfather's Dance from The Nutcracker. Isn't that hilarious?"

Ginny and Cho smiled, and Ron managed a fake chuckle, but Harry just shook his head. They all watched the teachers as they promenaded around the dance floor to the stately music. Snape looked like he could happily chew glass, but Miss Stuart winked at them as they passed, which made Ginny giggle. Professor McGonagall, though, almost looked like she was crying on Professor Moody's shoulder, which sobered all of the group, and many of the teachers looked like they were determined to enjoy themselves for tonight, at least.

After the teachers' dance, the Weird Sisters broke into a more lively tune, and the students flowed out onto the dance floor. Cho, though, took one step onto it and almost crumpled. Luckily, Harry caught her, and the group brought her back to a small table.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said, trying to stand up on her own. "I don't know what came over me, but I'm fine now. Let's dance, Harry."

She certainly didn't seem fine to Harry, especially with the tears in her eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to just sit here for awhile?" he asked.

She gave a small sigh. "Well, I suppose I'd better. You all should go enjoy the dancing, though."

"Don't be silly," Harry said. "I'm staying with you."

Hermione and Ginny wanted to stay, too, but Cho wouldn't let them. Finally, they left, to Ron and Colin's relief.

"I'm really sorry, Harry," Cho said as soon as they were gone. "I thought I could do this, I really did. But when I stepped onto the dance floor, I suddenly seemed to see Cedric, and I just couldn't..." She trailed off, her voice full of tears.

"You did?" Harry said. "You don't think that someone - Malfoy, maybe - cast a spell to make -" He broke off, because Cho was shaking her head.

"No, it's just grief, Harry. I thought I was getting over it, but I suppose I'm not."

"Well, you're here, aren't you? That's a step," Harry said. He looked out over the dancers and winced to see Ginny and Colin. At least it was a fast dance, so they weren't too close. "Do you want to talk about Cedric? Would that help?"

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Cho asked, looking up into his eyes. "I'd...really like that."

So they talked about Cedric. Since Cho didn't seem to want to look at him while they talked, it left Harry's eyes free to watch the dancing. He saw Fred and Angelina disappear into the enchanted rose gardens, then come scurrying back with Snape on their heels. Apparently, his dance with Miss Stuart had left Snape needing a scapegoat. George and Brenna looked awkward with each other to begin with, but as the night went on, they relaxed and seemed to have fun. Harry tried not to keep tabs on Ron and Hermione, but he couldn't help noticing that they, too, disappeared, though he didn't see where or when. And he deliberately kept his eyes away from Ginny, though he could at least tell that she danced with a number of different boys, not just Colin. All of his friends seemed to be having fun, and Harry tried to be happy for them. He tried not to think of Voldemort and what was waiting for someone on Christmas Day.

Harry learned more about Cedric that evening than he had ever wanted to know, but he was glad that he could help Cho. She certainly became more animated as the evening went on, and that had to be a good thing. Just as he was about to suggest that they might actually dance, a commotion broke out at the edge of the dance floor. Harry jumped to his feet, because at the center of it were Ginny and Draco Malfoy. He started to go towards them, but Cho caught his arm. He looked down at her, and she shook her head at him. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the music stopped. Apparently, the Weird Sisters wanted to hear what was happening, too.

"Draco, I said no, and I meant it!" Ginny was saying. "I didn't want to come to this ball with you, and I don't want to dance with you. What part of "no" don't you understand?"

"Of course you want to dance with me," Malfoy said, sounding like he honestly believed what he was saying. "How could you not?"

"Easily," Ginny said. She turned away from him, but he reached out and grabbed her arm. Harry tried to run to her then, but Cho tightened her grip on his arm. She was much stronger than he had expected, and he didn't want to hurt her, but he really needed to get to Ginny. *Where's Ron? Or Fred, or George? Why aren't they here?* he thought. *And why aren't the teachers doing something about this?* He looked over to the head table. Professor McGonagall was standing, her eyes flashing from that far away, but Professor Dumbledore's hand was on her arm, just like Cho's on Harry's.

"Let me go, Cho," he said, his eyes drawn back to Ginny and Malfoy. "I need to help her."

Cho actually laughed. "Ginny doesn't need your help, Harry," she said. "She's a pretty girl; I'm certain someone taught her the Pepper Spray Charm."

Harry glanced down at her - he had never heard of that charm - but he couldn't keep his eyes off of Ginny. She seemed to have collapsed in Malfoy's arms, which he took as an invitation to kiss her. Just as his lips touched hers, though, he was propelled back with such force that he knocked over Crabbe and Goyle, who were standing behind him. Everyone around him laughed, and he quickly picked himself up, snarled at Ginny - who just glared at him - and left the Great Hall, his useless bodyguards and Pansy Parkinson following behind him.

Ginny looked around the room quickly, ignoring the applause she had garnered, searching for someone. Harry raised his other hand to wave at her, but her gaze passed right over him. He expected that she was looking for Hermione, who also seemed to be nowhere around, but, instead, she headed towards Fleur, who swept her into a hug. Harry sat down weakly, and heard Cho chuckling.

"So that's who taught her," she said. "I'm not surprised *she* knows it, but I am surprised that Mrs. Weasley didn't teach Ginny herself."

"What *was* that?" Harry asked.

"The Pepper Spray Charm. It had another name years ago, but some Muggle-born witch renamed it after some Muggle repellent, and the name stuck."

"Yes, but, what does it do? It looked like Ginny collapsed, and then, suddenly..."

"That's because it was her first time using it. At least, I assume it was. See, Harry," Cho said, leaning towards him, her eyes alight, "the Pepper Spray Charm requires a witch to be absolutely certain that she doesn't want her attacker near her. If she has any doubt, any at all, it won't work."

"And Ginny had some doubt? About Draco Malfoy?" Harry couldn't believe it. He didn't want to believe it.

Cho shook her head. "No, but it takes more concentration the first couple of times. Ginny needed to focus all her energy on the spell, so she stopped fighting Draco for a moment."

"Wow," Harry said. He was going to say more, but just then, Ginny herself came towards them.

"Harry," she said as soon as she was close enough, "would you mind terribly dancing with me?"

Cho burst out laughing. "That's a horrible way to ask a boy for a dance!" she said.

Ginny blushed, but stood her ground. "Fleur told me that I needed to dance with someone, so I wouldn't get it into my head that all boys are like Draco Malfoy." Harry could hear the hatred in every syllable of his name. He hadn't known that Ginny could feel that much hatred about anyone.

"Yes, that's a good idea," Cho said. She looked thoughtful for a moment, but then smiled a little wickedly. "But why Harry?"

Ginny turned so pink that Harry was almost blinded by the contrast between her hair and her skin. "Fleur said to pick someone I felt safe with," she muttered, not looking at Harry.

"But...what about Colin?" Harry asked, looking back and forth between the two girls. Cho was enjoying this, he could tell, but he didn't know why.

Ginny swallowed, hard, and then looked up at him. "I feel safer with you," she said.

"Oh," was all Harry managed to say. He wasn't entirely sure he liked that, though he told himself that he *should* like it, but if she needed to feel safe, safe he could give her. He couldn't say no to Ginny, even if it meant leaving Cho, who also needed him, alone.

He stood up, but looked worriedly back at Cho. She seemed to understand.

"I'll be fine, Harry, you don't have to watch over me every second," she said. Harry was still unsure of what to do, but just then, Bill Weasley came up to them.

"Cho, will you dance with me?" he asked. "Fleur had to go be teacherly, and she told me to go dance with the second prettiest girl in the room. Ginny's out of the question, of course, so I came straight to you."

Harry watched as both Ginny and Cho blushed and smiled. *I've got to learn how to say things like that*, he thought. *Maybe Bill will give me lessons.*

The four of them headed for the dance floor, and it was only then that Harry realized that the song just beginning was a slow song. He hadn't counted on being that close to Ginny, but he tried to act normally as they took their place beside Seamus and Lavender. He followed Ginny's lead, so when she put both of her arms around his neck, he put both of his around her waist. He didn't allow himself to do what he wanted to - pull her close - because she wanted to feel safe, and he didn't think that would make her feel particularly safe. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Professors McGonagall and Moody were dancing quite close to them. *Sure*, he thought. *Now that it's too late, and Ginny's quite safe.* He looked down at her, smiling, he hoped reassuringly, into her anxious eyes. After a moment, she sighed, and closed her eyes.

"This is nice," she said. "I just love this song."

Harry turned his attention to the music just as the words began. He didn't recognize it - it wasn't a normal Weird Sisters song.

"What is it?" he asked.

Ginny opened her eyes, and he was surprised to see tears in them. "*This Is the Time*, by Billy Joel. He's an American Muggle musician. I hadn't heard it either, until I went to Miriam's this summer." She sighed again. "Someday, I want a relationship like that."

Harry listened again. *Someday we will both look back, and have to laugh. We lived through a lifetime, and the aftermath.* That sounded pretty good to him, too.

Ginny suddenly gasped. Harry whipped his head around to follow her gaze, and saw Cho crying on Bill's shoulder. He let go of Ginny to go to her, but Ginny locked her arms tighter around his neck.

"Harry Potter will have young witches falling all over him!" Harry turned his head to glare at Seamus, which was nothing to the look Ginny was giving him. Lavender looked like she wanted to laugh, but instead she smiled at Ginny, and dragged Seamus away.

Harry turned back to Ginny to see her biting her lip. "I mean, if you really want to go to Cho, then of course you should go," she said, loosening her death grip on him a little. "But she needs to cry, and Bill's a very safe person for her to do it on. And he's very good at comforting crying girls."

Harry shrugged. "I just thought - I mean, I'm her date..."

"That's exactly why she couldn't cry on you," Ginny said, looking up at him earnestly. "She wouldn't want to ruin your evening."

"Oh," Harry said, shaking his head. "You know, Ginny, I don't think I'm ever going to understand girls."

Ginny giggled. "We're easy to understand, really."

"Oh, yeah? Then why did Ron take so long to understand Hermione?"

"Because Ron's Ron," Ginny said. "And, besides, he worked it out in the end, didn't he? Do you see them anywhere around here?"

Harry looked around, and he didn't. "Tell me they didn't have a fight."

Ginny grinned. "They didn't."

Harry started to grin, too. "So, we're not going to walk into another scene like the one I walked into last year after the ball?"

"I doubt it. We might walk into a completely different kind of scene, but not that one."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "I don't think I want to walk into *any* kind of scene."

Ginny giggled, and put her head down on his shoulder. Harry could barely believe it, but he let himself pull her a little closer and close his eyes. He knew he shouldn't be enjoying this - he shouldn't be having fun at a ball a few days before Voldemort's attack - but, then, Ginny had told him to relax. He would listen to her. Maybe this ball thing wasn't so bad, after all.

Chapter 20 Christmas at the Burrow

The next morning found them all in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express. This was the first time that Harry was actually leaving Hogwarts for Christmas, and already, he could tell he had missed a lot. Everyone was still tired from the ball, but excited and happy to be going home for a visit. Slowly, Harry let himself relax and enjoy the atmosphere. He could worry about Voldemort later.

Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione had a compartment to themselves, with Ron and Hermione sharing a bench, and sitting much closer than Harry had ever seen them before. In fact, he thought he saw their hands touching, though they tried to pretend that everything was normal. He very carefully avoided looking at Ginny, who sat next to him, though not nearly as close as Hermione sat to Ron. She chattered away cheerfully about the ball.

"And did you see Neville and Hannah? I think he must have taken some dancing lessons this summer, or maybe she just doesn't mind having her feet stepped on, because they didn't dance with anyone else the whole time! I thought he'd definitely ask me for a dance - for old times' sake, you know - but he didn't come near me."

"Good," Ron said. "You had enough boys wanting to dance with you, how'd you notice to miss Neville?"

"Speaking of which," Harry said, not wanting to think about how many boys had danced with Ginny, "when did you learn that Pepper Spray Charm? That was amazing, Ginny - and it was great to see Malfoy knocked on his arse."

"Harry, don't swear, but - the Pepper Spray Charm! Why did you have to use that, Ginny?" Hermione asked, sitting up straight.

"Malfoy? Did he lay hands on you again?" Ron did more than sit up straight, he stood up and started for the door.

Ginny glared at Harry, who felt a little sheepish, but if he hadn't told Ron, someone else would have.

"Yes, he did, Ron," Ginny said, turning her glare onto her brother. "But I used the Pepper Spray Charm, and he won't be doing that again." She looked almost diabolically satisfied, which would have worried Harry, except that it was Draco Malfoy.

"But, Ginny, that's a very hard charm to master, especially since you can't actually practice it," Hermione said. "Where did you learn it? I found it in...well, never mind the name of the book, but...or is this something that all magical mothers teach their daughters, so I missed out again?" Her expression went from eager interest to sadness, and Ron practically tripped over his feet getting back to her. This time, he actually did take her hand. She put her head on his shoulder.

After a moment of just watching them, Ginny smiled and said, "Well, I'm glad you two finally admitted what we all knew was true!"

Ron's ears turned pink, and he looked imploringly at Harry, but Hermione just smiled at her friends.

"Me too," she said, which made Ron blush even harder. "You don't mind, do you, Harry?"

"Me? Why would I mind? I've been after Ron to say something for months, you know that -" He broke off in horror. "Oops. Open mouth, insert foot."

"You knew that Hermione...erm...we'll talk about this later, mate," Ron said, glaring at Harry, but Harry could tell that he was too happy to be really mad.

Ginny giggled, and then answered Hermione's initial question. "Actually, Mum didn't teach me that charm. I guess she thought I would never need it, with six older brothers. But Fleur said that there would be times when none of them were around, so she taught it to me." She shook her head sadly. "You wouldn't believe the number of times she's had to use it. I'm really glad she's found Bill."

"It was amazing, Hermione, you should have been there to see it," Harry said. "Malfoy tried to kiss Ginny, and suddenly he was on the floor, six feet away. The force knocked down Crabbe and Goyle, too."

"He tried to *kiss* you? How did he get close enough? And where were you, Harry, that you saw it and didn't help?" Ron looked like he was going to jump up again, but Hermione tightened her grip on his hand.

"Weren't you listening, Ron - I didn't need any help," Ginny said. "I knocked Malfoy over - *I* did that. I don't need you or Harry or anyone else to protect me."

"Right," Ron said, then looked pointedly at Harry. Hermione glared at him, but he evidently felt that some things an older brother had a right to, like an explanation as to why his best friend didn't help his sister.

"Actually, I wanted to help Ginny, of course I did," Harry said, more, if he was honest with himself, to Ginny than to Ron. "But Cho wouldn't let me - she has a very high opinion of you, you know."

"She does?" Ginny said, blushing. "So, she recognized what I was doing?"

"Oh, yeah, she knew right away. She's probably had to use it lots, don't you think?" Harry almost kicked himself as soon as he said that. *I must not be awake yet*, he thought, as he watched Ginny deflate.

"So, can you teach me, Ginny?" Hermione asked. "Not that I think I'll need it," her eyes slid towards Ron, whose ears turned red, "but of course I want to learn it."

The rest of the train ride was taken up by Ginny attempting to teach Hermione the charm. Ron declared that nothing could be more boring, and took out *Quidditch for Keeps* to read, but Harry thought that it was actually interesting. He hadn't realized before how much of learning new magic was in the practicing. With this charm, the witch couldn't practice, since she had to be absolutely certain that she didn't want the boy threatening her to touch her, and that rather precluded practicing. After watching Hermione struggle for awhile, Harry came up with a wicked idea. *I'll probably regret this*, he thought, *but now that it's all out in the open, I can tease Ron and Hermione, and maybe Fred and George are starting to rub off on me.*

"Why don't you practice with me, Hermione?" he asked, making both girls stare at him in shock. "You don't want me to touch you that way, after all." He heard Ron make an indeterminate noise, but he kept watching Hermione. As he expected, she blushed.

"Well, no, she doesn't," Ginny said, "but she wouldn't mind you touching her, just not touching her, touching her. So it wouldn't work." She didn't look happy with him, and he was sorry, but he couldn't resist teasing Ron and Hermione.

"So, it wouldn't work," he said, trying to sound disappointed. "Are you certain? I could try it, to make sure." He half-stood up.

"Harry!" Ron and Hermione both shouted, making him dissolve into laughter.

"Your faces...honestly!" was all he could get out, especially as both of them continued to glare at him. Ginny, though, looked thoughtful.

"Maybe it would work," she said, nibbling on a strand of her hair. "Oh, not with Harry, but maybe, say...Fred or George."

"No!" Ron said, looking even more horrified, which Harry hadn't believed was possible. He reached out and grabbed Hermione's hand.

This time, it was Hermione herself who got the joke. "But, Ron, I don't want either of them to touch me...maybe it would work." She couldn't hold the laughter in, though, and fell against him, helplessly giggling. Ron managed to look gratified and outraged at the same time, which proved to be too much for Ginny, too.

By the time they all recovered, the train had arrived at platform nine and three-quarters. The first person they saw was Mrs. Weasley, who had a hug for each of them, though she did seem to linger over Harry. Harry supposed that, at fifteen, he shouldn't want an adult to hug him, but it did feel good. Mrs. Weasley definitely had the largest group of students surrounding her, and Harry looked around, half-expecting to hear Draco Malfoy's usual sneer. But, instead, he saw Malfoy take one look at their group, turn around, and head in the opposite direction.

"Guess you showed him, huh, Ginny?" Ron said, gleefully following Malfoy's retreating back.

"Yeah," Ginny said, her eyes narrowed. "But I wonder what he'll do to retaliate. You know he will."

Hermione patted her shoulder. "I'm sure you're up to handling whatever he can throw at you," she said, which made Ginny cheer up.

When they got to the Burrow, Harry was surprised to see that it wasn't at all decorated. Ron noticed his surprise.

"Ever since Bill started at Hogwarts, Mum decided to wait to decorate until all her children were here. Once Bill and Charlie didn't always come home, she waited until whomever was coming home came home. So, we'll probably do it tonight, once Dad, Bill, and Percy get home. In the meantime, how about a game of Quidditch?"

"Ron, you're as predictable as the sun rising in the morning," Hermione said, but she smiled at him.

He smiled back. "And don't think you're getting out of it," he said. "You're going to referee." "Oh, no, Ron - I couldn't! I'd be horrible."

"Well, you can't possibly be worse than Snape," Harry said.

They had a rousing Quidditch match, though they didn't use a Snitch, with Charlie, Fred, and Ron against Harry, George, and Ginny. Ron's team won, basically because Harry as a Chaser was no match for him. Ginny wasn't half-bad as a Keeper, though Harry knew that she preferred watching Quidditch to playing it. He was glad that he didn't have to try to score on her, though - he was sure he'd be much too distracted. Hermione didn't really call many fouls, except when Fred hit a Bludger at Harry, which hit Ron instead. Charlie had to explain to her, manfully keeping in his laughter, that that was a legal move. He didn't even laugh when George asked just who she was going to award a penalty shot to, since the person who hit the Bludger was on the same team as the person who had been hit. The rest of them didn't even try not to laugh, though, and Harry could hear Ginny shrieking with laughter from all the way across the field.

They didn't come down until sunset, and when they reached the Burrow again, Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Percy were home. After one of Mrs. Weasley's delicious feasts, the decorating began. Harry thought he almost would prefer to just watch, but he was certainly made to feel at home. Mr. Weasley wanted his help putting up the garlands of ivy and holly all around the house, and he had to help extricate Ron from the depths of the Christmas tree. Hermione had found a charm that shot bits of tinsel out of her wand, which she wanted to teach Charlie, but he told her that "...the Ministry never checks up on wizarding families at Christmas - far too much magic flying around to keep track of it all." So Hermione was able to perform her charm herself, but it got a bit out of hand, so there was tinsel everywhere, not just on the tree. Percy wanted Harry's opinion on exactly where the mistletoe should go, but that was one decision Harry had no intention of helping with. *Imagine if Percy knew exactly whom I want to get under that mistletoe*, he thought, shuddering. Fred and George managed to do something to some of the ornaments when Mrs. Weasley wasn't watching, and Harry made a resolve not to get too near the tree any time soon. Even Dobby and Winky got into the Christmas spirit - they were covered in tinsel, and they seemed to be everywhere, trying to help everyone at once. It was a completely amazing time, and Harry tried to soak it all in, not wanting to miss a single second.

Everyone seemed to be done at about the same time, but to Harry's eyes it seemed that there was something missing. Hermione must have thought so, too.

"Should I put some tinsel on the garlands, too, Mrs. Weasley?" she asked, eyeing the dark green twists that were around every door and window, and all up the banisters of the staircase.

"No, dear, that's Ginny's job," Mrs. Weasley said. Ever since she had seen Ron kiss Hermione on the cheek under the mistletoe, she had been treating her even more like one of the family than before. Unfortunately, Fred and George had seen it, too, and Harry was dreading what they were going to do to Ron now.

Right now, though, he was more interested in what Ginny was doing. She smiled at her mum and Hermione, rolled up the sleeves of her robe, and gave her wand a little flick. "Joyeaux

Noel", she murmured, and little sparks of light burst from her wand, shot over to the ivy and holly garlands, and grew into fairies, which hovered among the greenery. They were all shapes, sizes, and colors, and they turned the Burrow into a wonderland.

Winky clapped her hands together and squeaked, even the twins looked impressed, and Bill said, after he had ruffled Ginny's hair, "Those are your best yet, little sister!"

Ginny blushed, and smiled up at him. "I asked Professor Flitwick for some tips, seeing as this is Harry's first Christmas," she said, though she didn't look at Harry.

Harry saw Fred, George, Ron, and Hermione exchanging looks, but he didn't care. Ginny had done that for him - *for him* - and, right then, he wasn't sure if he could get a better Christmas present.

Christmas Eve was even more fun. Harry and Hermione were told to bring their presents for everyone downstairs after dinner. Harry was glad to see that Hermione had just as many as he did, so he wouldn't be the only one told off by Ron for going overboard. They got downstairs to see everyone standing by their own pile of presents.

"Now, we turn down the lights, and everyone puts their presents for each person in their stocking," Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry and Hermione looked at the stockings that were now hung up in a row across the mantelpiece. They each had one, no doubt knitted by Mrs. Weasley, and seeing "Harry" in gold across a scarlet stocking almost made Harry feel weak. This was so much more than he had expected. He gave Mrs. Weasley a tremulous smile, but Hermione, being Hermione, was still thinking logically.

"I suppose they've been enchanted to hold more than they look like they can," she said. She clapped her hands together lightly. "This is so wonderful - everything so magical!"

Mrs. Weasley smiled at the two of them, and explained further. "This has been a Christmas tradition in my family for a long time. And don't use magic, dears, it's much more fun to do it without."

"Ready," Mr. Weasley said, holding out his wand. "Set. Go."

There was a mad scramble, as everyone tried to reach the stockings at once, tripping over each other, and the house-elves, in the process. *This is fun*, Harry thought. *I just hope I get it all right - I certainly don't want to be giving that crystal to Fred!*

He worried about that again, as he lay in bed the next morning. This was the first year that he had woken up before Ron - usually, though of course he liked it, Christmas wasn't much more exciting than any other day of the year. But this year, he actually had a family to spend it with, he couldn't wait to see Ginny's face when she opened the crystal - or Ron and Hermione's when they opened their picture frames - and Sirius and Remus were coming to dinner. They couldn't come earlier because of Percy, but he was going to Penelope's for Christmas dinner. Harry just lay there, and let himself enjoy the moment.

Not for long, though. Suddenly, Ron's snores stopped, and he jumped out of bed. He reached Harry's bed in one leap, but then recoiled in shock when he saw Harry awake.

"Oy, how long have you been up, and why didn't you wake me?" he said. "Presents downstairs, you great git!"

Harry laughed. *Some things will never change*, he thought. *No matter how old Ron gets, he'll always be excited on Christmas morning*. It was a nice thought.

They bounded downstairs, Ron pounding on Fred and George's door as he went. He almost pounded on Ginny's, too, but then stopped. Ignoring Harry's snickers, he kept jumping down stairs. When they reached the living room, Ron headed straight for the stockings, but bounced off an invisible barrier just before he got there.

"Ow! Mum! What's going on?"

"We're waiting for the Grangers, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, appearing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Why don't you come help me get ready?" Dobby appeared beside her, shaking his finger at Ron, who was still rubbing his head from the impact.

"The Grangers?" Ron said. "They're coming for presents? I have to change." He turned, and bounded up the stairs as quickly as he had come down.

Mrs. Weasley smiled at his retreating back, then turned her gaze onto Harry.

"Should I change, too?" he asked, looking down at his pajamas. They had always opened presents at Hogwarts in pajamas.

"No, of course not," Mrs. Weasley said. "Hermione and Ginny are still in their nightdresses, and I'm sure Fred and George will be in their pajamas, too. Ron's just being..."

"Ron," Harry finished half-heartedly. Ginny was still in her nightdress?

Just then, the Grangers appeared in the room with a pop, both of them clutching the same book, and looking slightly dazed. Harry sympathized - he still remembered his first trip by Portkey, and nothing since then had endeared them to him. But since the Burrow had been taken off the Floo network, and been made Unplottable, recently, a Portkey was the only way to get there magically. Mrs. Weasley rushed forward to greet them.

"Sophie, Robert, how good to see you again," she said. "Come, sit down and recover. Would you like some tea?"

"Some tea would be lovely, Molly," Mrs. Granger said. She still looked a little green, but Mr. Weasley was looking around with great interest at the decorations. Harry thought he saw one of Ginny's fairies wink at him, and watched him turn pink. When Winky brought in the tea, both of the Grangers exclaimed over her, and Harry saw Dobby in the doorway, looking as proud as though Winky were his daughter. Then he heard someone pounding down the stairs, and turned, expecting to see Ron, but it was Hermione, who threw herself into her mum's arms.

"Mum, Dad, I'm so glad to see you!" she said. "Happy Christmas!"

"Happy Christmas!" Mrs. Granger said, as she looked sharply at her daughter. "Running down stairs isn't like you, Hermione." She held her out at arms' length. "And you look different." Hermione blushed, and Mr. Granger looked sharply at Harry.

Hermione must have seen Harry's horrified look, because she shook her head. "No, not Harry," she said to her mum softly. Mrs. Granger hugged her again, but before she could say anything, Ron re-entered the room.

Nothing ever amazed Harry more than the fact that he kept a straight face through the next few minutes. Ron was just wearing jeans and a jumper, but not even Percy, who followed him into the room, could have acted more proper. He shook hands with the Grangers, asked how their trip was, and if he could get them anything to eat or drink. When Fred and George came bounding down the stairs, he shot them a look to rival any from Percy's Head Boy year, and introduced them as though they were royalty. The twins, of course, put on a performance to rival their greeting of Harry in the Leaky Cauldron before his third year, as Ron got redder and redder. Mr. Granger definitely enjoyed their antics, but Mrs. Granger, though she looked like she was about to laugh, played along with Ron.

Mrs. Weasley didn't seem to notice her youngest son's odd behavior, but it was Ron whom she asked to go fetch his father.

"Even Christmas can't keep him away from his Muggle contraptions, I'm afraid," she said. She turned to the Grangers. "I hope you two can convince him that they're really nothing to be excited over."

Mr. Granger laughed. "Well, seeing how excited we are over all of your magic, I don't think we would have a leg to stand on. How did you get those creatures to, well, exist?" he asked, nodding at the fairies in the garland nearest to him.

"Ginny did that," Harry said. "She's wonderful with Charms."

"Yeah," Fred jumped in. "Like the Pepper Spray Charm, I hear she's absolutely wonderful with that."

"There's something called the Pepper Spray Charm?" Mrs. Granger asked Hermione, but before Hermione could answer, Ron returned with Mr. Weasley, and Mrs. Weasley, who hadn't looked happy at the mention of the Pepper Spray Charm, went to the bottom of the stairs.

"Ginny, would you please wake up your two eldest brothers?" she called. "We're ready to start."

"Sure!" Ginny called back. They could all hear her pound on Bill and Charlie's door. "Wake up, you sleepy-heads, have you forgotten that it's Christmas? If you don't want your presents, I'm sure there's someone else who does, and do you really want Fred and George to get a chance with your -" She broke off suddenly and burst out laughing. She said something in a softer voice that Harry couldn't hear, and then came down the steps.

Harry had braced himself against what she might be wearing. Hermione's nightdress covered absolutely everything, but that was Hermione, after all. Harry had once seen what Lavender Brown wore to sleep, when he'd been studying late in the Common Room and she'd come down looking for Seamus. He wasn't sure if he hoped that Ginny was wearing something like that or not. He willed himself not to react.

When she entered the room, though, he couldn't help but give a sigh of relief. Her nightdress was long, it was white, and if it clung to her in places that Hermione's didn't, well, Harry could ignore that. Of course he could.

Bill and Charlie finally put in an appearance, and the ritual of opening Christmas presents began. With so many people, Harry expected a free-for-all, and it was a bit of one, but he did see some memorable presents opened. Fred and George gave Hermione a book on household magic, which made her blush as she tried to hide it from her mother. She gave Ron a set of Quidditch balls signed by the entire Bulgarian national team. Ron looked upset at that, at first, and then he seemed to realize that he didn't need to be jealous of Viktor Krum anymore, and could actually enjoy the present. Ron's present to Hermione was a book on taking care of part-Kneazles, which Professor Figg said that Crookshanks was. In fact, the only present that Hermione got that wasn't a book was Harry's picture frame full of pictures of Ron, but that was the one she seemed to like the best.

Until he opened Ginny's present, Harry thought that the best present he could possibly ever be given was from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Everyone stopped opening their own presents when he reached for that one, so he knew it was going to be special. It was a long, and very thin, rod with his name written on it, but he couldn't figure out what it was.

"There's a card, Harry," Ginny said softly.

Completely baffled, he read the card.

"We decided it was time to make it official. Happy Christmas from the Weasleys," was all it said, and Harry still didn't understand, until Bill took the rod from his hand and, with a flick of his wand, affixed it to the Weasley family clock. It whirled around the face a few times, and then settled on "home." Harry stared at it for a few moments, and then felt tears spring to his eyes. He blinked rapidly, and turned to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, especially when Mrs. Weasley enveloped him in a huge hug. Finally, after people started opening presents again, he was able to say thank you, though he knew that a simple thank you would never be enough for everything the Weasleys had done for him.

After that, he just sat for awhile, watching the happy throng and absorbing the atmosphere, every once in a while glancing over to his hand on the clock. So almost everybody else was done opening their presents when he finally reached for Ginny's. He looked around before he opened it, but most people were watching Mr. Granger, who had just eaten a Canary Cream. Mrs. Weasley scolded Fred and George, of course, not believing them when they said that Percy had given it to Mr. Granger, even when they showed her the wrapper.

Ginny was watching him, though, so he smiled at her and opened it. His gasp made everyone else look around. She had given him the exact same crystal pendant he had given her, though it was strung on a dark green cord, instead of a gold chain. Harry lifted it out of the box and stared at Ginny.

"What?" she asked, sounding slightly nervous. "It reminded me of our sessions with Miss Stuart, so I thought you'd...what is it, Harry?"

"Ginny, have you opened your present from me, yet?" he asked, though from her reaction, he knew she hadn't.

She shook her head, and picked up his present from where she had had it in her lap. She was sitting cross-legged on the sofa across from Harry, and he couldn't help but admire the way her bright hair looked spread out on the white nightdress, and the way the nightdress itself clung to her curves. He really couldn't help it. He stared at her, not really noticing what she was doing, until she gave an almost identical gasp to his, and then she started to laugh. She lifted her own pendant up and twirled it around.

"Great minds think alike, don't they?" she asked, smiling at him.

He tried to smile back. *Well, I suppose she really won't think it means more than I want her to, if she gave me the exact same thing*, he thought. *That's what I wanted, right? So, I should be happy.* He wasn't, though, he had to admit to himself. He still put the pendant on right away, even over his pajamas, and he let himself feel a slight satisfaction when Ginny did the same.

After all the presents had been opened and Winky and Dobby started picking up all of the wrapping paper, all of the kids went upstairs to get dressed and ready for another Weasley tradition - the Christmas snowball fight. This one, Harry had been a part of for years at Hogwarts, but this year's was the best yet, with Bill, Charlie, and even Percy joining in. That would have made the sides uneven, so Hermione talked her dad into playing, too, and he turned out to be even better than Charlie at sneaking up on people. It was an epic battle, and they all got so covered in snow that they finally found a clear patch further from the house to make snow angels. It was while they were all lying on the ground that they saw the Daily Prophet owl swoop down into the house.

"But the Daily Prophet already came this morning," Ron said, sitting up to watch the owl. "Why would it - oh, no!"

Harry and Ginny were already on their feet, running towards the house. They had been having so much fun with the presents and the snowball fight that they had forgotten all about her vision. The vision that said that a house would be attacked by Death Eaters, on Christmas Day.

Chapter 21 The Hour of Lead

When Harry and Ginny burst into the kitchen, it was already in an uproar.

“I have to go, Molly,” Mr. Weasley was saying. “I can’t imagine how this happened, but Sirius and Remus must need my help - something must have gone horribly wrong.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere!” Mrs. Weasley said, her eyes flashing and her hands on her hips. “Have you forgotten who’s staying in this house right now? What if this is all just a feint to draw you away so that they can attack here?”

Mr. Weasley actually laughed, though it didn’t sound completely normal. “I’d like to see them try. You’d be a match for them all by yourself, my dear.” He stepped closer to her, which Harry thought was very brave of him, and kissed her on the cheek. “You know this house is quite safe. I really have to go. Say good-bye to the children for me.” He pulled a battery out from a pocket in his robes, muttered a few words, and disappeared.

Harry had felt Ginny holding herself back throughout the whole conversation, and now she could hold it in no longer.

“Mum! Who - who was attacked?”

Mrs. Weasley had been staring at the spot where her husband had vanished, but at this she turned instantly. “Oh, Ginny,” she said. “I’m so, so sorry, dear.” She put her arms around her daughter, and drew her into a chair at the table. Harry followed.

“What? Who is it?” he asked. *Why Ginny especially?* he thought. *I thought the attack was going to be against someone I cared about.*

Mrs. Weasley looked at him with tears in her eyes, but then she turned back to Ginny. “It was...it was Colin. His...house was attacked early this morning...the whole family was killed.”

Ginny turned with a horrified look to Harry, and then buried her head in his shoulder, sobbing convulsively. Shocked as Harry was, somehow he knew what to do. He put one arm around her, and reached with the other for the Daily Prophet, which was still lying on the table. All the details were there. The attack had begun at 5:53 precisely, with ten Death Eaters, in masks and hooded robes, killing the two Aurors who had been watching the Creeveys'. Mr. and Mrs. Creevey, Colin, his brother Dennis, and his little sister Lydia, who Colin had been sure was going to start Hogwarts next year, all dead. Witnesses - Muggles, of course, and their memories had been wiped - reported that one of the Death Eaters had had a silver hand.

Early this morning, Harry thought. So, the whole time we were having fun, opening presents and playing in the snow, Colin and Dennis were already dead. How could I have forgotten? How could Ginny...

Ginny's sobs were easing somewhat, and Harry patted her on the back, looking up at Mrs. Weasley, who had sat down across the table from them, in mute appeal. He was surprised to see that, along with the tears in her eyes, she also had a somewhat satisfied look. *She can't be pleased that her daughter has turned to me for comfort*, he thought. *No mother in her right mind would want that - I'm obviously far too dangerous. Even people that are just friends; really, not much more than acquaintances, are in peril.* But he had to admit that holding Ginny felt just about perfect. It also felt right that he was the one to comfort her - he wanted to be there for her in the bad times, as well as the good.

Ginny pulled away from him suddenly, and reached for the newspaper. She took one look at the picture of the Creeveys' house, with the Dark Mark floating above it, and buried her face in Harry's shoulder again. This time, he put both arms around her and started rocking slightly, just as the rest of the snow-ball fighters re-entered the kitchen.

"Ginny!" Hermione said. "What happened?"

Ginny obviously wasn't going to be able to answer her - she started crying even harder - so Harry said, "It was Colin. His house was attacked, his whole family was killed."

"Oh, no!" Hermione gasped. She sat down in a chair with a thud. Ron moved to stand protectively behind her, his own face looking almost blank. "Oh, Ginny, I'm so sorry."

At that, Ginny's sobs stopped. She sat up straight, and glared at everyone, though she seemed to be most adamant about Harry. He had no idea why.

"I knew people would react like that!" she said. "Colin and I were just friends, nothing more. If you must know, I'm more upset that I didn't prevent it - it was my vision, after all. What's the use of having a talent when -" She broke off and bolted from the room.

Hermione looked after her, her face bewildered. "That's all I meant," she said. "I'm sorry she lost a friend..." she trailed off.

There didn't seem to be much else to say. Ron reached over Hermione's shoulder for the Daily Prophet and started reading it. Bill said that he supposed he should get changed, so he could report in, but Mrs. Weasley told him he would do no such thing - his responsibility was to his family, since his father had had to go. Percy disappeared, muttering something about the Ministry, and George looked like he'd been hit by a Bludger in the stomach.

"I'm sure she's fine," Fred said to him, his habitual smile wiped from his face. "But if you're worried, you should owl her."

"You know how her family feels when she gets owls," George said, but he was already rummaging for paper and a quill.

Suddenly, Mr. Granger cleared his throat. "Erm, I don't mean to pry...but, what is going on here?" He looked significantly at Hermione.

She gasped, as though she had forgotten that he was there. Then she turned and looked imploringly at Mrs. Weasley, who sighed and nodded.

"I suppose I should explain a lot of things to both you and Sophie," she said. "Come along, Hermione, we need to have a talk with your parents."

Hermione looked like that was the absolute last thing she wanted to do right then. Her parents knew about Voldemort, and they knew that Harry was a target, but she hadn't told them about

his dream, and she hadn't told them that she was being trained as an Auror. She stood up resolutely, though she looked a little green, but when Ron took her hand and followed her out the door, she managed to give him a tight smile.

Harry followed them out of the kitchen. He didn't know where he was going, exactly, but he knew that he didn't want to stay there. Fred and George were looking entirely too solemn for them - it was unnatural. And Bill and Charlie were talking in such quiet voices, that Harry knew they didn't want to be overheard, even if he had wanted to, which he didn't.

As soon as he stepped into the hall, Mrs. Weasley pulled him aside.

"Harry, I do need to talk to the Grangers, but I think Ginny needs someone, too. Could you please go and check on her?"

"Me? But...why not Bill?"

"I think," Mrs. Weasley began, but then she paused for a moment before beginning again. "I doubt she'll want to talk to anyone, truthfully, but you have the best chance, and she does need someone, whether or not she'll admit it." She didn't give him a chance to answer; she just turned and joined the group in the living room.

So Harry slowly started up the stairs. Ginny certainly hadn't seemed like she wanted to talk to anyone, but maybe that was a girl thing - to run away, but expect someone to follow. He wouldn't have wanted anyone to follow; in fact, he didn't really want to talk to anyone right then, himself. It would be so easy to just keep going up these stairs to Ron's room, and shut himself away from everybody. He knew that Ginny was feeling like this was her fault - she'd said as much - but it was just as much his fault as hers, if not more. But Ginny needed him, so he stopped at her door and knocked softly.

The only sound that greeted him was her quiet sobbing.

"Ginny, it's Harry," he began, not really sure what to say to get her to open the door. "Please let me in." She didn't say anything, but he thought that her sobs sounded a bit louder.

“Ginny, please. It’s...it’s not your fault, you know. Your vision warned us, and we all should have thought of Colin. *I should have thought of Colin - I’m the one he follows around, after all.*” A fresh storm of sobs burst out. *Well*, he thought, *recently it has been Ginny that Colin has been following around. I suppose that was the wrong thing to say.* He tried again. “You can’t blame yourself for everything. You’re just beginning to understand your gift as a Seer, no wonder you couldn’t interpret that vision correctly. Please, Ginny, let me in. I...I want to comfort you.” As soon as he said that, he felt really silly, so he added, “Your mum told me to come up.”

She still didn’t say anything, and she didn’t stop crying. He didn’t know what else to do.

“Well, I’m going to stay right here, outside the door, if you change your mind, Ginny,” he said. “I’m here for you.”

He slid down the wall next to the door, and rested his head in his arms on his knees. What could he say to make her let him in? Nothing, really. There was no reason that she would want to see him right now - no reason why she would want him to be the one to comfort her. But she had turned to him downstairs, when she first heard the news. *That was probably just the shock*, he told himself. *And her mother was sitting across the table, too far away to reach.* Ginny didn’t know how wonderful it had felt to him to hold her. *And that’s a good thing*, he told himself. *Even if...even if my reason for not telling her how I feel seems a bit silly, now.* If Voldemort would go after the entire Creevey family, just because Colin followed him around with a camera, he would certainly go after Ginny, just because they were friends. Harry suspected that that wasn’t the real reason Voldemort had chosen that particular victim, though. His mind traveled back to when they first learned about the Yule Ball. “Allowing your tag-alongs to date each other, Potter?” Malfoy had asked. And then the scene at the ball. Malfoy had obviously wanted to go with Ginny - was obviously interested in Ginny, as sick as that made Harry feel. He was taking out the competition.

If this had been last year, Harry thought that he would have wanted to “get” Malfoy. Get back at him for whatever he had done. But how do you get back at someone for causing the death of one of your friends and his entire family? There’s just no way to do that, though it sickened Harry to think of Malfoy walking around Hogwarts, totally unscathed. Ron would probably want to use that water gun he’d given Harry for his birthday, but that seemed somehow petty and silly.

Harry put his ear to Ginny’s door. She seemed to have stopped crying, at least out loud.

“Ginny? I’m still here, can I come in?” he asked, not really expecting an answer. He didn’t get one, and he buried his head in his arms again, absently fingering the pendant Ginny had given him that morning. The whole thing sickened Harry, really. He had known that

Voldemort and his Death Eaters were evil, of course he had. But to go after a young boy and his whole family, who had never done anything to anyone, just because the boy was a Muggle-born wizard, and a friend of Voldemort's enemy...well, Harry just couldn't imagine an evil that depraved. He just couldn't wrap his mind around it, even though it had actually happened.

He tried to force himself to think of something else. The Death Eaters - and he hadn't missed the fact that they had included Wormtail - hadn't just killed the Creeveys; there had been two Aurors mentioned in the article as well. For a moment Harry's heart leapt - what if they were Sirius and Remus? But his better sense prevailed; Mrs. Weasley would have mentioned that, and Mr. Weasley had said that he had to *go* to Sirius and Remus. Surely he wouldn't have said that if they were dead. At least the fact that Aurors had been there meant that someone had thought of Colin. Ten Death Eaters had just been more than a match for two Aurors. Harry knew that more Aurors had been posted at Hermione's house, and he suspected that Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan's houses were heavily protected as well, since Dean was Muggle-born, and Seamus was half-blood. Probably even Neville was under surveillance - Death Eaters hated Squibs, too. But no one had really thought Colin would be the one. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Harry banged his head on his arms, repeatedly.

Just then, he heard footsteps on the stairs. He didn't take his head out of his arms, because he didn't want to face either sympathy from Bill and Charlie, or teasing from Fred and George about being outside Ginny's room. As he expected, the footsteps stopped when they reached him. He felt a hand try to smooth down his perpetually messy hair.

"Have you been here the whole time, Harry?" Hermione asked. "She wouldn't let you in?"

He looked up into her worried face as she knelt beside him. Ron stood behind her.

"No," he said. "I tried a couple of times. She's stopped crying though...hopefully she fell asleep."

"Hmm," Hermione said. Her eyes searched his face. "I can tell that you're blaming yourself as much as she is, ridiculous as that is for both of you." She straightened up. "Well, maybe you can talk some sense into him, Ron, and I'll try to do the same with Ginny." She opened the door and went in.

Harry stared after her. The door had been unlocked that whole time, and he hadn't even tried it. Shaking his head at himself, he turned to Ron, a warning look on his face.

Ron shook his own head. "Don't worry, mate. I know you're blaming yourself, but I also know that you know that you shouldn't. Nothing I can say will change any of that, so I know better than to try." He lead the way up to his room, then turned back to Harry. "But you know that if you need to talk about anything - anything at all - I'm here for you."

Harry stared at him, wondering what his friend really expected him to talk about. The fact that people were getting killed because of him, or the fact that he was in love with Ginny, and she didn't seem to want to have anything to do with him. They were equally difficult conversation topics, and, not suprisingly, Harry just turned away, to find Dobby sitting on his bed.

"Dobby is so sorry about Harry Potter's friend," Dobby said, giant tears trembling in his eyes. "Dobby is hoping there is something Dobby can to do help Harry Potter, sir."

Harry dropped down beside him on the bed.

"I don't think there's anything that anyone can do, Dobby," he said.

Dobby's tears actually did spill out of his eyes at that, and Harry hurriedly tried to think of something to cheer the house-elf up. If he kept on crying like that, Harry might break down, too.

"I think Mrs. Weasley may need even more help, though," he said, looking at Ron for help. "It'll be much harder for to prepare her usual Christmas feast with this hanging over..." He trailed off.

"Yes, and I don't think Ginny will be up to helping her tonight," Ron said, his eyes going to the wall closest to where Ginny's room was.

Dobby's face had brightened a bit, but at that, it darkened again.

“Poor Miss Ginny,” he said mournfully. “She is just miserable.”

“You’ve seen her - she let you into her room?” Harry asked, sitting up.

“Winky is there now, Harry Potter, sir.”

Well, at least Ginny has somebody, Harry thought, and tried not to be hurt that she had preferred a house-elf to him.

“Then can I count on you to help Mrs. Weasley as much as you can, Dobby?” he asked, watching in an almost morbid fascination as more huge tears collected in Dobby’s large, round eyes.

“Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir! If you is sure you don’t need me, I is going right now!” After Harry shook his head again, he disappeared with a pop.

Neither boy said anything after that, but just having Ron in the room helped. Harry settled down on his bed next to the window, unsurprised that Hedwig was there waiting for him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron lay down on his back on his bed, his hands behind his head. He didn’t close his eyes, just stared at the ceiling. Harry knew that Ron, like himself, was thinking back on all they knew about Colin. He reached up to take hold of Ginny’s pendant again, this time more deliberately. He felt like he could draw strength from it, and, at the same time, hoped that she might hold her own crystal and remember that she had a friend, at least, in him.

He felt someone’s eyes on him, and turned to see Ron watching him curiously. Reddening a little, he dropped the pendant, and reached for Ginny’s picture frame, which he had brought with him for the holidays, instead. He flipped through the pictures until he came to the one of the second task. He knew Colin had taken that one, because Ginny had told him so. Ron, after a surprised look, seemed to realize what he was doing, because he went to his trunk, pulled out a picture album, and brought it over to Harry’s bed. They sat with the picture album between them, and looked at the pictures that their friend had taken. At first, Harry tried to hold his tears back, but then Ron started crying - over a picture of Neville after he had eaten a Canary Cream, of all things - and Harry finally let go.

A long time later, they heard a commotion downstairs. As one, they turned and looked at each other, then rose and left the room. Hermione joined them as they passed Ginny's door, but when Harry gave her a questioning look she shook her head.

"I think she needs some time alone," she said. "She's actually much calmer than I thought she would be - she seems almost determined about something."

The three friends exchanged looks, but all of them shrugged their shoulders. Whatever Ginny was determined about, they would have to find out later. They proceeded on downstairs, to be met with lots of people talking, and a loud barking. Harry actually smiled as he pushed open the door to the living room, seeing, as he had expected, Padfoot, barking at Percy. At any other time, Harry would have laughed at the sight - Percy, after all, had no remembrance of the last time he had met Padfoot, and was trying to keep control of his dignity while a very large, very loud dog jumped and barked at him, for no reason that he could tell. Harry suspected that Sirius was letting out some of his anger and frustration over their failure to prevent the attack by behaving obnoxiously towards Percy. Remus was trying to apologize to Percy and Mrs. Weasley, but his quieter tones couldn't be heard over Padfoot's barking. Finally, Mrs. Weasley said that since Percy had come back from the Ministry to get ready to go to Penelope's, he should go get ready. So, with a perfectly acceptable excuse, Percy could leave the room.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Sirius looked up at Mr. Weasley, his ears perked. Mr. Weasley shook his head.

"Not until Percy actually leaves the house, Sirius," he said. He didn't look terribly sorry, and though Harry wanted to talk to Sirius, he could understand why Mr. Weasley was adamant. Instead, he turned towards Remus, who sighed.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Remus said, sitting down on the sofa and indicating that Harry should sit next to him. When he did, Sirius put his head on his knee and looked up at him sorrowfully. "We just didn't expect it to be Colin. We'd thought of everyone else, even Justin Finch-Fletchley and Brenna O'Keefe, and we did have two Aurors at the Creeveys'. Good men, too. They'll be missed."

Harry bowed his head, thinking of the Creeveys and the two Aurors. He was confused about one thing, though. "I didn't know Brenna was Muggle-born. Actually, I had thought..." he

trailed off. He really hadn't talked to Brenna much, and, as far as he remembered, she hadn't mentioned her family at all.

"All of Brenna's family are Squibs, except for her," George said from where he sat with Fred on the hearthrug. "And you know how Voldemort feels about Squibs."

"Is she all right?" Hermione asked.

"She's fine," Remus said. "Everyone else is, too."

"Were any of the Death Eaters caught?" Ron asked. "Wormtail?"

Sirius growled at the mention of Wormtail, but Remus shook his head.

"All of the Aurors on surveillance had modified Portkeys to activate at the first sign of trouble. Instead of transporting them away, they set off a signal, telling us of the attack. But by the time we got there, everything was basically over. The Death Eaters were Apparating when we got there, and we had enough to do rounding up all the Muggles and giving them Memory Charms to try to pursue. Wormtail was the one who sent the Dark Mark into the air, just before he Apparated, we did see that." Remus had been looking down at Sirius while he talked, but now he raised his head, and looked Harry in the eye. "Harry, you know that we tried our best to protect all of your friends. We knew this attack would come, and it was our most grievous error that we failed to prevent it. This was our fault, not yours. There was nothing you could have done, neither you nor Ginny. We were able to narrow the number of people we had to watch down, because of her vision. She - where is Ginny, by the way?"

"She's in her room," Hermione said. "She's taking this hard, of course, and I think she needed some time alone."

Remus shook his head. "She shouldn't be blaming herself for this. As I said, this is our fault -" He broke off as Percy reentered the room.

“Mum, Dad, I’m off to Penelope’s,” he said. “Professor, it was very nice to see you again, albeit in such tragic circumstances.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Fred try to suppress a snort of laughter. He supposed that he should be laughing, too - Percy at his most pompous was always funny - but he felt as though all the laughter had been sucked out of him. No matter what anyone said, no matter what he tried to tell himself, Colin and his family had been killed because he was Harry’s friend, and for no other reason. He would just have to learn to live with that, somehow, because he had a feeling that it would happen again and again, until they finally defeated Voldemort.

After Percy left, Sirius transformed with a pop, and swept Harry up into a hug. Harry blinked away tears, which was even more difficult because he could see Fred and George just watching him soberly, not a trace of a joke or a grin between them. He was vaguely aware of Mrs. Weasley shoos everyone except him, Sirius, and Remus out of the room, which Harry was grateful for. If he did break down again, he didn’t want it to be in front of the entire Weasley clan.

When Sirius pulled out of the hug, he held Harry at arm’s length and inspected him carefully. “How are you holding up, Harry?” he asked.

“And how is Ginny doing? Have you talked to her? Should she really be alone?” Remus added.

“I’m doing as well as expected, I suppose,” Harry said. “Ginny...well, she wouldn’t let me in to talk to her, but she did talk to Hermione. She would have a better idea, if you want to ask her.”

“In a minute,” Sirius said. “You’re our primary worry, Harry. You really mustn’t blame yourself -”

“And how am I not to do that?” Harry asked, jumping up and striding around the room. “A whole family has died - because of me. You’ve all had your Christmas ruined - because of me. Many, many people live in fear every day - because of me! Tell me how I’m not to blame myself?”

Sirius looked devastated, but Remus spoke up in his calm, quiet voice.

“People live in fear every day, but not because of you, Harry. Because of Voldemort. He’s the one who ordered the Creeveys killed, not you. I know it’s hard, but you have to believe that. It’s the truth, and to think otherwise is to devalue the evil we’re all facing.”

Harry hadn’t thought about it that way before. It did make sense, of course - not a lot of what Remus ever said didn’t make sense - but he knew it would be some time before he could really believe it.

While he was wrapped up in his thoughts, he noticed Sirius give Remus a questioning look, and Remus give him a resigned nod back.

“And if anyone’s ruined Christmas, it’s Voldemort,” Sirius said. “But he hasn’t, I hope. Or that really would be letting him win.”

Harry’s hand went up to grip his pendant again - he didn’t think he could have prevented it if he’d tried. His eyes were drawn to the Weasley family clock, too, where his own hand still sat on “home.”

Sirius and Remus smiled at each other. “We have a Christmas present for you, too.” Sirius said.

Harry physically recoiled from him. How could Sirius think he wanted to receive a Christmas present right now, after everything that had happened? Remus put out a hand to him.

“This isn’t an ordinary Christmas present, Harry,” he said, pulling a package out of his robes. “It was your father’s.”

Harry reached for the package, still not sure that this was the best time. He opened it, and pulled out a pocket watch. It was rather large, and carved in a pattern of Quidditch balls, but he couldn’t see what was so special about it that it had to be given to him right then.

“Open it,” Sirius said, leaning forward.

When Harry did, he saw that the face was quite blank. He looked up at Sirius in confusion.

“This is no ordinary pocket watch, Harry. Lily, Toby, and I made it for James. I did the mechanical work, Lily put more charms than you could possibly imagine into it, and Toby...well, she did something to do with Divination, but she knew I wouldn’t understand if she’d explained it, so she didn’t. We were going to give it to James for his next birthday, but...” He trailed off for a moment. “So, instead we’re giving it to you. Hold it in your hand, and Remus will put the final charm on it to link it to you, so that it only works when you’re holding it.”

Harry did so, much more interested now. He was holding something that his mother had helped make for his father, along with both of their best friends. Remus murmured a charm, and suddenly words appeared on the face of the watch, curling in an ornate script.

“Home, but unhappy,” it said, and Harry almost dropped it.

“How...how did it know?” he asked. It was the second magical clock that indicated that he thought of the Burrow as home, not that he really needed to be told that. He certainly didn’t think of the Dursleys’ that way.

“Well, I don’t know if anyone has ever told you, Harry, but Lily was a genius at Charms, pure and simple. And Toby’s a true Seer, of course. The two of them together did some amazing things. That watch doesn’t read your mind, of course, but it does sense your emotions, at least at the most basic level. The really strong emotions come through the best,” Sirius said, looking down at the words on the face of the watch, his shoulders slumped.

“Expect the unexpected, Harry, that’s all I can tell you,” Remus added. “And don’t think you can hide from it...it will tell you things you might not want to admit to yourself, and definitely not to anyone else.” Harry looked up quickly into Remus’ eyes, which seemed to shine with understanding. Harry resolved not to open the watch anywhere near Ginny, at least not where anyone else could see it.

“One more thing, Harry,” Sirius said. “This watch can be used to send messages. Not long ones, obviously, and only if the person sending it knows the charm. Remus and I know it, and Toby, but no one else. I think we should keep it that way.”

Harry nodded, though he thought it would be fun if Ron and Hermione knew it, too. He understood why Sirius wanted to keep it secret, though; it could be very useful, but only if it was uncompromised. Before he could say anything else, the door burst open, and Hermione dashed through.

“Oh, Harry, come quick,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “I think Ginny’s having a vision, and I don’t know what to do!”

Chapter 22 Persistence of Vision

Harry never knew how he made it up the stairs to Ginny's room. It seemed to him that he was just there, kneeling next to Ron beside her chair. She had placed her crystal ball on her desk, with candles in her usual places around it, and she sat perfectly still, eyes wide open as she gazed into the crystal.

"Harry, what should we do?" Hermione asked. She stood next to him, wringing her hands, her eyes fixed on Ginny. Winky was there, too, her large eyes almost trembling from the effort not to blink.

"There's nothing to do until she comes out of it," Harry said. He didn't take his own eyes off of Ginny, either; he remembered how difficult it was for her after her last vision, and he wanted to be there for her this time, at least. "You said that she was determined about something - I suppose this is it."

"Yes, but I had no idea, Harry, really! I wouldn't have left her..."

"Hermione, Ginny is a Seer," Sirius said, from where he stood near the door. "When she's in trouble, she's going to try to have a vision. It's what they do; I should know."

"And maybe it will be useful," Ron said. He reached out and put one hand on Hermione's arm, and the other on Harry's shoulder. "Especially now that we know what her last one meant. Maybe that will help her."

Harry felt more than heard Hermione give a gasp at that, but he thought that Ron had a point. It was unlikely, after all, that Ginny's new vision wouldn't have something to do with Voldemort - not many things didn't nowadays.

Sure enough, after a few more moments Ginny began to murmur, "No, no, not..." like the last time. This time, though, tears started pouring down her cheeks, even as she continued gazing into the crystal ball. Suddenly, she jerked spasmodically, seemingly tearing her eyes away from the ball. She almost fell off her chair, but Harry and Ron caught her.

"Ginny, what -" eight voices said at once, but Harry overbore them all.

"Stop!" he yelled. "She has to tell it her own way, with no interference from anybody." He still hadn't taken his eyes off of Ginny, and now her own eyes met his and widened in what looked to him like terror.

"No!" she said. "No, I can't, I can't tell anyone!" She tried to twist away, but Harry managed to catch her hands before she did.

"Ginny, you know you have to," he said. "We need to get it down right away, before you lose any of it."

"I can't, I can't," she repeated, and burst into tears. Harry tried to reach out to her, but she drew away from him, so he let Hermione comfort her. He looked around - everyone was either staring at Ginny, or at the floor - anywhere but at each other. *They're all thinking the same thing*, Harry thought. There were only a few things that would upset Ginny that much - she must have seen one of them dead. Suddenly, he had a thought.

"Sirius, could you contact Miss Stuart? Maybe she could help Ginny."

"Remus already left to fetch her," Sirius said. "They should be - ah, yes, I think I hear them now."

Everyone moved out of the way of the door, and Miss Stuart, followed by Remus, came running in. Miss Stuart lost no time in shoosing everyone except Harry out of the room, saying that Ginny needed quiet right now. Then she turned to Harry.

"What did she say? Where are your notes?"

"She won't say anything," Harry said. "She just keeps saying that she can't tell anyone."

"I'm right here, you know," Ginny said, but she didn't raise her head.

"Good, then you can tell us about your vision," Miss Stuart said. She took a small notebook and quill from her pocket, and sat down on Ginny's bed.

"No, I can't," Ginny said. "I'm sorry, I just can't."

"Ginny, remember your reaction to me when I told you of the vision I had of Sirius? You were angry with me, and you had every right to be. I withheld vital information, which could have been helpful to people I cared about. You're doing the same thing, right now."

"I know, but...what's the point of telling, if it's just going to happen anyway? Can visions be changed, or can't they? If I'm a true Seer, won't everything I See come to pass, no matter what we do?"

Miss Stuart sat very still on the bed. "Ginny, we've talked about this before," she said. Harry stared at the two of them, surprised. He certainly hadn't had any talk about this before, with either Miss Stuart or Ginny.

"I know," Ginny said. "But now..." She reached up and grabbed her pendant, but then dropped it as though it had burnt her.

To stop the pain he was feeling from showing in his eyes as he watched Ginny, Harry turned to Miss Stuart. "Can you explain it to me?"

She sighed. "This is the classic paradox question, and it's something that every Seer must come to terms with at some point. It took me much longer than I hope it will take Ginny. If what we See is going to come true no matter what, what's the point of Seeing? I don't believe that the universe could work like that; that it would give someone the power of visions just to taunt them with things they cannot change. But if that's true, is what we See really the future, or just one possible future? The solution, I believe, lies in how vague visions usually are, and how difficult it is to interpret them. They always come true - always - but not always in the ways you think they will. Think of my vision of Sirius - it did come true, but my interpretation was so far off that it was almost as if I didn't have a vision at all."

"What if the vision isn't vague at all?" Ginny asked, very low.

"If you tell me what it is, I can answer that question better," Miss Stuart said.

Ginny let out a long breath. "I suppose I have to...I can't keep...but just to you," she said, fixing her eyes on Miss Stuart. "I don't think I could bear it..."

Harry met Miss Stuart's eyes and nodded. He left the room, but he patted Ginny's shoulder before he left. He felt her flinch at his touch, and that hurt him, because he could almost feel her withdrawing from him and he didn't know why, but he somehow still made it out the door.

He was met with a barrage of Weasleys as soon as he stepped outside.

"She's going to tell Miss Stuart," he said, not meeting anybody's eyes. "She wouldn't tell with me in the room."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, and threw her arms around him. Harry couldn't help but meet Ron's eyes in shock, to see Ron almost grinning at him. Despite everything, despite the worry in his eyes, Hermione could still make Ron grin.

"Erm, Hermione, it's Ginny you'll need to comfort, not me," he said, patting her awkwardly on the back. When she showed no signs of moving any time soon, he turned to Mrs. Weasley. "Maybe we should all go downstairs," he said. "Ginny would hate it if we were all here waiting for her to come out."

"You're quite right, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "All right, everyone, let's give Ginny some space."

They all trooped downstairs, but everyone's thoughts were obviously still up in Ginny's room. To distract them all, and to keep his own mind off of the thought of one of them possibly dying, Harry asked Mr. Weasley more about the attack, but he didn't really have much more to say. None of Harry's other Muggle-born friends had been attacked; in fact, no other attacks had happened at all.

"But is this the beginning, Dad?" Ron asked. "Professor Dumbledore told me that he thought that once things started happening, they would *really* happen. Is that what you think?"

Mr. Weasley sighed. "I agree with Dumbledore, and so do Remus and Sirius." The two of them nodded. "I think we're in for a very bad time, and especially in the next few months. I've owled Dumbledore - I think you all should go back to Hogwarts as soon as possible."

"Just us, or all of the students?" George asked. He and Fred were in back in their old place on the hearth rug.

"The whole school, if they'll go," Mr. Weasley said. "It's the safest place right now."

"But Mr. Weasley, what about Colin and Dennis' funeral?" Hermione asked. "I'm sure we'd all...want to go to that."

Mr. Weasley shook his head. "Even if you don't go back to Hogwarts, attending the funeral would be out of the question. In the first place, it will be a Muggle funeral. We contacted Colin's grandparents, and they're making all of the arrangements. And it would be far too dangerous."

Hermione didn't look convinced, but Ron, who was sitting next to her on the floor, put his hand on her arm. "Think what a target we would be," he said.

"We can have a memorial service for Colin and Dennis when we get back to Hogwarts," George said. "You should suggest it to McGonagall - we could have it in the Common Room."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "That's a good idea, but I think we should open it up to all of the school, not just the Gryffindors."

"What about the Aurors, Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked. "I didn't notice their names in the article."

"Jon and Samwell," Mrs. Weasley said, sighing. "That just made it worse, that it was those two."

"Why?" Harry asked. He wondered what could possibly make it worse.

"They were the two Aurors who watched over Ginny this summer while she was at Miriam's. She became quite friendly with them. I'm sure she feels even more guilty because of that." Tears welled up in Mrs. Weasley's eyes, and her husband put his arm around her. She leaned in gratefully.

Harry gulped. He positively ached for Ginny. He knew what it was like to blame himself, even when he knew he shouldn't, and he knew that's what she was doing right now, but he also knew that nothing anybody said to her could change a thing.

"What about their funerals?" he asked. Ginny would definitely want to go, and of course he would go with her.

"That would be too dangerous as well, Harry," Mr. Weasley began, but just then Ginny and Miss Stuart appeared in the doorway. Ginny looked so pale that Harry thought he could count every freckle, and she looked like she was swallowing convulsively. Mrs. Weasley gave a small cry, and ran to her daughter, hugging her tightly. Ginny let her for a moment, but then resolutely pulled away.

"I'm ready to tell everyone about my vision now," she said.

Remus jumped up and offered Miss Stuart his seat. She took it with a small smile up at him, and drew Ginny down to sit on the overstuffed arm. Ginny started speaking very rapidly, staring straight ahead and not looking at anyone, not even Charlie, who was in her line of vision.

"I saw the Dark Mark over a Muggle house. It was completely destroyed, and there were Muggles standing all around, looking and pointing. I don't think anyone could have survived that kind of destruction." She stopped for a moment, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. "The house was number four, Privet Drive."

There was an uproar. Fred, George, Charlie, and Ron sounded incredulous, Sirius, Remus, and Bill tried to reassure Harry, from what he could hear, and Hermione and Mr. and Mrs.

Weasley tried to comfort Ginny. Since everyone was making such a noise, none of that worked.

Harry just sat there, completely stunned. He didn't take his eyes off of Ginny, but he could still see the way everyone else's eyes kept being drawn to him. He just couldn't believe that the reaction she had had to her vision was because she thought she saw him dead. Ron, or her parents, he could understand, but him? *Don't make this more than it is, Potter*, he told himself. *Obviously, she's worried about the collapse of her world, if The Boy Who Lived died. And you've become friends, at least. That's all you want her to feel, anyway, remember?* It was becoming more and more difficult to convince himself of that. Suddenly, he realized that he couldn't see Ginny's pendant anymore. *What does that mean? Is she too scared to wear it - scare even just to be my friend, now?*

"Miss Stuart," Hermione asked, her voice sounding decidedly shaky. "How inevitable are visions? I mean, is this absolutely going to happen, full stop, no chance of avoiding it?"

Miss Stuart pointedly looked at Ginny, who sighed, obviously not wanting to rehash this subject right now.

"The vision itself is inevitable," she said, now looking down at the ground. "But the interpretation definitely isn't. The Dark Mark will float above a ruined number four, Privet Drive. But that doesn't necessarily mean that...that Harry will die. He might not be there, the Dursleys might not even be there, it might even be years in the future, and the Dursleys might not own the house anymore, and it's just random Muggles that are killed. Though that would be horrible enough," she muttered.

"But," Miss Stuart prompted.

Ginny turned to her abruptly. Harry couldn't see her face, but he could see Miss Stuart nod decisively.

"But," Ginny said after a moment, "One of the things we've been working on is interpreting time in visions, since that could be of the utmost importance. And I think this will happen soon. In the next year, at least." Suddenly, she broke down, hiding her face in her hands. "I'm so sorry, Harry, so sorry." Mrs. Weasley ran to her again and took her in her arms, rocking her back and forth.

"Don't be sorry, Ginny, this isn't your fault," Harry said, but he could tell that she didn't really hear him. He turned to Ron and Hermione, but Hermione just shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, and Ron looked like he was thinking hard about something. Harry didn't know what to say to Ginny, yet again. Instead, he turned to Mr. Weasley. "Someone will have to tell Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, though I doubt they'll believe it," he said.

Mr. Weasley nodded. "Do you think you should be the one to tell them? We could go tomorrow."

Harry shook his head. "They'll be even less likely to believe it if I tell them. Maybe Remus - he's very believable."

Fred gave a snort that sounded like a laugh he tried to turn into a cough. "Good thing they don't know he's a werewolf, huh?" he said. Remus gave him a small smile.

Ron did chuckle. "Yeah, if they reacted the way they did to ton-tongue toffee, imagine how they'd react to a werewolf. You, know, Harry," he said, growing serious again. "There's just one thing to do. You can't go back to the Dursleys, ever. Now we have a good counter-argument for Dumbledore - it's obviously not safe there."

"That's true, Ron," Mr. Weasley said. He stared at his youngest son, a thoughtful look on his face. Ron looked like he was trying not to swell up with pride that his father agreed with him, and failing miserably.

"Of course, you know you're always welcome here, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry looked over at the Weasley family clock, where his hand still rested on 'home'. "I know," he said, swallowing hard. "And I can't ever thank you enough."

Dinner that night, Ron assured Harry much later, was not a usual Weasley Christmas feast. As Harry looked around at all the subdued faces, he felt a hatred for Voldemort that he had never experienced before, not even when Cedric Diggory had been killed next to him. The Weasleys, Hermione, Sirius and Remus were everything to him. They were family and friends. They had taken him into their lives, supporting him and laughing with him, teasing him and loving him. And these people, who had never done anything to hurt Voldemort or his Death Eaters, were in mortal danger, simply because they were that family to Harry. He knew he should walk away. He should distance himself from all of them, because if he didn't, one day or another Voldemort would murder them. Just like in his dream, one by one they would die, and it would all be Harry's fault. He thought that it would serve him right, the loneliness that would come then, because he knew he couldn't do it.

The next day found them back at Hogwarts. It was probably the quickest mobilization of that many students ever, and Harry wondered if Professor Dumbledore had anticipated something like this, and prepared plans in advance. Not all of the students returned - some parents insisted on keeping their children as long as they could, and some refused to send them back at all. None of the students were cheerful, except some of the Slytherins, and the atmosphere was the darkest in Gryffindor Tower. The first thing Hermione did - even before finishing her holiday work - was talk to Professor McGonagall about the memorial ceremony for Colin and Dennis. It was to be held after classes had started again to accommodate the students who wouldn't return until then.

Harry wasn't as involved in the planning as much as he would have liked to be, because Ginny was very involved, and she had been avoiding him ever since Christmas. She didn't study with them in the evenings anymore, and she somehow always managed to walk alone to their sessions with Miss Stuart, which had started up again as soon as they got back to Hogwarts. She even managed this when they had both been eating in the Great Hall right before the session, but since she didn't often eat with them anymore, that wasn't so surprising. They hadn't really talked about anything that had happened over Christmas, and Harry hadn't seen her wear her pendant at all. He didn't know what to do about all this. He certainly didn't want to force her confidence, and he worried that if he said anything to her, he would say too much. But he missed their former camaraderie, and he didn't know what to do to get it back.

After a few days of this, Harry grew so concerned that he actually asked Ron about it. The two of them were sitting with Hermione in the Common Room, studying. Only two weeks ago it would have been the two of them with Hermione and Ginny, but now Ginny was across the room sitting with Dean.

"That's what Ginny always does," Ron said, paging through *Intermediate Transfiguration*, looking for anything to help him turn a shirt into a pair of pants. "Why are cross-clothes switches so difficult? And don't look at me like that, Hermione, have I mentioned a word about copying?" He stopped flipping pages and looked up at Harry. "I tried to talk to her - George even tried to talk to her - and Bill's been sending her owl after owl. It hasn't helped. Whenever there's something wrong, Ginny stops talking to the whole family. Remember her first year...if she thought that she was the one opening the Chamber of Secrets, whyever didn't she talk to someone about it? There was Percy, Fred and George, and me, if she didn't want to go to Mum and Dad. But that's the way Ginny reacts. Trust me on this one, Harry."

Harry wasn't sure he'd have wanted to go to either Percy or Fred and George if he'd been Ginny, but he didn't mention that, and he certainly didn't want to remind Ron that he was the one who had withdrawn from Ginny that year, not the other way around. "But, Ron," he said instead, "I'm not part of the family, and it's really me she's been avoiding."

"You're the person she has to avoid," Hermione said, looking up from her Potions essay. "You're the one who dies in her vision."

"I didn't die in her vision - the Dursleys' house was destroyed! That's completely different."

"You know that, and I know that, but Ginny has to work through it herself," Hermione said. "I'm sure it's much more difficult when it's actually your vision. She actually saw it, and felt all of the emotions that went with it, so it's harder for her to dismiss."

Harry admitted that she had a point, though he thought it interesting how sure she was that he wouldn't die, but he hated just sitting around doing nothing when Ginny was unhappy. Another thing that annoyed him was that it seemed as though every time he looked around, Ginny was with Dean. Not that he had a problem with Dean - he liked him, and he knew that he wouldn't take advantage of Ginny. But he also knew that Dean liked Ginny, enough to want to ask her to the Yule Ball, at the very least. Every time he saw the two of them together, even if they were just studying, it frustrated him. Ginny was supposed to turn to him in times of trouble - he had thought they were friends, and he was the one who had been there for her when they first found out about Colin. But apparently she now wanted to be with someone who was distanced from the situation, and safer.

This frustration led him into some embarrassing situations. One afternoon he and Hermione were working in the Common Room on the Cushioning Charm that was used on brooms. Ron was with Professor Dumbledore, and he'd actually perfected this charm on the first try, which had annoyed Hermione, so she insisted that Harry practice with her. When Harry rolled up his sleeves to get more comfortable, Hermione said, "What's that bracelet you're wearing, Harry? I haven't seen you wear that before."

Harry was about to push his sleeve back down and say that it was nothing, when he noticed that Ginny and Dean, at the next table, had both looked up at Hermione's words. So, instead, he even raised his voice a little. This should show Ginny that, even if she didn't want to be close to him, some people did.

"It's a Christmas present from Cho," he said, holding out his arm so Hermione could look at the bracelet, which was made of red, blue, gold and bronze threads braided in an intricate pattern. He'd been surprised to open it on Christmas - after all, he had just taken Cho to the Yule Ball, they weren't particularly friendly. "Wasn't that nice of her?"

Hermione nodded, but she was studying the bracelet. Suddenly, she started to laugh. "Wizards are really so far out of fashion, aren't they?" she said. "Friendship bracelets went out years ago among Muggles!"

Harry's face burned, and he quickly pushed his sleeve back down his arm. He carefully didn't look at Ginny, and he used all his will-power to make himself not reach for his pendant. As soon afterwards as he could convince Hermione that she had mastered the charm, he grabbed his broomstick and headed out to the Quidditch pitch. He found himself out there a lot, as the days passed. Ron and Hermione spent every available moment together, and he no longer had Ginny to take his mind off of things. Instead, he used flying, doing enough dives and dangerous moves to force himself to concentrate on what he was doing, and to tire himself out enough that he could sleep at night. Otherwise, whenever he closed his eyes, he saw the Dark Mark over the Burrow, or Remus' house, which he'd only seen in pictures, or even Hogwarts. The night he couldn't force that picture out of his head, he crept out of the school, using his Invisibility Cloak, and flew all night. The only person who knew what he was doing was Dobby, who just watched him with his large, sorrowful eyes whenever he left with his broomstick. He supposed that since Dobby knew, Dumbledore did, too, and he assuaged his conscience with that.

One of the first things Harry had done when he got back to Hogwarts was to pay a visit on Hagrid, who had come back for the holidays, and he repeated the visit as often as he could. Hagrid was going back on his mission in the New Year, and, besides, their talks together gave Ron and Hermione time alone. Harry might still be adjusting to his two best friends being involved with each other, but he tried to be as considerate as he could.

Hagrid was the same as ever, and happy to see Harry and Hogwarts again, but Harry could tell that he was really enjoying his mission. He let slip all the things that he shouldn't have - that his mission was to the giants, and that Madam Maxime was still with him, and that he'd seen his mother. Harry couldn't help but grin every time Hagrid said, "I shouldna 'ave told you tha'," but he was happy that Hagrid's mission didn't depend on secrecy, or it would have been doomed from the start.

The day before classes began again, Harry left Hagrid's hut, in an even worse mood than usual. Hagrid would be leaving the next day, Dumbledore had told him that the Dursleys hadn't believed Remus about their danger and refused to move, and he still hadn't been able to talk to Ginny. So when he saw her walking along the edge of the forest, he followed her, determined to have at least some sort of conversation. He was surprised when she actually entered the forest, and even more surprised when he finally caught up with her, and saw that she was talking to a centaur. The centaur galloped away as soon as it saw Harry, and Ginny turned towards him, her hands on her hips.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Was that Firenze? Why are you talking to him, and how did you meet him?"

"What is this, an inquisition? What I do is my business, not yours, and why do you care, anyway?" She kept her eyes on the ground, but she sounded furious.

"Ginny what do you mean? Of course I..." Harry trailed off. Why he couldn't just say "of course I care, we're friends" he didn't know, but the words stuck in his throat. And he was afraid that he'd say too much if he got started. "Why are you avoiding me, Ginny?" he asked

instead. "You know I don't blame you for that vision - how could I? Is it something I said? Or did? If it is, I'm really sorry." He realized that he was babbling, and shut his mouth with a snap. She seemed to have that effect on him.

For the first time in days, Ginny looked him in the eye. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she looked extremely tired. Her anger faded as he watched.

"It's nothing you did, Harry, I just have some things I need to work out for myself. Toby told me that this type of reaction is common with the first vision that affects a Seer deeply. I need to learn to accept that I can't change things, and somehow come to terms with knowing at least part of the future."

Harry thought she sounded like she was just parroting Miss Stuart, but he didn't say so. And since when had she called Miss Stuart by her first name? "I understand that this is a lot for you to handle," he said instead, "but can't I help you work through it? Why do you have to do it all by yourself? I thought we were friends, Ginny." He reached out and put a hand on her arm.

She jerked away. "Of course we're friends, Harry," she said, though she had never sounded less friendly towards him that he could remember. "This is just something I need to do myself. I'm sorry, Harry." She whirled around and started running back to the castle.

Harry just watched her go. He had no idea what else to do.

Chapter 23 *In Memorium*

As bad as the holidays moping around Gryffindor Tower and the Quidditch pitch had been, Harry wasn't looking forward to the start of classes. The memorial ceremony for Colin and Dennis would be on the evening of the first day, Professor Dumbledore would be certain to say something at breakfast, and, as a purely mundane problem, the first day back would include double Potions with the Slytherins. Ron hadn't yet come up with the idea that Draco Malfoy could be behind the attack on the Creeveys, and Harry certainly wasn't going to suggest it to him, but he suspected that Ron would think of it one day. And with Ron, the step from thinking of it and doing something about it was a short one, so Harry was dreading the revelation. But, as he'd found last year, time had a funny way of not behaving itself. All too soon, he was sitting down to breakfast on the first day of classes, Ron and Hermione bickering next to him.

"No one will ever think of that, Hermione," Ron said. "All right, maybe the Ravenclaws, but not everyone is as smart as you are."

"It doesn't take cleverness, Ron, just compassion," Hermione said. "I think it's a brilliant way to keep out the people we...the people who shouldn't be there."

"Well, of course you think it's brilliant - you're the one who thought putting the Full Body Bind on Neville our first year was brilliant!"

Harry hadn't really been listening to the conversation, but he thought he should step in at this point - Hermione looked murderous. Being a couple certainly hadn't stopped their arguing; but then, Harry wouldn't know what he'd do if it had.

"Actually, that was you, Ron," he said, grinning at the look his best friend gave him.

"'Brilliant, but scary,' I believe was the phrase." *Oops*, he thought. Now both of them were glaring at him. "What were you two talking about, anyway? What won't people be smart enough to think of?"

Hermione stopped glaring immediately. "Oh, well, it's the password for the Fat Lady for Colin and Dennis' memorial."

"The Fat Lady? You're not really going to let the whole school know where our common room is, are you?" *How did I not know about this?* he thought. Had they been hiding it from him?

Ron snorted. "Yes, she is, despite all my objections. She managed to convince Ginny, not that that was difficult, and even McGonagall. Oh, and Natalie MacDonald, but she doesn't really count."

Harry must have looked puzzled, because Hermione told him, "She was Dennis' best friend. And she does count, Ron - she's been very helpful, even though she's taken it very hard."

"But, Hermione," Harry said, "how can you let Slytherins into our common room? I don't even like the thought of them knowing where it is, let alone actually seeing it."

Hermione tossed her head, but before she could say anything, Ron snorted again. "You think I haven't told her that?" he said. "And Fred, and George, and half of bloody Gryffindor! I thought Lee was Petrified, the way he just sat there, staring at her. And you know Martin Sandwidge, that sixth-year whose family's been Gryffindors for centuries? He tried to *hex* Hermione, and she was so shocked she didn't even take off any points from him."

"I didn't take any points off because I knew how upset he was," Hermione said. "And, Harry, Professor McGonagall said that she would give Gryffindor fifty points for this." Her eyes pleaded with him, willing him to agree.

Harry wasn't sure what to say. He certainly didn't approve, and even the fifty points didn't really help, but it was obvious that Hermione wasn't listening to opposing opinions.

"I'm really surprised you talked Professor McGonagall into it at all," he said, shaking his head. "She's so...so rigidly Gryffindor, and you know she doesn't like the Slytherins. I don't see why she'd let them just waltz into our common room."

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but before she could, Ginny moved over from where she had been sitting and entered the fray.

"Why shouldn't they? What will it hurt?" she said, her eyes, which had seemed completely lifeless every time Harry had seen her since Christmas, actually alight. "Why do you think they wouldn't mourn Colin and Dennis, just the same as we do?"

"Because they're Slytherins, Ginny!" Harry said, staring at her in shock. It was like asking why a Weasley's hair was red. "They're Death Eaters, or they will be soon."

"Not all of them," she said. "Why are you so prejudiced against them? After all," she lowered her voice, "you know what Professor Snape is doing. Why do you think they're automatically evil just because they're Slytherins?"

Harry just sat there, unable to answer her. Ron, though he sounded like he'd had this conversation with her before, spoke up.

"How can you be so...so lenient, Ginny?" he asked. "After what Malfoy did to you?"

Ginny huffed. "Just because one person in a group does something wrong doesn't mean that all of them will. Oh, I hate this inter-house hatred! It's not just Slytherin, it's Hufflepuff, too - remember last year, with the tournament?" She looked apologetically at Harry, who, he had to admit to himself, reveled in it a bit. It was the kindest look she had given him since Christmas. "Why do we have this horrible separation? Professor McGonagall said that our houses will be our families at Hogwarts, but she didn't say we couldn't have any friends!"

Harry, Ron, and even Hermione just sat and stared in shock at this outburst, but Fred and George, who had sat down near them in the middle of it, stood up and applauded wildly.

"That's our Ginny - protector of the weak and worthless!" Fred said.

"Defender of the puny and pointless!" George said.

"After all, look how she puts up with Harry, here," Fred added.

Ginny jumped up, looking so angry that Fred actually cringed, but all she said was, "Look how I put up with you!" before flouncing away to sit with Dean, Seamus, Lavender and Parvati.

Luckily, just then Professor Dumbledore entered the room and stood before the head table. Fred and George had to sit down, which was a good thing for Harry, because he knew his face was bright red, and he suspected the twins knew it, too.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts," Professor Dumbledore began as soon as the hall quieted enough for him to be heard. "I know all of you have heard the terrible news of the death of the Creevey family. I do not know if all of you have heard the cause. The Creeveys were attacked by Death Eaters, under orders from Voldemort." He paused for a moment until the murmur that always attended Voldemort's name died down. "Now that Voldemort has returned to his full power, we must, unfortunately, expect many such attacks. However, that does not make each one less of a tragedy. We all mourn Colin, Dennis, and their family in our own way, even if we did not know them personally, because they were innocent, and killed solely because Voldemort had the power to do so."

His blue eyes seemed to bore into Harry from across the room, forbidding him to think otherwise. Harry knew it wasn't that simple, though, and even a stern look from Dumbledore wouldn't change that.

"I ask everyone now to stand and raise their glasses in honor of that family."

This time, as the students rose, Harry deliberately looked at the Slytherin table. Ginny was right - the vast majority of the students there stood and raised their glasses, looking just as subdued as the rest of the school. Malfoy and his group didn't, but Harry certainly hadn't expected them to do so. He looked over at Ginny, and found that she was watching him. He nodded slightly at her, and received her lit-from-within smile in return. It was all he could do to tear his eyes away from her as Professor Dumbledore continued.

"In a spirit that they believe that Colin and Dennis would approve, and which I certainly do, Gryffindor House wishes to invite the entire school to their common room tonight, at eight o'clock, for a memorial service for the Creevey family. Your heads of house will tell you how to find it." He leaned forward, emphasizing his last words. "Everyone is welcome."

As Dumbledore sat down, the hall burst into a babble of noise; the other three houses shocked that the Gryffindors would throw open their common room this way, and the Gryffindors looking around to see how everyone else would take it. Apparently, everyone else in Gryffindor had known what Hermione was planning, except Harry.

"Erm...Hermione?" he asked. "When were you planning on asking me if I was all right with this? You seem to have asked everyone else."

She turned to him, surprise written all over her face. "Ginny said you'd be fine with it, that we didn't have to ask you, and I thought..." she trailed off at the look on his face. "I thought she would know," she finally muttered. When Harry still didn't say anything, she jumped up and tugged on his and Ron's arms. "Come on, we'll be late for Potions."

Harry and Ron both protested against this, but Hermione refused to listen to their arguments, so they followed, grumbling. Harry did manage to snag a piece of toast on his way out.

Despite the fact that he must have known it was pointless, Ron continued to argue outside the hall, eventually asking Harry to pull out his pocket watch so he could prove to Hermione that they still had plenty of time.

Harry did, shaking his head at his two best friends. Ron knew that his watch wouldn't actually give the time - he'd been fascinated by it ever since Harry first showed it to him, and he just wanted to see what it would say this time. When Harry held the watch so both he and Ron could see it, they both burst out laughing.

It said, "You should have finished breakfast."

Hermione tutted, but even she couldn't help grinning. Then they all watched as the words swirled and reformed into, "Heartsick and frustrated."

Harry stared at them in shock. He definitely couldn't raise his head to look Ron in the eye, especially when Ron gave a great snort.

"Frustrated, huh?" he asked. "Frustrated. And why, pray tell, are you frustrated, Harry?"

Luckily, since Harry couldn't have answered Ron even if he were threatened with the Cruciatus Curse, Hermione tutted again.

"Of course he's frustrated, we're all frustrated," she said.

Harry did look up at that, just to see the look on Ron's face. As he had expected, it was a look of unholy glee.

"We are?" he asked Hermione.

"Yes, of course we are," she said. "It's extremely frustrating to be stuck here at school, when so much is happening out in the world." She studied Ron's face for a moment, then allowed herself a smirk. "Why, whatever did you think I meant, Ron Weasley?"

While Ron sputtered and tried to explain what exactly he had meant - without success - Harry turned his eyes back to his watch. He thought that 'heartsick' described how he was feeling exactly, no matter how much his friends tried to cheer him up. And, well, yes, he was certainly frustrated, in both senses of the word.

Suddenly, the watch was ripped from his fingers.

"A pocket-watch, Potter? How posh," Draco Malfoy said. He flicked the cover closed. "And Quidditch balls as the pattern - how quaint. Is that really all you think about? Perhaps that's why the Dark Lord is gaining strength." He flicked it back open, and stared at the blank face. "Did the entire Weasley clan band together to buy you this watch? Pity it's broken."

Ron launched himself at Malfoy, but before he could even grab the watch back, Professor Snape's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Malfoy has my watch, professor," Harry said. He felt a horrible sense of déjà vu. Was he doomed to replay this scene over and over until Malfoy finally grew up?

"Indeed?" Snape asked, reaching over and taking the watch from Malfoy. His lip curled as he saw the pattern on the watch. Harry was getting a little tired of everyone denigrating his father's watch. Was there something wrong with liking Quidditch? Snape flipped open the watch and stared at the blank face, looking remarkably like Malfoy had a minute before. "A watch that doesn't work, I see."

"It works just fine for me, professor," Harry said, plucking it from Snape's unresponsive hand. As soon as he touched it, it said, "Barely on time for the worst class at Hogwarts," which made Ron snort, and even Hermione smile. Snape looked less than pleased.

"If you're barely on time for my class, you had better hurry up, Potter," he said, reaching over to turn the watch face towards him. As soon as he and Harry were both touching the watch, the words swirled and reformed into, "Professor Snape still needs to keep his abnormally," and then into, "large nose out of other people's business."

Ron burst into a guffaw that not even a strangled cough afterwards could hide, Hermione giggled nervously, and even Malfoy snickered. Harry would have been amused, but he knew that statement wasn't something the watch would ordinarily say. He craned his neck to see around all the people standing near him, and saw Miss Stuart leaning against a wall, tucking her wand back into a pocket of her robes. Unfortunately, Snape noticed what he was doing, and saw her, too. His sneer intensified, and he took his hand off of the watch and took a step towards her. She stood up straight, crossed her arms over her chest, and raised one eyebrow at him. He gave a snarl, but turned away and strode off down the hall, his black robes billowing behind him.

Miss Stuart then turned to Harry, eyebrow still raised, and he lost it. He howled with laughter, holding on to Ron and Hermione, who were having just as much trouble staying upright. Even Malfoy, though he followed after Snape, could be heard laughing as he walked down the hall. Harry hadn't laughed that much since before the Creeveys died, and he realized that he had needed it. So when he finally calmed down a bit, he walked over to Miss Stuart with a grateful smile on his face.

"Are you certain you won't teach us how to do that?" Ron asked, following Harry over. "Think what fun we could have."

"Would it be worth it?" Miss Stuart asked, looking up at him perfectly seriously.

"No, I suppose not," Ron said, but he gave a huge sigh and shook his head, obviously thinking of all the pranks they could have pulled knowing how to send messages through Harry's watch.

Both Hermione and Miss Stuart looked at him approvingly, but then Miss Stuart turned back to Harry.

"Could I have a word with you sometime today, Harry?" she asked.

"Of course," Harry said. "I'll see you in our afternoon Seer session, anyway."

"Before that," Miss Stuart said. "Would you mind joining me for lunch? Alone," she added, looking significantly at Ron and Hermione.

"Of course," Harry said again, though he had no idea why she wanted to talk to him. He hadn't exactly been making much progress in inducing visions.

Which turned out to be exactly why Miss Stuart wanted to talk to him. After she had served him with sandwiches and pumpkin juice, she started right in, without any preamble.

"Harry, I don't think I'm going to be able to help you induce any visions," she said. "You definitely aren't a true Seer, and none of my techniques for bringing out the talents of a Seer are working for you. I've taught you everything I know about remembering visions after you wake up, and all the usual techniques for recording them. The only other things you could learn are how to tell time and place in your visions, but, since your visions only seem to be of what's happening at that exact moment, you don't need to tell time. And, frankly, I'm not certain that the usual techniques for telling place would help you, since your visions are so different from what a true Seer does."

"All right," Harry said. "That makes sense, I suppose. Would I at least be able to come talk to you - oh, no, Miss Stuart! I couldn't stop coming to your sessions - I want to be there when Ginny...needs me." He felt his cheeks turning red, but he knew he had to say this.

Miss Stuart's eyes looked kindly but firmly at him. "Harry...I had hoped not to have to say this, but that's another reason why I think you should stop coming to the sessions. Your presence is inhibiting Ginny. She hasn't had a vision since Christmas, even though, according to what most Seers experience, she should be having them frequently at this point. She's so nervous about what she might see - not that I blame her - that she's blocking herself. And that's really not good for her development, let alone the fact that she's the only useful Seer we have on our side." Her eyes darkened, and she breathed deeply for a moment. "Having you there only makes it worse," she continued. "She can't help but think about what she saw in her last vision, and what it could mean for you."

"But we don't know what it means for me," Harry said. He stared down at his half-eaten sandwich, but he wasn't really focusing on it. His presence was inhibiting Ginny.

"No, of course we don't," Miss Stuart said. "But Ginny...part of her wants desperately to have another vision, preferably one with you alive and well. On the other hand, part of her doesn't want to risk seeing anything more that shows you in danger."

"As likely as that is," Harry muttered. After all, he only had the most feared dark wizard ever as an enemy.

"Well, yes. So you see her problem."

"But why do you think it will help her if I'm not there? I mean, all of this will still be going through her mind every time she tries to induce a vision." Harry finally raised his eyes from his plate and looked appealingly at Miss Stuart, who sighed.

"I don't, not really," she said. "Remember what I told you in our first session - this is a most imprecise science, really more of an art. It could have turned out that it would help Ginny to have you there - you obviously care a great deal for each other. But that's not the way it's

working out. I think that not having you actually in the room with her will help her focus better, which is why I'm asking you to do this."

"Of course, I'll do anything for Ginny," Harry said, staring at Miss Stuart. Did everybody know that he fancied Ginny? First Cho, now this. At this rate, Voldemort would know before Ginny did.

Miss Stuart looked relieved. "Good," she said. "Oh, and one more thing, Harry. Could you not mention this to anyone, and especially not Ginny herself? She's very sensitive about her visions, quite understandably, and I don't want anything else to block her at this point in her training."

Of course Harry agreed to that, too. He finished his lunch and headed off to Care of Magical Creatures, thinking hard. If so many people knew how he felt about Ginny, it really did seem silly not to tell her. If she was going to be in even more danger because of how he felt about her, she deserved to know. Of course, she was going through a lot right now, what with her problems with her Seer training and Colin, and he would have to think further about it. Especially since just the thought of actually telling her made him shiver with anticipation. What if...what if he had lost his chance with her?

The talk with Miss Stuart was the last time that Harry could think of himself and his problems that day. His afternoon teachers - Professor Sprout and Fleur - treated the Gryffindors as though they were made of glass, and it had the effect of reminding all of them what was going to happen that evening. Their collective mood became worse and worse, so that by the time they returned to prepare for the memorial service, no one was really talking. Herbology had run late, so that even though the fifth-years had rushed through dinner, by the time they made it up to the common room, there wasn't much left to be done. Harry just had time to change into his dress robes before eight o'clock.

When he came back down to the common room, he found Hermione and Ginny standing near the portrait hole, looking worried.

"So, what is the password, anyway?" he asked, causing Hermione actually to wring her hands.

"It's 'I'm here to mourn Colin and Dennis,'" she said.

Harry stared at her. "You're kidding, right? Ron's right this time, Hermione, no one's going to get that."

Ginny glared at him and put her arm around Hermione. "Or any reasonable variation of that," she said. "We've given the Fat Lady permission to accept anything she thinks is sincere."

"Professor McGonagall gave her permission, but...Harry, do you really think it's too difficult?"

Harry was just about to tell her that, yes, he thought it was much too difficult, when the portrait hole opened. As they watched, three young Hufflepuffs climbed through the portrait hole and looked around apprehensively. Someone behind Harry gave a strangled cry and brushed past him, throwing herself on one of the Hufflepuffs and bursting into tears when the other two gathered round as well.

"Oh, I'm glad Natalie has someone," Ginny said, speaking so softly that Harry had to lean towards her to hear it. He watched as the Hufflepuffs drew Natalie away from the entrance and towards a sofa by the fire. The crowd of Gryffindors parted to let them pass, then turned as one to watch the portrait hole again.

The next person to climb through was Cho Chang, followed by Brenna, Padma Patil, and several other Ravenclaws. Cho looked around the crowded room, but made her way directly over to Harry's group. He thought she was coming for him, but, instead, she put her hands on Ginny's shoulders and said, "Can we talk?"

Ginny tried to draw away, but as Harry had discovered, Cho was much stronger than she looked. "There's nothing to talk about," Ginny said after a moment, when it became clear that Cho wasn't going to let her go. "You're...you're mistaken in your assumption."

"And so are you," Cho said, her eyes boring into Ginny's. Ginny gave a gasp, and her eyes widened in surprise. Then she nodded, and followed Cho to a secluded set of chairs.

Harry didn't have any time to think about what had just happened, because the rest of the Ravenclaws crowded round him, offering sympathy and, in some cases, hugs. He still wasn't used to being hugged - the only people to have ever hugged him, that he could remember, were Hermione, Ginny, Sirius and Mrs. Weasley. As first Padma and Brenna, and then several Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw girls that he barely knew hugged him and murmured words of sympathy in his ear, he realized he did feel better, every time one of them did it.

Without meaning to, Harry and Hermione had seemed to form a welcoming committee of sorts, so that all the people who came through the portrait hole came to them first. Harry wasn't surprised that Ron didn't join them - he had made his objections to the opening of their common room quite plain - and when the first Slytherins made their way through the entrance, he was glad. He could almost feel Ron's glare from where he was standing with the twins, and he was happy the poor Slytherins, a quartet of third years who looked very apprehensive, didn't have to face that the very first thing.

It felt like no time at all before almost the entire school was crowded into the Gryffindor common room. Tiny Professor Flitwick was beaming approvingly at Ginny's fairy charms, which Hermione had asked her to reproduce in the common room. Hermione herself was talking to Professor Vector, her Arithmancy teacher, in one corner, looking nervous. Miss Stuart had entered, looked around, obviously for Ginny, and smiled when she saw her talking to Cho. Professor Dumbledore seemed to have found a place surrounded by Fred and Angelina, George and Brenna, Lee and Alicia, and Katie and Theo. He wasn't quite smiling, but his eyes twinkled as he looked out over the assembled throng. Several house-elves, including Winky and Dobby, sat on the floor in a corner. Even Professor Snape was there, actually without his sneer for once, though he wasn't mingling; in fact, all of the Slytherins were sitting together on some of the extra chairs that had been conjured up.

All of the Slytherins who were there, that is. Harry couldn't help but notice that Draco Malfoy and his little coterie were nowhere to be seen. He wasn't at all surprised - he doubted that Malfoy could say that he mourned anybody convincingly, let alone two Muggle-born wizards and their family. Not even to see the Gryffindor common room.

After it became apparent that everyone who was coming was there, Professor McGonagall and Hermione went to stand near the fireplace. In almost no time, everyone in the room fell silent.

"We are gathered here this evening to mourn," Professor McGonagall said. "We're mourning many things. The end of a time of peace, the end of a time of blissful ignorance, the end of innocence." Harry watched her lock eyes with Professor Dumbledore for a moment before she continued. "But, most importantly, we're mourning people. We're mourning two young wizards who brought more than they could possibly have known to our community - their eager embracing of all the wizarding world has to offer brought new understanding to many of us." Harry heard someone begin to cry at this, and turned to see tears streaming down Natalie's face again. "I'm very proud to have had Colin and Dennis in my House," Professor McGonagall continued. "They embodied the true Gryffindor spirit - courage, a keen sense of justice, and a love of life in all its forms."

She paused for a moment, and Harry wasn't surprised to see many Gryffindors staring at the floor, as though they didn't want anyone to see their eyes. He wasn't ashamed that his own eyes were burning - he distinctly remembered Colin and Dennis trying to fix Malfoy's enchanted buttons during the Triwizard Tournament, because they believed in him, and they knew that what Malfoy had done was wrong. They hadn't succeeded, but for some reason that thought made him even more sad.

"We're also mourning a family," Professor McGonagall continued. "A family that included Muggles and wizards, for Colin and Dennis were just as much wizards as anyone here." She glared at the Slytherin contingent for a moment, and then let her eyes sweep the rest of the room. Several of the students couldn't hold her gaze, and not all of them were Slytherins. "A family who supported our friends even though they had a talent that the rest couldn't share. This is what family should be. This is what *our* family should be - we shouldn't let petty rivalries and feuds come between us now, because we're facing a threat greater than all of us. Colin and Dennis were a part of our family - our wizarding family - that we will greatly miss. We're all a little weaker, a little less, because they are not with us anymore." She stopped abruptly, and Harry could see the tears in her eyes. He had never heard Professor McGonagall this passionate about anything before.

Hermione then stepped forward. "I didn't know Colin or Dennis as well as some people here did," she said, her eyes finding first Natalie and then Ginny in the crowd. "But I knew them well enough to call them both friends. They would come to me for help with classwork -" Several students giggled at this, letting out pent up tension, and Hermione smiled before she continued. "But not just for that. They truly wanted to learn - to become a real part of this world that they were thrust into so suddenly. I know what that's like, and we helped each other with the constant struggle for acceptance. I will miss Dennis' straightforward happiness at everything in life, and Colin's quieter, but no less sincere, excitement in the wizarding world. I'll even miss Colin's camera."

At that point, the flash of a camera interrupted her, and everyone laughed. Dean, who had taken the picture, smiled sheepishly.

"I know I can't ever take Colin's place," he said. "But Gryffindor needs a photographer." Harry saw Ginny smile at him from her seat across the room, which made him wish, for an insane moment, that he had his own camera.

After Hermione finished, many other students and teachers stood and spoke of Colin and Dennis. Harry learned more about the two of them than he ever had known before: that Dennis had been quite good at Potions, which Snape shocked everybody by saying, that Colin had been a willing tester for some of Fred and George's wilder schemes, and that they both disliked butterbeer and had tried to persuade Madam Rosmerta to stock root beer in the Three Broomsticks. He knew he should stand up and say something - these boys had died because of him, after all - but he couldn't. He knew he'd break down, thinking of what their deaths meant and of all the deaths that would most likely come. He was glad when Ron stood up and exhibited his photo album, pointing out some of Colin's best pictures.

After Ron sat down again, Ginny stood. She had moved over to talk to Natalie, and she seemed to have been trying to encourage the younger girl to say something, but Natalie just shook her head. As soon as Ginny stood, the room, which was still buzzing from some of Ron's comments, quieted.

"Colin was one of my best friends," she began. Harry noticed that she wasn't looking at anybody, instead keeping her eyes fixed on the wall above everybody's heads. "And, even so, I never really understood him. I never understood his passion for life, his love for absolutely everything that life had to offer him, even Potions classes." She glanced down at Snape for a moment and gave him a small smile, before fixing her eyes back in the same place. "I never really understood his feeling of belonging in this world that, as Hermione put it, he was thrust into. Up until recently, I had problems believing that I belonged here, even with all of the...advantages I have. Colin never had that problem, though - he felt at home everywhere and with everybody. His favorite piece of writing, which I also didn't understand, I think I do better now. It's from John Donne's Meditation XVII."

When Ginny said this, some of the students, realizing that she was about to recite, shifted in their seats a little. Ginny seemed to realize this, for she smiled and removed her eyes from the wall. To Harry's surprise, she locked eyes with him, making him feel as though her gaze bored into his soul as she began to speak.

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

Ginny's clear, sweet voice faded away into quiet. Everyone seemed to feel the weight of those words, but none more than Harry. This poet had known exactly how he felt, and Ginny was telling him, not only that she knew how he felt, but that Colin had known as well. Colin, whom Harry had always dismissed, in the back of his mind, as just a kid, a tag-along, and, which he hadn't realized before, not worthy of Ginny. Now *he* felt not worthy of her, because Colin certainly had been.

Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet, breaking the long silence. "Thank you, Miss Weasley," he said. "I think we all needed to hear that." He looked around the crowded room at the collection of students from all four houses, his eyes twinkling again. But before he could speak, he was interrupted by the sounds of an altercation outside the portrait hole. Professor McGonagall strode over to the entrance and opened it to reveal Argus Filch, looking even wilder than usual. Filch hurriedly climbed through the portrait hole, his eyes searching for Professor Dumbledore.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir," he said, his chest heaving. "I just received news...it's Hagrid, sir. He's dead."

Chapter 24 A Thinly Drawn Line

No matter if you're born

To play the king or pawn,

For the line is thinly drawn

'Tween joy and sorrow.

So my fantasy

Becomes reality,

And I must be what I must be

And face tomorrow.

- from Flowers Never Bend with the Rainfall by Paul Simon

Everyone started talking at once. Over the pandemonium, Harry heard one of the Weasley twins yell, "I don't believe it! I don't believe it!", and, beside him, Neville was muttering, "Please tell me it's not true, Harry, not Hagrid." Harry barely heard him, though. He barely heard anything. Everyone seemed to be moving in slow-motion, and his head felt funny. He looked around for Ron and Hermione, and watched them turn to each other and just crumple. All he could think about, of all stupid things, was the time Hagrid had put the Engorgement Charm on his pumpkins, when he wasn't supposed to be doing any magic at all. Even Hermione hadn't been too critical, just because she liked Hagrid so much, and Ginny... Harry looked around, suddenly worried about Ginny, and was just in time to see her sneak up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Maybe it was because of the uproar that nobody noticed her going, or even him following.

Harry was prepared to unlock her door magically this time, but it wasn't necessary. Ginny didn't even seem to hear him enter the room; she was stretched out on her bed, her face buried in a pillow, sobbing brokenly. Harry didn't know what to do. All he knew was that he had to be there, had to try to comfort her, even if she ended up hating him afterwards. He sat down on the bed next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. She stiffened for a moment, but then continued crying, not lifting her head from the pillow, so he allowed himself to savor the feel of her hair under his hand. He knew he shouldn't be enjoying that in the middle of tragedy, but he was a fifteen-year-old boy, and he couldn't help it. So, he didn't say anything, just kept stroking her hair and enjoying the way his fingers looked entangled with it, while trying not to think about Hagrid.

By the time Ginny's sobs finally quieted, Harry was wondering why no one had come looking for them yet. She turned over onto her side, facing away from him.

"Maybe you're right, Hermione," she said, though he could barely hear her, even as quiet as the room was. "Maybe Divination is completely pointless."

“Why do you say that?” he asked. Her huge start and gasp made him almost smile, but he was genuinely confused. How did she get to Divination from Hagrid’s death?

“What are you doing here, Harry?” Ginny asked, sitting up and staring at him in shock. “I...thought you were Hermione.” She rolled her eyes before dropping them to her lap, and that did make him smile. Obviously, she had thought he was Hermione.

“I had to be here, Ginny,” he said. Her gaze flew up to his again, and he paused, hovering around saying something else, something...she didn’t need to hear right now, upset as she was. He dragged his eyes away from hers, and repeated, “Why do you say Divination is completely pointless?”

She continued to stare at him for a long moment - he could feel her gaze, but he steadfastly refused to meet it. *Too complicated*, he told himself. *This is not a good time*. He repeated that mantra several times before she spoke again.

“Because I didn’t See this,” she said, rubbing roughly at her eyes. “What good is this talent if it doesn’t show me anything useful?”

“Ginny, you can’t See everything. You’re not omniscient - not even Dumbledore’s omniscient, except in Hogwarts.”

She gave a watery giggle, but she didn’t look convinced. “I should at least be able to See what’s important to me, especially something this big. Hagrid...he helped me through my first year...I don’t think I would have held out as long as I did if he hadn’t been there...” Tears started coursing down her cheeks again, but she didn’t seem to notice. “And I didn’t See anything! I’ve had this block, Toby says, and she says...she says it’s because I’m so caught up in everything. I take things personally, she says, and that’s not good for a Seer.”

She turned to look at him again, and when he saw her huge brown eyes drowning in tears, he couldn’t help it, he had to reach out to her. He didn’t do what he wanted to, which was to take her in his arms, but he reached out both hands and grasped her shoulders.

“Ginny, I don’t know how to help you - if Miss Stuart doesn’t, I certainly don’t - but I’m here for you. I...don’t want you to pull away from everyone the way you’ve been doing. You wouldn’t be...well, you wouldn’t be *Ginny* if you became some Seeress in a high tower somewhere, completely removed from the world.”

She stared at him, barely seeming to breathe. Then, she caught her breath and deliberately removed his hands from her shoulders.

“You’re right, Harry,” she said, still holding his hands in hers. “You’re absolutely right, but I need to find a balance. I need to find out how to be a Seer and still be a person, too, and that’s going to take time and...distance. Can you...can you understand that?”

Harry looked down at his hands, held in hers. Was she really asking what he thought she was, what he hoped she was? He took a deep breath and looked into her eyes. Those eyes. Warm, deep brown, they had an almost ageless quality to them that he suspected came from her experience with Tom Riddle. Ron’s eyes certainly didn’t have that quality. Anxious, worried eyes. Was she worried that he wouldn’t understand? That he wouldn’t...wouldn’t wait for her? Well, that would be an easy question to answer. He would wait for her as long as she needed,

and for whatever she could give him. Whether that was just friendship, or...his thoughts trailed off as he lost himself in her eyes. Her loving eyes. How could he not have seen that before? Love shone from her eyes, from every part of her, actually, love for him. He couldn't believe it. It had been here all the time, and he'd been blind, so blind. And his heart reached out to take it, his soul leapt to meet hers. He wanted nothing more than to hold her, to seal that love, but she had said that she needed distance, so distance was what he would give her. He wanted to give her the world, a little time and distance shouldn't be so hard. Somewhere deep inside his brain, the part of him that couldn't believe how mushily he was thinking, was saying that this was just a teenage love, something that he would feel for many girls before he found the perfect one. But something else told him that he'd already found her...this girl who drove him crazy in every way possible. He turned his hands in hers so that he could hold hers, and looked back up into her eyes.

"I understand," he said. "Take as long as you need, Ginny." As relief filled her eyes, joining the love there, he leaned over and kissed her cheek, savoring the way she leaned into the kiss, the way her hands convulsively clutched his. This would have to last them for quite awhile, he knew, but it would. Now that he knew she loved him, he could handle anything. He stood up and walked to the door, turning back just before he opened it. She was watching him.

"Should I send Hermione to you?" he asked, though he hadn't known what he was going to say before he'd opened his mouth. He had just wanted to hear her voice again.

"Please," was all she said, so he nodded, and left the room.

When he came back downstairs, he found a solely Gryffindor common room again. The Gryffindors had quieted down quite a bit, but the main emotion still on everyone's faces was shock. Harry saw Natalie sitting on the floor, surrounded by most of the first through third years, looking like she couldn't quite handle this latest tragedy. She and Dennis had practically haunted Hagrid's hut for a year and a half - Dennis' first Hogwarts experience had been falling into the lake and playing with the giant squid, and he had embraced every strange and wondrous beast Hagrid introduced him to after that, dragging Natalie with him. Fred and Angelina were talking quietly with Lee and Alicia, and none of them seemed to notice Harry sneaking down the girls' dormitory stairs. He couldn't see George anywhere, but just when he thought he hadn't been spotted, he felt someone's eyes on him, and turned his head to look straight at Ron.

Ron was sitting in one of the overstuffed armchairs in front of the fire, and his head was turned at an awkward angle that Harry couldn't understand at first. Then he realized that Hermione was sitting on Ron's lap, her head against his chest. As he made his way over to them, he felt his heart lift a tiny bit. Voldemort might be able to strike seemingly at will, and his own personal life might be on hold for the moment, but at least Ron and Hermione had found each other, and were happy.

As he got closer, Harry realized that Hermione was asleep. He drew his wand and waved another chair over, so he could talk to Ron quietly without waking her up. He would wake her up eventually, because Ginny wanted her, but Ron was looking at him with an intense, big-brotherly look, and Hermione didn't need to hear the conversation that he knew was coming.

Sure enough, as soon as Harry sat down, Ron whispered, "What were you two doing up there?"

Harry sighed. Really, what did Ron think they were doing up there? Shagging?

“She’s really upset, Ron,” he said. “I was trying to comfort her. She blames herself, you know.”

“For Hagrid? But why?” Ron spoke louder than he intended, and Hermione stirred for a moment, but she settled back against his chest with a soft murmur.

“She feels that she should have seen it, so we could have prevented it,” Harry said, trying not to show how strange he felt having a conversation with one of his best friends while the other one slept on his lap.

Ron shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way. It’s not something that can be controlled like that.”

“I know that, and you know that,” Harry said. He felt like someone had said that to him recently, and then remembered that it was Hermione, and about almost the same subject. “I think Ginny knows it, too,” he continued after a moment. “But she needs to come to terms with it, and it’s difficult.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. He dropped his eyes to the top of Hermione’s head, took as deep a breath as he could with her sitting on him, and said, “Listen, Harry, I want you to know I’m okay with it. It was weird at first, but now it just seems right, you know? And I think it’ll be good for Ginny to have you to turn to.”

Harry’s jaw dropped, but Ron still hadn’t lifted his eyes, so he couldn’t see it. That was absolutely the last thing he’d expected his friend to say, and he wasn’t sure how to answer him, especially since he’d gotten it all wrong.

“Erm...do you mean Ginny and me being friends?” he finally said.

Ron snorted, which made Hermione stir again and then burrow closer to his chest in her sleep. Harry had to look away at the expression of pure enjoyment on Ron’s face. That was something he didn’t need to see. After a moment, Ron seemed to remember what he was about to say.

“You’re more than friends, Harry, please don’t lie to me,” he said, finally looking up and staring intensely at Harry.

This shocked Harry even more than the previous statement. He’d expected some joking protest, not this serious appeal. They didn’t talk about their friendship much, of course; it was just there, like air, part of everything they did. But Harry knew that Ron wouldn’t lie to him, just as Ron knew that he wouldn’t. Especially about something like this.

“I’m not,” he said. Seeing doubt in Ron’s face, he hurried on, “I’d definitely like to be more than friends with Ginny, but...” he trailed off. This had to be the most awkward conversation he’d ever had.

“But what?” Ron asked. He didn’t seem to be finding it awkward in the slightest. “She fancies you, everyone knows that. She always has.” He must have seen Harry’s look of pure shock, because he said, “Oh, come on, Harry, even you must be able to see that.”

Harry raised his eyebrows at Ron, and looked pointedly at Hermione. Ron's ears turned red, but before he could say anything, Harry noticed that Hermione's lips were curled upwards in a smile, and shook his head at him.

"How long have you been awake, Hermione?" he asked.

"Long enough," she said, opening her eyes and smiling at him.

"I still don't understand," Ron said, craning his neck to see over Hermione's raised head. "If Ginny fancies you, and you," he paused for a moment, swallowed, and went on, "fancy her, what's the problem?"

Harry just looked at him, then moved his eyes to Hermione, and back to Ron, who had the grace to blush.

Hermione, though, actually answered him. "In case you hadn't noticed, Ron, both Ginny and Harry are going through some difficult times right now, and yes, there could be problems. Besides, it's really none of your business, is it?"

Hearing Hermione lecture Ron while she was still sitting on his lap capped a completely surreal conversation for Harry.

"Yes, it is," Ron said, evidently not having that problem. "Harry's my best friend, and Ginny's my sister. Whose business is it if it's not mine?"

"Theirs," Hermione said firmly.

"Would you two mind not talking about me as if I'm not here?" Harry said, though he couldn't help but smile at them. Then his smile faltered, as he remembered exactly why Hermione was sitting on Ron's lap. Reaching Ginny had been his first priority, and he'd been able to push his horror to the background for awhile, but it was forcing its way out. He simply couldn't imagine a world without Hagrid's large, comforting presence. Hagrid had been Harry's first contact with the wizarding world, and, thinking back on it, he realized just how lucky he had been. Hagrid had been on his side from the very beginning, and he had needed that, coming from the Dursleys'. It might not have been that way - imagine if Snape had been the one to fetch him!

"Hagrid..." he said, but then didn't know what else he really wanted to say.

Hermione seemed to see some of his thoughts in his face, and, though she didn't speak, her eyes shone with understanding and support. As she watched him, she sat up and half-slid off of Ron's lap onto the arm of the chair. He looked disappointed, even when she took his hand and leaned against his arm. Harry watched them, and thought about all the time the three of them had spent in Hagrid's hut...watching Norbert hatch, helping Ron recover from the slug-belching incident, helping Hagrid in his defense of Buckbeak, pulling Hagrid out of his Rita Skeeter depression.

"How...how did it happen?" he finally asked.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said. "You won't believe this - it wasn't even You-Know-Who."

“What?”

“You know what Hagrid was doing, right?” Ron asked, leaning forward. “Well, apparently, the giants didn’t like him leaving, even though they knew he was coming back, and they didn’t like what they heard about the Creeveys. We don’t know exactly what happened, of course, but according to them, they challenged Hagrid to give them assurances that they wouldn’t be attacked by Voldemort, that Professor Dumbledore would put the same emphasis on saving their lives as he would Hogwarts students.” He stopped, because Harry and Hermione were both staring at him. “What?”

“You said Voldemort,” Harry said.

“I know,” Ron said, scowling a bit. “I’ve been saying it to myself six times every morning before breakfast. Anyway, Hagrid couldn’t give them those assurances, because you know how truthful he is. And apparently giant society is even more different from ours than we had thought, because they killed Hagrid over it.”

“But...that makes no sense,” Harry said.

Ron ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head. “I know. I need to talk to Professor Dumbledore about it, maybe there’s more to it than what Filch said. But that’s what we know right now.”

“What about Hagrid’s mother?” Hermione asked. She was staring into the fire, but didn’t seem to see the merrily leaping flames. “I hadn’t thought about her before, but isn’t she with the giants? Why would she allow them to kill her son?”

Ron just shook his head again, and all three of them sat in silence for awhile. Somehow, Harry decided, the thought that Hagrid died for nothing made it even worse.

Finally, he broke the silence. “Hermione, Ginny would like to see you before you go to bed,” he said. “And, speaking of...”

“Yeah,” Ron said, looking around at the now mostly empty common room. “Suppose we might as well.”

Harry said good-night to Hermione, not surprised that she hugged him before she let him go upstairs, and then left the two of them to say their good-nights privately. As he entered his dormitory to the sounds of Seamus’ snores, knowing he had a sleepless night ahead of him, he couldn’t help but think of Ginny up in her bed, hopefully asleep.

The next morning, he wished he’d put a Stupefy spell on himself - anything so that he’d have had some sleep, at least. At breakfast, the Great Hall seemed as though a black cloud hung over it, so much so that Harry actually looked up at the ceiling to see if one really did. He was shocked to see that the sun shone brightly - he could have sworn that the day was overcast and brooding. Everyone else seemed to be having just as hard a time keeping their eyes open as he was, and he could just imagine how annoyed the teachers were going to be in their classes, though he supposed they’d be a little understanding. Even most of the Slytherins seemed subdued – at least, all the ones he’d noticed at the Creeveys’ memorial service the night

before. He suspected that Malfoy was exulting right now, but he deliberately didn't look at him. Instead, he looked around for Ginny, and saw her, shockingly enough, sitting with the other girls of her year. The four of them had been a tight-knit group since Ginny's first year, and he suspected that even if it hadn't been for the Tom Riddle's diary, Ginny would have had a hard time fitting in with them. For the first time, he thought about how much that must have hurt her, especially after Ron practically abandoned her. No wonder she had been an easy target for Voldemort.

Now, though, the four girls surrounded Ginny, two on either side of her and two across the table. Harry wondered why, and wished that he could talk to Ginny, so that he could ask her. Then he had to laugh at himself, because, really, he wished that he could talk to Ginny, just to talk to her.

Ron and Hermione were sitting across from him, obviously too tired even to argue. Harry knew that Ron hadn't slept last night either; he hadn't heard any snores at all coming from Ron's bed throughout his own sleepless night. Hermione had her head down on Ron's shoulder, not even pretending to try to eat. From the looks on both their faces, Harry could tell that they were still trying to comprehend a world without Hagrid. He deliberately kept his eyes away from the head table, so he wouldn't have to see Hagrid's empty seat, and he hadn't seen either Ron or Hermione look there once, either.

He kept his eyes away from the head table until he heard a loud bark, that is. Then, he couldn't help but stare; he knew that bark. Sure enough, there was Padfoot, being led into the Great Hall by Remus, to the wonderment of the assembled students. A muted murmur of pleasure went up around the hall; Remus had been the favorite teacher of many students, even after it was revealed that he was a werewolf.

Harry, Ron and Hermione didn't really need the glance they exchanged as they rose as one and made their way towards the head table. Harry looked back at Ginny, and found her watching them. He made a motion with his head, indicating that she should come with them. She smiled sadly at him, but shook her head. Harry could see the shock and excitement on her dorm-mates faces at this exchange, but that didn't stop him from smiling back at her before he turned away and followed Ron and Hermione.

When they reached Remus, Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He wasn't even sure what he wanted to ask Remus, because he knew that what he most wanted - to demand that Remus tell him that it wasn't true, that Hagrid wasn't dead - was impossible. Luckily, because neither Ron nor Hermione seemed able to speak, either, something bumped into Harry's hand. Looking down, he saw Sirius, ears flat and tail down, his eyes looking as sad as Harry had ever seen them. Harry returned the look, but he still couldn't force any words out of his mouth. Hermione, seemingly heedless to what the rest of the students in the Great Hall must be thinking, threw herself down on her knees beside Sirius, and wrapped her arms around him. Harry could hear some of the disjointed phrases she muttered into Sirius' ear as she petted him, "...not your fault...we know you tried your hardest...nothing you could have done...Harry knows..." When he heard that phrase, Harry tried to pretend he wasn't listening, turning his attention to Ron and Remus. It wasn't that he didn't agree with Hermione - there wasn't anything any of them could have done, and he certainly didn't want Sirius, or Remus, or Ron, for that matter, blaming themselves for Hagrid's death, but he knew he couldn't actually say that right now. He was grateful that Hermione could.

Remus seemed to realize that neither Ron nor Harry was ready to talk yet, because he answered their most likely question without them needing to ask it.

“I’m going to be taking over the groundskeeper job for now,” he said, smiling his small smile at them. Remus’ smile was usually slightly sad, but now there was an added helplessness to it. It did become more genuine, though, when Ron snorted.

“You’re the best teacher we’ve ever had,” he said, though he looked around to make sure neither Professor McGonagall nor Professor Moody was around to hear. He obviously didn’t care that Snape was sitting only two seats away, his usual sneer in full force. “It’s bloody ridiculous to say you’ll be the groundskeeper.”

“Do keep your voice down, Mr. Weasley,” Snape said, speaking out of the corner of his mouth. “We don’t want other people thinking about how ‘bloody ridiculous’ it is. No, don’t look at me,” he added, his sneer intensifying. “One would think Dumbledore had taught you nothing at all.”

Ron’s ears turned red, but he didn’t say anything to Snape. Instead, he turned back to Remus and, in a much softer tone, said, “Well, it *is* bloody ridiculous.”

“Hopefully, not too many people will think so,” Remus said. “We thought that it wouldn’t be too surprising, since it’s common knowledge that I need a job.” His eyes twinkled as Ron and Harry looked indignant. “So, if you need me, I’ll be living in Hagrid’s hut, though of course I can never truly replace him.” His eyes softened, and he looked out across the hall at all the mourning students.

Harry felt Sirius bump his head into his hand again, and looked down. Remus must have noticed, because he gave a soft chuckle.

“And of course Padfoot will be with me,” he said, though he really couldn’t have seen what Sirius was doing over the head table. “We both hope all three of you will visit as often as you can. And Ginny...where is Ginny, by the way? Oh, I see her now.” He waved at her, so obviously not questioning why she wasn’t with the three of them, that Harry suspected Miss Stuart had told him about Ginny’s problems.

The rest of the day, and, in fact, the next few weeks, seemed to Harry to be insanity mixed with bouts of normalcy. Hagrid’s memorial service had to be held in the Great Hall, despite Ron’s lobbying of Professor Dumbledore to have it out on the Quidditch pitch. Harry agreed with him - it just seemed right to have a service for Hagrid outdoors, and, besides, Hagrid had loved Quidditch. But Dumbledore said that it was just too dangerous. The whole school and much of Hogsmeade, to say nothing of the many alumni who wanted to come, would be just too big and attractive a target for Voldemort. Harry made it through the service itself by somehow turning off his emotions - he just didn’t allow himself to feel what he was feeling. He couldn’t say anything, though, just like at the Creeveys’, because he knew that if he did, he would break down. So he sat there, listening, taking everything in, and cursing Voldemort in his heart. He knew that, even though Voldemort wasn’t the direct cause of Hagrid’s death, he was certainly the indirect cause, and this was just one more reason why he had to be stopped. As though Harry needed another reason.

Hagrid’s memorial service was one thing that seemed to Harry to be just surreal, but there were others. Seeing Miss Stuart and Snape speaking - civilly! - in the hall, watching Remus

go about Hagrid's groundskeeping duties (though he used more magic to do them than Hagrid ever had), receiving care packages almost every other day from Mrs. Weasley, who seemed to be working off her grief by cooking and baking, seeing Filch sitting at Remus' kitchen table crying one day when he went down to visit, seeing Ginny in the halls between classes, surrounded by the girls of her year. Not that he wasn't happy that she'd finally made friends with them, but it just reinforced how much he missed her.

Normalcy was going to his classes, where the teachers all managed to act completely as usual, studying for the O.W.L.s like any fifth-year, practicing Quidditch at all hours and in all conditions (Angelina seemed to be taking a page from Oliver's book lately), listening to Ron and Hermione's now good-natured bickering, and watching Ginny. Harry felt like he'd always been watching Ginny, even though, when he thought back on it, it had only been a couple of months since he'd realized how he felt about her. It felt normal, too, to exchange glances with her in the halls, even though they'd never really done that before. It was wonderful to know how she felt about him, and to know that she knew how he felt about her, even though they couldn't do anything about it yet.

It was an odd existence. Harry tried several times to talk to Remus and Sirius, to try to get them to tell him what was going on in the war. For it was a war now, if it hadn't been before, even though the Ministry, including Percy, still wasn't admitting it. Harry suspected that Remus wanted to tell him more than he did, but Sirius refused, and Remus bowed to Harry's godfather's wishes. So Harry had to live a normal life, even with all of the insanity going on, not because he could, but because he wasn't allowed to do anything else.

Chapter 25 Fear and Laughter

“Hermione, when’s Ginny’s birthday?” Harry asked. He, Hermione, and Neville were sitting in the library, supposedly studying. They were scheduled for an afternoon double Potions, but Professor McGonagall had told the fifth years as they were finishing lunch that the lesson was cancelled. When Hermione had asked why, all she had said was that Professor Snape was currently unable to teach the class. She’d then told Ron to report to Professor Dumbledore, instead. Hermione had decided to go to the library to study, and had encouraged the rest of them to go with her, but only Harry and Neville took her up on her offer.

She and Neville were both working on an essay for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Figg, having pushed the fifth years unmercifully for months to catch them up, had turned to the whys of defense instead of the hows. They’d been writing a series of essays: “Why is a vampire easier to kill than a werewolf?”, “Why are Hogwarts students taught hexes and curses, if they can only be used for harm?”, “Why is Lord Voldemort more feared than Grindelwald was?”, “Why is a werewolf considered a beast, when he/she is a human for most of the time?”, and then discussing them in class. The essays hadn’t been marked, but Professor Figg wrote long comments on each of them, and Harry thought that he’d never before taken so much away from a class. The essay assigned this week was “Why is *Avada Kedavra* an Unforgivable Curse?”, and Harry had already finished his. It was probably the first time he had ever finished a piece of homework before Hermione, though he suspected that her essay would be much better thought-out and researched than his. His had come from the heart - he wasn’t sure that Professor Figg would like it, but he knew that he’d had to write it. Neville, too, looked like he wasn’t over-analyzing what he was writing - his quill fairly flew across the parchment, and his face was set.

Harry had his History of Magic book open in front of him - he was trying to memorize the key dates in the Forty Year Goblin War, which had somehow occurred in the middle of Queen Victoria’s reign without the Muggle world noticing - but he couldn’t concentrate. He kept thinking about Professor Snape, and why he wasn’t able to teach today. The possibilities were endless, and most of them were horrid. Hopefully, Ron would ask Professor Dumbledore what was going on, but when Harry had mentioned it to him, he hadn’t sounded enthusiastic. Harry tried not to compare the situation to Hagrid’s, who had left for a routine mission and never come back. Not that Harry would mourn Snape the way he was mourning Hagrid, but, objectively, he knew that losing Snape would probably hurt the war effort even more than losing Hagrid had done. So, to take his mind off it, he thought about Ginny. He did this a lot nowadays, since he now felt that he was justified, knowing that she also felt the way he did. And sometimes, it was the only way he could keep himself from becoming completely morbid. Valentine’s Day was coming up, and he wondered if he should get her something. He probably shouldn’t - that wouldn’t be giving her distance - but he wanted to. Maybe something anonymous? Or maybe he should wait for her birthday. That’s when he realized that he had no idea when her birthday was.

Hermione looked up from her essay, her eyes not quite focused. Sometimes, she immersed herself so deeply in her studies that it took her a few moments to come back to earth. Harry waited patiently.

“Ginny’s birthday?” Hermione said finally. “Why do you want to know, Harry?”

Harry rolled his eyes. "Because I want to get her a gift - why else would I want to know?" He exchanged a glance with Neville, who was having a hard time not laughing. Neville rarely laughed at Hermione - he didn't want to offend her in any way.

Hermione rolled her eyes back at Harry. She lowered her voice even further than her usual library whisper. "It's just that Ginny doesn't like her birthday. She doesn't want people to know when it is."

"Whyever not?" Neville asked.

"If I told you that, you'd know when it was," Hermione said.

"But we won't tell anyone, Hermione," Harry said. "And how am I supposed to get her a present if I don't know when it is?" Beside him, Neville nodded enthusiastically. He might be dating Hannah Abbot, but he and Ginny were friends, too.

Hermione sighed. "Oh, all right. But don't spread it around. It's February 14th."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. Here he was, wondering if it would be more appropriate to get Ginny something for Valentine's Day or her birthday, and they were the same day.

"Why wouldn't she like that?" Neville asked.

Hermione sighed again. "It's like being born on Christmas - it's a holiday for everyone else, too, so it's not your special day. Not that she had to worry about that much when she was younger, but now..." She trailed off, and didn't look at Harry.

Well, that answered that. If Hermione expected him to give Ginny something for Valentine's Day, then Ginny did, too. So he would, and he'd even give her something else for her birthday, too.

"Wait a minute, Hermione," he said, suddenly remembering. "All that stuff that happened on Valentine's Day second year - the singing valentine, and Malfoy making fun of her, and...and the diary - that all happened on her *birthday*?"

Hermione nodded, a small smile playing about her lips. Harry just shook his head. He'd just have to make up for it.

The three of them returned to their studies, and actually did quite a lot of work before Harry and Hermione had to go to their Auror training. Luckily, Hannah Abbott had entered the library some time before with some of her Hufflepuff friends, and Neville had naturally waved them over to join the Gryffindors' table. Hermione looked put out at first, but Harry whispered, "Remember what Ginny said about the Houses," to her, and, though she gave him an ironic look, she subsided. So Neville didn't care when they left without him.

When they reached the classroom, they were thrilled to see Remus there with Professor Moody. That is, until he told them that what they'd be doing was facing a boggart.

"But we've already done that, Professor Lupin," Brenna said. Her face, normally pale, had turned almost translucent. George, who was sitting next to her, reached over and took her hand under the desk. Harry was probably the only one who could see this, because of where he sat. Brenna didn't look noticeably happier, but she didn't hyperventilate, either, which Harry had thought she was going to do a moment before.

“Ah,” Remus said, his eyes looking over all of the students. “But facing a boggart is something that is good to do every few years, if not more often. Does anyone have an idea why that might be?”

To nobody’s surprise, Hermione spoke up. They had long ago done away with the formality of raising hands; since the class was so small, and the subject matter so serious, there was never any chance of speaking out of turn. Even Fred and George usually behaved themselves. Professor Moody encouraged questions, and never minded going off on tangents in class. Anyone who thought that he’d lose the track of his lesson, though, found out quickly enough that he didn’t. It might not be until the next class, but he always found it again. Now, all Hermione had to do was speak, especially because no one else seemed talkative.

“Because our greatest fears will change as we grow and mature,” she said.

“Very good,” Remus said. He looked like he was struggling not to say something else, and that made Harry smile, even though he really didn’t like the idea of facing another boggart. Professor Moody had told the students at the beginning of the year that they would not be receiving or losing house points for anything that happened in his class; he wanted everyone to be concentrating on what they were learning, and why they were learning it, and not their petty house rivalries. In view of his order to Harry back at the Burrow - to live a normal life - Harry thought that that was ironic, but he hadn’t called him on it. Apparently, Remus didn’t agree with Moody, who took advantage of his silence.

“Not only as you grow,” he said, his voice even more gravely than usual. “Your boggart will change throughout your life, as your experiences change you. Some people, it is true, have the same boggart for much of their lives, but most people do not. This lesson is two-fold. You each need to face your greatest fear, because once you know what it is, you can try to work through that knowledge. But, in addition, what your greatest fear is can tell you a lot about yourself, and self-knowledge is very important.”

“This will be slightly different from when you faced a boggart before,” Remus said. “We have two boggarts, one in each of these cupboards.” He pointed to two large cupboards on one wall of the room. “Each of you will enter the cupboard and face your boggart, without anyone else seeing it. After that, you’ll have the chance to discuss it with Alastor or myself, with a Silence Charm around us. You are free to tell your friends what your boggart was or not, as you choose.” He paused and looked around to make certain everyone understood him, then smiled. “We’ll start with the eldest. Theo and Fred?”

As Theo and Fred stood and walked over to the cupboards, Harry turned towards Ginny. She had told him that Remus had not allowed her to face a boggart in class, either. The second years had been given the chance to face one, even though they would not be on their exam, which had surprised Harry when Ginny told him, but now he thought he understood why Remus had done it. Ginny had been angry with Remus, and had stayed after class to demand the chance to face the boggart, and Remus had let her. As they both expected, her boggart had been Tom Riddle, emerging from his diary. Ginny wouldn’t tell Harry how she made Riddle look funny - in fact, she’d said that it hadn’t really been funny at all, and that Remus had given her twenty points for a highly original use of *Riddikulus*. But she still wouldn’t tell him what it was.

When Harry turned towards her, though, he saw that she wasn’t thinking of her own boggart at all; she was too concerned with Hermione, who looked like she might faint at any moment. Harry jumped up and started towards her, but he was very surprised. He couldn’t understand

why she would be this afraid of her boggart now - surely, she was beyond being afraid of what Professor McGonagall thinks of her marks. Ron evidently felt the same way. He knelt down next to Hermione, grasping her upper arms and looking into her eyes.

"You know you're more than your marks, Hermione, don't you?" he said, not seeming to care about his audience. "You don't need to be frightened of that old cat."

Hermione opened her mouth, probably to reprimand Ron for calling her favorite teacher an 'old cat', but then she just shook her head, looking incredulous. "You really believed me that my boggart was Professor McGonagall?"

"Well, of course I did," Ron said. "You told me it was. Why shouldn't I believe you?"

Hermione gave an almost bitter laugh, which would have surprised Harry if he weren't having such a hard time wrapping his mind around the fact that Hermione had apparently lied to them. To *them*.

"Remus told me that I was a terrible liar, and that I shouldn't do it much," she said, glancing over at their teacher. Everyone else's gazes followed hers, to see Remus smiling gently at them. Harry suspected that this conversation was the reason why he had had the eldest students face their boggarts first.

"So...what was your boggart, Hermione?" Ron asked. He stood up, and turned away from her. Harry took one look at her face, and then fixed his eyes on Ron's back. He didn't feel right, seeing that look of intense love and need.

"I had listened to you, you know," Hermione said, not taking her eyes off of Ron, "when you told me that it would be about my marks. I didn't agree with you, but I did think that it might be Professor Dumbledore telling me that I'd lost all my magical ability. That would have been horrible, but I knew I could laugh at it - after all, if I was facing a boggart, I had to have *some* magical ability. But when I climbed into the trunk, I saw a corpse. I thought, well, that's creepy, but I'm not really squeamish, so I just need to think of something to make it funny. I didn't know what, right at that moment, but I knew I'd think of something."

Harry could feel Ginny nodding next to him, and he wondered again just what her boggart had been, but Hermione continued speaking.

"Before I could, though, the corpse turned over - you know, the way boggarts move and change without a real reason - and it was Harry."

Ginny gasped, Ron's back stiffened even more than it had been before, and Harry turned his face away. He couldn't believe it. Hermione had faced that in their third year - she had been fourteen, and she'd already been thinking about one of her best friends' death as the worst thing that could happen to her. He thought of Remus telling him that having his greatest fear be fear itself was intelligent and mature, and wondered what Remus would have told Hermione. George and Brenna were listening, too, Harry could see now, and both of them looked like they understood Hermione's boggart quite well. But then, they had been older when Remus taught at Hogwarts the first time, so maybe their boggarts hadn't been mummies or banshees, either. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Theo come out of the cupboard. He looked a bit shocked, and his hair stood on end, as though he'd been running his hands through it, but he also looked satisfied. Apparently, Harry thought as he watched Theo and Professor Moody start talking behind the Silence Charm, he had vanquished his boggart.

Hermione was still talking, though, almost as though, now that she had started, she wanted to tell them everything.

"I still knew it was a boggart - Harry was outside the trunk, alive and well, I knew it - and I still thought I could handle it. I had no idea how, but I thought I could. But then..." She trailed off for a moment, looking anxiously at Ron's back, before taking a deep breath and hurrying on. "Then, it turned into *you*, and you were dead - there was blood pooling near your head - blood everywhere - and I felt you saying, "Hermione, you left us. You left us." I knew you were dead, but you were still saying it, and I knew that there wasn't anything that could make this funny, and I dropped my wand, and -"

She was still talking, but Harry couldn't hear her anymore, because Ron had turned around suddenly, and taken her in his arms. Her face was crushed against his chest, one of his hands holding her close, while the other one stroked her hair, and Harry, Ginny, George and Brenna turned away as one. To keep himself from thinking about what was happening behind him, Harry turned his mind back to their boggart exam in third year. Hermione had come bursting out of the trunk, white-faced and screaming. She hadn't been able to tell them what she'd seen at first, but then she'd burst out with the story of Professor McGonagall telling her that she'd failed everything. Thinking back on it, Harry wondered how he'd ever believed her. Even Hermione wasn't that focused on classes and marks. And then, he remembered, later that night, Sirius had shown up and taken Ron down the passageway under the Whomping Willow, breaking Ron's leg in the process. He couldn't imagine what Hermione had been going through that night. She must have thought her boggart was coming true.

Suddenly, Fred came out of his cupboard, his hair wet with sweat, and his face so white, his freckles looked almost black. Something about the way he looked told Harry that he had vanquished his boggart, but he didn't have the satisfied look Theo did. Remus motioned him over, and Fred went, though, once they were behind the Silence Charm, they appeared to be arguing.

Harry saw Ginny risking a glance over her shoulder and then turning around, so he assumed it was safe to do so, too. When he did, he saw Hermione sitting down in her chair again, and Ron perched on the desk in front of her. Ginny walked around to join her brother, making him move over so she had room. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked down at Hermione seriously.

"You said that Remus told you you were a terrible liar," she said, glancing quickly over her shoulder to see Remus still talking to Fred behind the Silence Charm. Fred looked much calmer. "Ron told me that Remus gave you partial credit for the boggart, because you told him what it was. How did he know you were lying, when Harry and Ron didn't?"

Hermione said, "He just did," but she didn't seem to want to meet Ginny in the eye. Just like everyone else, though, she knew that Ginny wouldn't give up, so she finally said, "He said that Sirius' boggart had been similar." She said it in a very low voice, and didn't look at Harry, but he heard her, anyway.

"What was Sirius' boggart?" he asked, moving around to perch on the desk on Ron's other side.

Hermione sighed, but she answered him. "It was James and Remus, dead. He told Remus that there wasn't anything in the world that could make that funny. And he was right, because there just isn't."

“There has to be.”

All four of their heads’ whipped around to see who spoke. They saw Brenna standing beside George, as though she had just jumped up from her chair.

“There just has to,” she said, her cheeks going from white to red and back again. “I can’t go through that again, I just can’t.”

“You’ll be fine,” George said, standing up beside her. He took her by the upper arms and turned her so she had to look at him. “Anything can be made funny - haven’t you learned that from spending time with me?” He grinned at her as though he expected her to grin back, but she didn’t.

“How?” she shot at him, surprising Harry. Brenna was always so quiet and shy that it shocked him to see her going stare for stare with George. “How can I make the death of my whole family funny? Especially when they die without ever forgiving me? Or what if it’s you this time? Tell me, George, tell me how to make that funny.”

When she mentioned the possibility that her boggart could be him dead, George looked like someone had punched him in the stomach. He recovered gamely, though. “You know I don’t mind that you’re magical, so I can’t die without forgiving you, anyway.” He saw that she still wasn’t smiling, and his own smile faltered. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I just know that anything can be funny. That’s how I live my life, Brenna, that there’s humor in everything. I don’t know any other way to live. I’m sorry.” He took his hands from her arms, as though expecting her to reject him because of what he’d said.

Instead, she reached out and took his hands in hers. “Don’t be,” she said. “I think it’s wonderful.”

They stood there like that, holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes, until Remus came up behind Brenna and cleared his throat. Then, they split apart hastily, Brenna blushing furiously, and George grinning unrepentantly. Remus didn’t seem to mind, just indicating that it was their turns to face their boggarts, but Fred, who stood beside him, had a grin on his face that told Harry that George was in for some intense, Weasley-style, teasing later on. George didn’t seem to notice. With a last look at each other, he and Brenna turned away and walked to their respective cupboards.

“Well, it looks like there’s something good old George isn’t telling his loving family,” Ron said. Fred just laughed, patted both Ron and Ginny on their heads, and left the room. The two youngest Weasleys just stared after him for a moment.

“Would you expect him to?” Ginny finally said, first shooting an annoyed glance at the door through which Fred had just left, and then at Ron before leaning over close to Hermione and speaking softly to her. She obviously didn’t want the boys to hear, so Harry turned to Ron and spoke equally softly.

“Can you believe Hermione actually lied to us, and we believed her?” he asked.

“Can you believe her boggart was us dead?” Ron asked in return. “Who would have thought?”

Harry just shook his head. He couldn’t understand how Ron could consistently undervalue his importance to his friends and family, and he knew that he couldn’t say the things Ron needed

to hear to convince him otherwise. Especially not with Hermione and Ginny right there, and Remus and Professor Moody just across the room. Luckily, just then, Brenna opened the door to her cupboard and stepped out.

Six heads whipped around to stare at her. The only emotion showing on her face was complete and utter shock, which Harry shared. She had sounded convinced that she wouldn't be able to handle her boggart before she'd entered the cupboard, and here she was, the quickest to dispatch it. Remus recovered from his own surprise and motioned her over to him.

As they began speaking behind the Silence Charm, Hermione said, "How did she do it? How did she make the death of her family, or George, funny?"

"How do you know that was her boggart?" Harry asked.

Hermione just raised her eyebrows at him, but Ginny said, "What else would it be? It was obviously something she was expecting, or she wouldn't have handled it so quickly."

Harry shrugged. He wasn't completely convinced, but he was willing to go along with them. "All right," he said, "then how did she do it?" He looked at Ginny, and found that she was looking back at him.

"Easy, isn't it?" Ron said, making everybody else stare at him. Hermione, in particular, gazed at him wide-eyed, and it was to her that he seemed to be primarily speaking. "It's a boggart. That means that your mind is what controls it. That's how *Riddikulus* works, isn't it? You change the boggart into something else, or at least change it enough to make it funny."

"Yes, but Ron, how do you make the death of someone you care about funny?" Hermione asked.

"Think about it, Hermione," Ron said. "It doesn't really even have to be funny - you just have to laugh at it. That's what defeats a boggart - laughter."

She looked up at him, obviously not understanding, but just as obviously determined to figure this out.

"All right," she said. "I need to laugh at it, but it doesn't necessarily have to be because it's funny..." She trailed off and closed her eyes, thinking furiously.

"Why don't you tell Hermione about your boggart in your second year, Ginny?" Remus said from behind Harry, making him jump. Looking around, he saw that Brenna had left, and that George was now talking to Professor Moody.

Ginny looked around, too, and seemed about to protest, but then shrugged and turned back to Hermione.

"My boggart was Tom Riddle, of course, coming out of the diary," she said.

Hermione nodded. "How did you defeat it?"

Ginny smiled at her. "Remember who I told you Tom looked like?"

Hermione gasped. "So, you..."

"I convinced myself that it wasn't Tom," Ginny said, as though that was the simplest thing imaginable. "And it was such a relief that I laughed."

"*Relieved* laughter," Hermione said. She took a deep breath and let it out. "All right," She added, turning to Remus. "I'm ready now."

Remus smiled at her and led her over to the cupboard. Professor Moody was waiting for Ron, too, which left just Harry and Ginny waiting.

Harry didn't know what to say to her, so he sat down in the chair that Hermione had just left and fixed his eyes on the desk in front of him. He certainly remembered who looked like Tom Riddle - he did. So, Ginny had forced the boggart to turn into him, and that had made her laugh in relief? In her second year, when he was still ignoring her, and, he realized suddenly, not really treating her the way he treated the rest of the Weasleys? She'd been so happy to see him that she'd laughed? Well, he supposed it had been the other way around - she'd been so happy not to see Tom anymore that she'd laughed. That, he could understand. He stole a look at her, and saw her watching him, a small smile on her face.

"Ginny," he said, but then he had no idea what to say. She seemed to understand, and leaned close to him, so she could whisper in his ear.

"Thank you for saving my life in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry," she said, and kissed his cheek.

Harry felt himself blushing and stiffening with shock and delight. He watched Hermione come out of her cupboard, looking satisfied, but he didn't really see her. Kissing Ginny's cheek in her bedroom on the night of the Creeveys' memorial service had been wonderful, but it hadn't prepared him for what he felt now. He could still feel the spot where her lips had been - he thought that he'd probably be able to feel it forever.

"Harry?" Remus said, and Harry looked up, surprised to see him standing so close. "Ready now, Harry?"

He stood up too quickly, and almost fell over the desk in front of him, but he was steadied by Hermione, who stood next to him. Once he was all right, she smiled at him and patted his arm.

"You'll be fine, Harry," she said, causing him to roll his eyes at her. She had been the worried one, and now she was concerned about him? He'd already vanquished his boggart - he hadn't even had trouble with it in the middle of the third task of the Triwizard Tournament, and that was less than a year ago. Hermione shook her head and continued to smile, but she didn't say anything else.

Harry nodded at Remus, and followed him over to the cupboard. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron and Ginny with their arms around each other, while Professor Moody looked on with what Harry would have thought, if he didn't know Moody better, was a benevolent eye. He wasn't sure just who was comforting whom in that hug, but he didn't have much time to think about it, because Remus opened the cupboard door.

Darkness. *Right, of course*, he thought. He should have expected that. He drew his wand, murmured, "*Lumos*," and looked around for the dementor.

Instead, he saw Ron, lying on the ground, without a mark on him, but obviously dead. *Avada Kedavra*. Next to him was Hermione, with that same look of arrested movement, of sudden death. They had their arms around each other, much like Ron and Ginny had had outside the cupboard. *This is a boggart*, he told himself. *It's not real, Ron and Hermione are still alive, just outside the door, waiting for you. This too shall pass.*

Then, he saw the Burrow. It was utterly destroyed, a burnt-out shell, and the Dark Mark floated above it. *I didn't know that a boggart could be this elaborate*, he thought, but that was his last coherent thought for some time. Instead, his mind grappled with the fact that everywhere he looked, there were dead Weasleys. Mr. Weasley lay by the front door, and Mrs. Weasley hung over the sill of the kitchen window, her hair trailing in the dirt below, which sickened Harry so much that he had to look away...to see Fred and George lying under a tree, Bill half-way down the drive, and Charlie half in and half out of a flower bed near the kitchen window. Close to him, Harry saw Remus, who had obviously died trying to protect Mrs. Weasley, and, suddenly, he realized that Sirius lay near Ron and Hermione, his wand dropped from his outstretched hand. Harry picked it up, turning it over and over in his hands, as he stared around at the death and carnage. All these people, this whole family, dead because of him. His family...

Except Ginny. *Where is she?* he thought, frantically looking around from one dead Weasley to the next. She definitely wasn't there, but she had to be. She wouldn't be anywhere else, not with the Burrow attacked...

Suddenly, the front door opened. Harry had thought the Burrow completely lifeless, but now someone was coming through the doorway, and Harry looked up, hoping against hope to see Ginny.

And he did see her, but she was being carried in Voldemort's arms.

She was alive, he saw immediately, and he watched her chest rise and fall with each breath as though he could will it to keep moving. And her eyes were open, though her head hung limply. *That's not right*, part of his mind said, but the rest of it was too busy paying attention to Voldemort.

"You didn't think you could really escape me, did you, Harry?" Voldemort said, his now-human eyes somehow managing to glow red. "I said that I would kill everyone who was close to you first, so you could see all their deaths, and then come after you. But you made it easy - you came to me. I have to wonder why...but I suspect that *she* might have something to do with it." He looked down at Ginny, still lying in his arms. She didn't look back, didn't move, just lay there.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, Harry's mind said, but Voldemort wasn't done yet.

"I can't say I blame you, Harry," he said. "She is luscious, isn't she?" He bent his head to nuzzle at Ginny's neck, while she just lay there and took it...and something snapped in Harry's head.

Ginny wouldn't just lie there, she *would not*, and so she didn't. She sat up and slapped Voldemort, a resounding smack that whipped his head around, and caused him to drop her. She landed on her feet, like a cat, put her hands on her hips, and glared at Voldemort, looking so like her mother that, as improbable as it all was, Harry had to laugh.

Once he started laughing, he kept going - it felt so good, so necessary, and suddenly all of the dead Weasleys, Hermione, Remus and Sirius disappeared. The Burrow followed a moment later, then Voldemort, until all that was left was Ginny, calmly watching Harry laugh. Then she winked, and disappeared. Harry quickly left the cupboard, wiping his eyes, to find Remus waiting for him.

“Well done, Harry,” he said, motioning him over to one side of the room. They both sat down, and Remus invoked the Silence Charm around them.

“I take it this boggart was not a dementor,” he said, then chuckling a bit at Harry’s surprised face. “You were in there a full fifteen minutes, Harry,” he added. “I had to threaten Ron and Hermione with detentions before they would leave.”

“No...not a dementor,” Harry said after a moment. He was remembering Remus’ lifeless face in the cupboard, and contrasting it with the one across from him now, the one that was concerned, and caring, and *alive*. And it would stay that way, if Harry could have anything to say about it. He wasn’t sure, though, if he wanted to tell Remus what he’d seen - should he burden him with even more than he already was? But then, he remembered Sirius’ boggart, and how understanding Remus had looked when Hermione told about hers.

“It was you,” he said abruptly. “And Sirius, and Hermione, and all the Weasleys. You were dead, and the Burrow was destroyed, and...” he trailed off, not wanting to explain about Ginny. “What does this say about me?” he asked, instead.

“What do you mean, Harry?”

“Well, Professor Moody said that what our greatest fears are says a lot about us, and you said back in my third year that having my greatest fear be fear itself showed my maturity. Does that mean I’m less mature now than I was two years ago?”

“Do you think that Hermione was immature to have the boggart she described?” Remus asked, his head slightly tilted as he studied Harry.

“No, of course not.”

“Then why do you think that you are?”

Harry thought about that for a moment. “It just feels like I’m going backwards,” he said finally.

Remus shook his head. “I think you’re going forwards,” he said, his voice firm, and his eyes fixed on Harry’s. “In your third year, you were more focused on yourself, on your own problems, which was completely understandable, considering the life you had lived. Now, you’re opening up and letting more people in. That’s always a risk, of course, because the more people you allow to be important to you, the easier it is for you to be hurt. But it is necessary, Harry, to live a fulfilling life.”

Harry nodded, but he couldn’t help thinking that, however true that was in general, his case was a bit different. The people he let in were automatically put into grave danger, just because he did.

“How did Ginny do?” he asked, not wanting to talk about his boggart anymore.

Remus' expression, already serious, turned grave.

"She hasn't come out yet," he said. "I sent a house-elf to fetch Toby -" He broke off as Miss Stuart entered the room and walked over to them. Remus immediately dropped the Silence Charm.

"Hello, Harry," Miss Stuart said. "I hope your boggart wasn't too difficult."

Somehow, Harry managed to smile at her and say, "Not too difficult," but all his thoughts were now on the other cupboard, where Ginny was facing her own boggart.

"Harry," Miss Stuart said, breaking into his concentration, "I know what Ginny's boggart will be."

That got his attention. As soon as he fixed his eyes on her, Miss Stuart continued.

"Seers' boggarts are always similar, once they begin to have visions," she said. "And especially right after the Seer has, as she sees it, failed, which Ginny feels she has."

Harry thought about that. He thought about Colin and Dennis, and Hagrid. About the Dark Mark over Privet Drive, and the Burrow. About Ginny, immediately assuming that her vision meant that he was dead.

"You want me to leave," he said.

"I know this is difficult for you, Harry," Remus began, but Miss Stuart put her hand on his arm, and he stopped.

"Please, Harry," she said. "I believe it's what Ginny would want."

And because Harry believed it, too, he nodded his head, turned, and left the room.

Chapter 26 Interlude

Harry stood in the Owlery window and watched Hedwig fly away through a leaden sky. It was just a week before Valentine's Day, and he had finally decided what to give Ginny for her birthday, but his mind wasn't really on that. Instead, he imagined himself on his Firebolt, following Hedwig as she delivered his order to Hogsmeade. Since the return of the majority of the students and Hagrid's death, sneaking out of his dormitory to fly at night had become nearly impossible. Besides, Angelina's Quidditch practices were actually keeping his insomnia away. He'd have to figure out a way to thank her, because he was finally getting some sleep. He had a feeling that her secret admirer that sent her flowers daily, and that Fred insisted wasn't him, was actually Dobby.

Of course, even intense amounts of Quidditch couldn't keep away his nightmares. Since the lesson on boggarts, they'd become even more disturbing - almost always involving one or more Weasleys dead or dying, often Hermione, Sirius and Remus, too, and usually the Burrow destroyed. To Harry's extreme relief, only a few of the dreams had involved Ginny. Apparently, the memory of her appearance in his boggart experience was a talisman for his mind.

Harry let his gaze drop from the sky, but that only made him feel worse, because it immediately fell upon Remus. He was clearing the snow off of the Quidditch pitch, in preparation for the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff match later that evening. From what Harry could see, Remus almost seemed to be enjoying himself; the snow flew about, making odd shapes and weird patterns at the behest of Remus' wand. But that didn't help Harry to think anything other than that this was completely and utterly wrong. Remus was a teacher; he shouldn't be doing groundskeeper work, he should be doing what he loved to do.

On the other hand, maybe that snow wasn't flying about in fun, maybe it was frustration. There had been another attack on a Muggle house the week before, and once again, the Aurors had arrived there just in time to see a Death Eater shoot the Dark Mark into the air and Disapparate. The Muggle who lived in the house hadn't been known to Harry, but Ron had come back from a session with Dumbledore and told him that it had been a Muggle politician. Why Voldemort was interfering in Muggle politics, not even Dumbledore knew, but Ron's guess was that he was just trying to create as much chaos as he could.

Harry leaned against the window, feeling the cold from outside seep through his bones. He didn't move away - he felt he deserved it - but he did reach up to grasp Ginny's crystal pendant. Since the boggart lesson, Harry had taken to wearing it outside of his robes, for easy access. Somehow, just touching it reminded him of her...her hair, spread out over her black robes as she gazed into her crystal ball, the way she'd looked in her nightdress, the wink boggart-Ginny had given him in the cupboard, the way her hands had desperately clutched his when she had asked him to wait for her, and, most especially, the kiss she'd given him. He didn't mind the odd looks he sometimes received when people noticed the pendant, or even Draco Malfoy's taunts.

"Harry."

Harry looked up to see Hermione standing in the Owlery door. He wasn't surprised - he'd been gone much longer than necessary just to post an owl. He didn't say anything, but his

eyes tracked her as she made her way over to stand next to him and look out the window. He saw her gaze fix on Remus.

"It doesn't seem right, somehow, does it?" she said.

Harry just shook his head. There were far too many ways that it was wrong for him to be able to put it into words. When he didn't answer, Hermione looked up at him sharply.

"Harry, you're not still blaming yourself, are you?" she asked, then let out an indignant sound. "You are! Harry, when are you going to learn that everything is not your fault?"

"I know it's not my fault, Hermione," he said, "but that doesn't mean that I can't blame myself."

Her nose wrinkled as she tried to understand, but she finally gave up. "That makes no sense," she said.

"I know," he said. He leaned his forehead against the window pane and watched his breath fog up the glass. He could hear the rufflings and cooings of the owls. "Hermione, you know how everyone keeps telling me that I have to let people decide for themselves if they want to be close to me or not? That I have to accept that I can't make the decisions for everybody?" He still wasn't looking at her, but he heard her make a sound in agreement. "Well, this is something that everybody is going to have to accept about me." He raised his head, and looked her straight in the eye.

She didn't even blink. "Harry, do you remember the morning after -" She broke off for a moment, and looked around as though to make sure that no one was near enough to overhear, which, since they were in the Owlery, no one was. "The morning after Snuffles escaped," she went on in a lowered voice. "Remember how happy Hagrid was, because Buckbeak had escaped, too? He didn't care that he'd never see Buckbeak again, even though they were friends, even though he loved him. All Hagrid cared about was that his friend was free."

"Yes, but...I don't get your point, Hermione," Harry said. That might have been all that Hagrid had cared about, but all Harry could think of right then was that Hagrid was dead. Did Hermione think that he shouldn't blame himself for that? Because he knew she couldn't possibly change his mind.

"My point is that Hagrid was happy," Hermione said. "He was always happy, even though his life had dealt him almost as many blows as yours has. He somehow managed to be happy, and get the most out of life, even through all that. He had a wonderful life, really, because he made himself have one. "

Harry shook his head. "I'm not Hagrid," he said. "I don't have his...his capacity for unreasonable happiness."

"You do, though, Harry," she said. "Or, at least, you did. How else did you survive all those years with the Dursleys?"

"Thirst for revenge?" Harry said, but he felt one corner of his mouth twitch upwards.

Hermione saw it. "See, Harry, you've got it - you just have to remember it. Remember that, even in the worst of times, there's always something to live for, something wonderful that could happen the very next moment. Remember that you have friends who...who love you, who would do anything for you, and who don't like seeing you blame yourself for things beyond your control."

Harry stared at her. She almost quivered in her desire to get this across to him, biting her lip in the way she did whenever she'd burst out with something emotional. He didn't know quite what to say, because he'd told himself those things many times before. Hearing them from Hermione meant a lot, but it wasn't going to change his mind that quickly. Sometimes, blaming himself was all he had.

Hermione seemed to see some of that on his face, because she smiled at him, and shook her head, as though putting their conversation behind her. "Did Ginny tell you that she had another vision?" she asked, instead.

"No, did she?" Harry said. "That's brilliant! Except..." He trailed off. Why hadn't she told him herself?

"Well, she did say that she would leave it up to me to tell you, if I wanted," Hermione said, before he could say anything else. "But I thought she wouldn't be able to hold it in, and she'd have to tell you." She bit her lip again, this time looking almost shy. Which looked so odd on Hermione, that Harry just stared at her.

"Well, what was it?" he asked, when she didn't say anything further.

Hermione turned to look out of the window again, and began speaking very quickly. "She was standing at the window in her bedroom at the Burrow, looking down at the garden. There was a wedding going on...a very small one, with just the bride and groom, and Professor Dumbledore, presiding." She stole a sideways glance at him, then fixed her eyes back on Remus, just finishing up clearing off the Quidditch pitch. "The groom had red hair, and the bride brown."

Harry thought about that, and the more he thought, the bigger a grin spread across his face. "Hermione!" he said, folding his arms over his chest, and trying to sound indignant. "Is there something you're not telling me about you and Ron?"

Hermione lightly banged her forehead against the window pane. "That's almost word for word what Ginny said," she said, sounding like she was trying not to laugh. "You two have to remember that Penny has brown hair, and so does Brenna. For that matter, we have no idea what Charlie's up to, and who *knows* when this was actually happening."

"Didn't Ginny get any idea of the time?" Harry asked.

"She said it didn't feel like it was very far in the future," Hermione said. "Which just goes to show that it wasn't me and Ron. And," she stopped, took a deep breath, and began again. "I hope it wasn't."

"What?"

She turned to face him, reaching out to put a hand on one of his folded arms.

"I hope it wasn't. Because, Harry, you weren't there. When - if Ron and I ever marry, you'll be there, believe me. We wouldn't have it any other way. And if you weren't there, that could only mean..."

"Oh, Hermione," Harry said. He unfolded his arms, but he wasn't quite sure what to do. Luckily, she wasn't finished yet. She reached for his hands, gripping them tightly, and her eyes, as she locked gazes with him, were bright with unshed tears.

"Harry, I know it must seem odd to you, with Ron and me together. And I know that when I described my boggart from our third year, that I seemed more upset about Ron being dead than you. And in a way I was, but I also wasn't. I mean..." She trailed off, and Harry started to speak, to explain to her that he understood, but she wouldn't let him. "Harry, you and Ron are my best friends. I could never tell you how much you both mean to me - there's no words...I love you both so much, just differently, and I never want you to feel left out...Ron doesn't either..."

Now, she was crying, and now Harry knew what to do. He drew her into a hug, marveling at how easy it was. Maybe this was the good thing about having a girl for one of his best friends - he could do this with her, and it was okay. He knew he couldn't with Ron, even though the feelings he had for the two of them were basically the same. But he could with Hermione; he could let the emotions out.

Just then, he heard a snort of laughter at the Owlery door. He turned his head - Hermione was still crying too much to notice - and saw Dean, grinning at him.

"All right, you two, break it up," Dean said, sauntering over to them. When he came close enough to hear Hermione's quiet sobs, though, he sobered quickly. "What's wrong?"

For some reason, this just made Hermione cry even more, so Harry said, "We've been...discussing the meaning of friendship." He smiled, trying to let Dean know that everything was all right.

"Wow," Dean said, shaking his head, his grin returning. "How come Seamus has never cried on my chest like that? Not that I want him to," he added swiftly, which produced a watery gurgle from Hermione.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked. "Because if that's something you want, I could let him know...I'm sure he'll oblige." He started laughing at Dean's horrified face, and felt something tight in his chest relax. Hermione was right, he had friends who cared about him, and he couldn't let them down, even just by being depressed all the time.

When Dean had recovered his composure a bit, he said, "Ginny sent me to find you both. She wants you to come rescue her from Ron."

Harry couldn't help thinking that Ginny had probably just said to fetch Hermione, and Dean had added him, which, since Dean must know how he felt about Ginny, was pretty good of him.

"We'll be there in a minute," he said, indicating the still-sniffling Hermione.

Dean got the hint, smiled one more time, and left.

"Hermione, listen to me," Harry said, lifting her face from his chest so he could look into her eyes. "You're right about that vision - we have no idea what it means exactly. If you and Ron were getting married," he paused and grinned, because it was still funny to think about, "Ginny wouldn't have been in her room, she would have been down there, supporting you. Visions are tricky things, you know. So, my not being there doesn't mean anything at all."

Hermione nodded. "I know, Harry. But..."

"But nothing. And about your boggart...I understand, Hermione. I haven't told you about my new boggart yet, and I don't think I'm ready now, but suffice it to say that defeating it took thinking about Ginny. Even though the boggart itself involved you and Ron. Some things...some emotions are just different from others..." He trailed off, unable to go on.

Hermione put her hand on his arm. "I know," was all that she said.

They smiled at each other for a moment, until Harry had to break away. He turned back to the window, and saw Fang and Padfoot, playing in the snow.

"Hermione, look," he said, and watched a happy smile break over her face. They watched the two dogs frolicking for a minute, then turned as one to leave the Owlery.

When they reached the common room, they found practically all of Gryffindor gathered around something near the fire. Or so it felt, as the crowd parted, and they made their way through to the center. There, they saw Ron sitting on one of the overstuffed armchairs, leaning forward over a chessboard on a small table. On the other side of the table, George sat in another armchair, with Ginny perched on the arm.

"Well, all I can tell you is that that game would have beaten me," George was saying as they drew near. "I wouldn't have seen that coming."

"Me, neither," Ginny piped up.

"Yeah, but this is Dumbledore we're talking about," Ron said, scrubbing his hands through his hair. "Wouldn't he have seen that move coming? I'd think it would have been obvious."

George snorted, and Ginny rolled her eyes, and she noticed Harry and Hermione for the first time.

"There you are," she said. "Please explain to my idiotic brother that he's actually beaten Professor Dumbledore in chess."

"You beat Dumbledore in chess?" Hermione said, going over to Ron and smoothing down his hair, before realizing what she'd done and blushing. Ron just gazed up at her until Harry cleared his throat pointedly.

"Erm, yeah, except I think he let me win," Ron finally said, his ears almost matching his hair.

"Wow," Harry said, looking down at the chessboard. "And this is the game?"

"Ron recreated it for us," George said. "He's trying to get us to admit that we would have seen his great strategy a mile away, but both Ginny and I think that we wouldn't have. Of course, we're not Dumbledore, but I think he might not have, either."

"This is Dumbledore we're talking about here," Ron said. "If I haven't beaten him in all this time, why would I now?"

"C'mon, Ron, it had to happen sometime," Ginny said. "You're amazing at chess, you know that, and why else would he be playing with you other than to help you reach the point where you could beat him?"

"How come you never told us you were playing chess with Dumbledore?" Seamus asked. "That's a great honor, Ron. Have you been doing it since our first year?"

Ron's ears turned red again, and he looked like he didn't know what to say. They weren't supposed to tell anyone of their extra lessons, and here he was, letting all of Gryffindor know. But just as Hermione opened her mouth to say something, he burst out with, "Yes, since first year. He was really impressed by my defeat of McGonagall's giant set, of course, but he said that I had a lot to learn. Now, Harry," he added, "would you have seen this strategy coming?"

Harry made an incredulous sound. Ron's improvisation impressed him, but, honestly. "If George and Ginny wouldn't have, believe me, I wouldn't have, either," he said. He turned to the assembled crowd. "Would any of you?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Well, then," Hermione said, "I think we all should return to studying, since we can't help Ron with his chess matches."

Everyone grumbled, but the crowd slowly dispersed, until all that was left was Ron, Hermione, Harry, George and Ginny.

"Really, Ron," Hermione said. "Couldn't you have picked a more private place for this demonstration?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I just wasn't thinking," Ron said.

"I can tell. And you two." She rounded on George and Ginny. "What were *you* thinking?"

"Sorry, Hermione," they said in unison, quailing before her.

"At least you thought up that cover story, Ron. I think people bought it," Harry said, trying to diffuse Hermione's wrath. "So, you actually beat Dumbledore! That's great, mate."

Ron shook his head. "Yeah, but I still think he let me." His gaze returned to the chessboard, as though he could actually find the answer there.

"Ron, Dumbledore wouldn't do that," Harry said, looking around to make sure that no one was close enough to hear. "You know why he's teaching you - it isn't just for fun. And Voldemort won't just let us win. I don't think Dumbledore would, either."

Ron stared at him for a moment, then looked back down at the chessboard. Slowly, a smile spread across his face. "He wouldn't, would he? That's bloody brilliant. *I'm* bloody brilliant."

After that, he let Hermione drag him away into another corner to study. Ginny watched them go with an indulgent smile on her face, then started putting away her chess pieces. Harry bent to help her, finding Ron's box and trying to put away his pieces without being stabbed by pikes, or even bitten. He desperately wanted to say something to her, but didn't know if she would want it. On the other hand, she was right there, and he even knew what he wanted to say, so he decided to go for it.

"So, Hermione told me you had another vision. That's wonderful, Ginny," he said in a low voice. Nobody else was very close, but he didn't want to put any more pressure on her than was already there, by letting other people know that she was a Seer.

Ginny kept her head bent over the table, but Harry could see that she smiled, and she looked up at him through her lashes. "Yeah. I've never seen Toby so happy. I'm just glad that it was a happy vision. Oh - did Hermione tell you what it was?"

Harry put the last chess piece away, closed the box, and sat down the armchair vacated by Ron. "Yes, she did. She...she was worried about what it might mean for me, if the couple was her and Ron."

Ginny sat down in the other chair with a thump. "Oh, Hermione!" she said, shooting a glare over to the corner where Ron and Hermione were actually studying. "I've told her and told her that we don't know what that vision means."

Harry laughed, marvelling at how easy striking up a conversation had been. He should have done it weeks ago. "Me, too. I don't think she believed either one of us, though. But, Ginny," he added, leaning forward, "tell me everything. Hermione said you were up in your room - did it look different? Could you tell when this was happening?"

Ginny shook her head. "Not really, although it did feel like it was relatively soon. At least, in the next three or four years. Toby wasn't too happy with me about that, but she was so happy that I had a vision at all that she forgave me. I think I was so shocked that I'd had another, even while I was having it, that I couldn't pay attention to the details as much as I should have."

"You were shocked? Why? Miss Stuart said you're a true Seer, why would you think you'd never have another vision?"

Ginny drew her legs up so she could wrap her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knees. "I thought I'd blocked myself. And Toby's had her block for fifteen years. I was just worried..." She trailed off, her eyes looking sideways into the fire.

"Oh, Ginny," Harry said, longing to reach out to her, but completely unsure of himself. "I wish there were something I could do to help."

"Well, there isn't," she said, but she said it with a smile. Then, she uncurled herself and stood up. "I should get to work - I have a four foot long essay due in Potions next week, and I need to start it."

"Next week, and you're starting it already? Hermione's really rubbing off on you, isn't she?" Harry said, standing up himself. He didn't want to pressure her by seeming like he was forcing her to stay.

Ginny laughed, sounding happier than he'd heard her in months, then went off to join her dorm-mates at a table on the other side of the common room. Harry sat back down in his armchair and stared at the fire. That was the first normal, private conversation he and Ginny had had since Christmas. Maybe she was ready to start spending time with him again. He certainly hoped so.

"Harry, you all right, mate?"

Harry looked up to see Ron standing next to him. He smiled, and stood up.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Did Hermione send you over to make sure I started studying?"

Ron shook his head. "I...she told me that she'd told you about Ginny's vision - don't say a word, Harry. We don't know if that was me and Hermione Ginny Saw, not that I'd mind - not a word, Harry. Anyway, we've never really talked about me and Hermione..." He trailed off, obviously unsure of how to proceed.

Harry definitely wanted to relieve him of having to - this whole conversation felt awkward. There were some things he and Ron just weren't supposed to discuss.

"I'm fine with it, Ron. I saw it coming before you did, remember?"

"That's right. You never explained that to me, either - you knew how she felt, and you never said anything? Some best friend you are."

Harry stared at him. Ron sounded completely bitter, but he had his head bent over the table, as though he couldn't look Harry in the eye.

"C'mon, Ron, you knew as well as I did, you just wouldn't admit it to yourself," he said, sitting back down in his chair and folding his arms over his chest. Ron was *not* going to make him feel guilty about this.

Ron looked up, saw his expression, and stopped trying. "Yeah, I guess I did," he said, grinning, and sitting down.

"Besides, I'm Hermione's best friend, too, you know," Harry added.

Ron's eyes traveled over to where Hermione's head, with its curls escaping from her braid, was bent over her books, then they returned to Harry. "I don't know, I think you might have been done out of that by Ginny."

Harry started to grin back, but then he remembered Hermione crying on him in the Owlery, and sobered. "No, I don't think so," he said, but when Ron looked at him questioningly, he just shook his head.

"Oh, Harry," Ron said, as though he'd just remembered something. "I asked Dumbledore today what had happened with Snape."

It's about time, Harry thought, but he didn't say anything. Snape had been back teaching the very next day, with no explanation whatsoever of his sudden absence. Before every one of Ron's sessions with Dumbledore, Harry had asked him to ask Dumbledore about it, but somehow, Ron had always conveniently forgotten to do so.

Ron lowered his voice to an almost Hermione-in-the-library whisper. "He was called to Voldemort suddenly, right before lunch that day, and he had to go. Dumbledore says there's no avoiding that summons."

If the situation had been any less dire, Harry would have laughed at the shudder that ran through Ron when he said Voldemort's name. Practice apparently hadn't made saying it any easier. He had more important things to think about, though.

"Why did Voldemort call him so suddenly?" he asked.

"Well, he said it was because he wanted some Wolfsbane Potion, since Snape's the only Death Eater that can make it," Ron said. He closed his eyes, obviously not enjoying thinking about exactly why Voldemort would need Wolfsbane Potion. "But that could have waited until later in the day, after classes, so Snape and Dumbledore think that this was a test."

Harry thought about that. "To see if Snape is really on Voldemort's side, you mean?"

"Yeah. I think it's a silly test, really. I mean, Snape went anyway, he just told Dumbledore about it beforehand. Did Voldemort really think he wouldn't?"

"Maybe...maybe it was a test to see if Snape would tell Dumbledore before he went," Harry said.

"Yeah, that makes sense, but it means that there's a spy in Hogwarts," Ron said. He gripped his head with both hands, digging his fingers into his hair. "Even with all of the precautions, there's still a spy."

Harry didn't say anything for a moment. He supposed that they should have thought of that...but, really, with Mad-Eye Moody around - the real one - how had a spy become established? And who could it be?

"What does Dumbledore think?"

"He won't say, he just says that I need to think about it myself."

"Well, then, what do you think?"

"I don't know, Harry. I just don't know. Some kind of strategist I am, huh?" Ron turned away and stared into the fire.

"Ron," Harry said, but then stopped. Nothing he could say would change Ron's mind - he knew Ron's stubbornness. So instead, he lowered his voice even further and asked, "Ron, has Dumbledore said anything about Hagrid?"

That made Ron look up. "No, never," he said. "And every time I say something about him - it's inevitable, you know - the pain in his eyes...I can't explain, but it's bloody awful to see, I can tell you that, Harry."

Harry could tell on his own, if the pain in Dumbledore's eyes was anything like the pain in Ron's.

"Why did you bring that up?" Ron asked, still staring at him. "D'you think the spy had something to do with Hagrid's death, too?"

Harry shook his head. He hadn't; he'd just wanted to know that Dumbledore hadn't forgotten Hagrid. He'd not said a word about him since the memorial service, and even though Harry should have known him better, he'd wondered. He didn't know how the spy could have been involved in Hagrid's death...

"What does Hermione think?" he asked. She always had lots of theories.

"I...haven't told her yet," Ron said. He didn't meet Harry's eyes, suddenly seeming very interested in his shoes.

"Whyever not?"

"I don't want to worry her; she has enough to think about," Ron muttered. He raised his head enough to direct a long glance at Hermione, her head still bent over her books.

"Ron, Hermione loves to worry - it's what she does best," Harry said, watching his friend in bewilderment.

"Yeah, but I don't want her to have to," Ron said, still staring at Hermione. "She deserves the best, Harry, she really does, and I want to give it to her..." He trailed off, and returned his gaze to his shoe tops.

"I understand that, Ron," Harry said, "but if anyone can discover the spy in Hogwarts, it's Hermione. She wouldn't want you to try to protect her from something she needed to do."

"I know, I know. I'll tell her," Ron said. When Harry didn't say anything else, he finally raised his eyes to meet Harry's. "I will, I promise. Only, not tonight - she has too much work to do. And I just...I don't see how this happened."

Suddenly, Harry didn't want to think about the spy anymore. He knew it was important - maybe the most important thing right now - but they weren't going to solve anything with the scant information they had, and it did no good to brood. If he'd learned anything this evening, he'd learned that at least.

He stood up, and pulled Ron to his feet. "Come on, we have work to do. Dumbledore can figure out who the spy might be, but he can't do our homework for us. Remember, the O.W.L.s are coming up!"

Ron groaned and punched him in the shoulder, but stood up, looking a little more like himself, and followed him over to Hermione's corner. Hermione looked up as they came close, her anxious eyes traveling from Ron to Harry and back before she relaxed. Ron sat down with a thump, complaining bitterly the whole time he rummaged through his bag for quill and parchment about the History of Magic essay he needed to write. He was obviously going to follow Harry's lead, and not think about the bigger picture any more tonight. Hermione had several obscure Charms texts open in front of her, and, for once, she didn't look very happy about the work she was doing, either.

Harry took out his quill and some parchment, too, but he just sat and stared off into space for awhile before he started writing. He had another essay to write for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and this one was much more difficult for him than the last. "Are there any circumstances in which you would permit Aurors to perform the Unforgivable Curses, and, if so, what are they?" Harry remembered the trials held under Barty Crouch that he'd seen in Dumbledore's Pensieve his fourth year. The Death Eaters had used the Cruciatus Curse on Neville's parents for so long that they went mad. No one could ever be certain when a Death Eater came back to the good side, and said that he'd been under the Imperius Curse. Veritaserum didn't work, so there was just no way to tell. And then, there was *Avada Kedavra*. On the other hand, if the Death Eaters had weapons the Aurors didn't, how were they ever to be apprehended? And what if...what if his boggart came to pass? Forget the Aurors, Harry was half-afraid that he would perform one himself, even though he knew, with every fiber of his being, that it was wrong. Harry rubbed one hand through his hair, making it stick up even more than usual, and looked over to where Ginny sat with her dorm-mates. She wasn't looking at him, she was deeply engrossed in her Potions book, but just the sight of her clarified his thoughts a bit. He took a deep breath, put quill to parchment, and started to write.

Chapter 27 Valentine's Day

Harry awoke on Ginny's birthday already nervous. He was regretting his decision to send her presents to her through the owl post, but he hadn't wanted to make her feel uncomfortable by forcing her to respond to him right after he'd given them to her. Now, though, the thought of her dormmates seeing her birthday present made him feel slightly queasy.

Thinking of the flowers wasn't much better. He'd asked Hermione what Ginny's favorite flowers were, and, after she'd stared at him intently for a moment, she'd replied, "dusky, wild roses." He hadn't been able to get another word out of her, even when he'd said that that didn't really tell him much. He'd finally gone to Miss Stuart for help, since she already knew about his feelings for Ginny. The flowers she'd showed him in the catalogue from her favorite florist didn't even really look like roses to him, but Miss Stuart said that they were what Hermione meant.

"They're Welsh, I think," she'd said. "And I'm a little surprised that Ginny likes them so much."

"Why?" he'd asked.

Miss Stuart had looked at him, a small, condescendingly affectionate smile on her face. "Because they're *pink*," she'd said.

It still hadn't made any sense to Harry, but he accepted her superior knowledge of girls. Just as he'd had to accept Hermione's knowledge of what Ginny would want.

Maybe he just shouldn't go down to breakfast. After all, Ginny would receive the gifts just the same, even if he weren't there. He could ask Dobby to fetch him some breakfast up here, and then sneak down to Potions. Or, on second thought, he could just hide out here for the rest of the day.

"Harry Potter is rising and shining now, sir!"

Harry had barely enough time to pull the bedcovers over his head before Dobby swept the bedcurtains aside, and sunlight poured over him. He really was going to kill Dobby one of these days, and Dean, too, for good measure. One morning, after even a strenuous Quidditch practice hadn't stopped him from having yet another sleepless night chasing thoughts around and around in his mind, he'd been more than usually difficult for Dobby to move from the bed. Dean had suddenly poked his head through the curtains, and said, "Rise and shine, sleepyhead!" This had had the desired effect of making Harry sit up, because he couldn't believe Dean had said it. Unfortunately, Dobby had taken the idea as his own, and had been coming up with a new variation every morning.

Harry groaned, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and stood up, trying to ignore Dobby's usual morning chatter. It took him some time before he realized that the other usual morning chatter - Dean, Seamus, and Neville's - wasn't evident this morning. Looking around, he spotted Dean and Seamus in the corner near Seamus' trunk, bent over something.

"She's going to hate it, Dean," Seamus said, looking like he wanted to put whatever it was back in the trunk and lock it away.

"Don't worry," Dean said, punching him in the shoulder. "She won't." He turned around, noticed Harry looking at them, and rolled his eyes at his best friend. Harry couldn't help but grin, though he did wonder what Seamus was giving Lavender.

Neville, he knew, was sending Hannah a huge bouquet of flowers, all of which he'd grown in the greenhouses under the supervision of Professor Sprout, and all of which had meaning. Harry knew this, because Neville explained it to everyone who would sit still long enough, as many times as they would sit still long enough. He was glad his friend was happy, but he wished Neville wouldn't tell him every detail.

Ron, on the other hand, hadn't told him a thing. Well, he'd told him that, since Christmas had wiped him out, he couldn't afford to buy anything for Hermione for Valentine's Day. Harry had wanted to offer to lend him some money, but the look in Ron's eyes stopped him. He wished he could somehow break through to Ron; he would gladly share his fortune with his best friend - after all, Ron had shared his family, and Harry could never repay that. So, Ron had decided to make Hermione something, and Harry had assured him that she would love whatever it was. She would, too, he knew.

The five boys made their way down to the common room, Seamus with a package hidden underneath his robes. As Harry walked down the stairs, he saw Lee present Alicia with an enormous bouquet of flowers. Alicia held it at arms length for a moment, staring at it suspiciously, while Lee looked on, a hurt expression on his face. Finally, Alicia appeared satisfied that nothing was going to come shooting out of the flowers, and held them up to her face. She took one sniff, then recoiled, her face screwed up in disgust.

"Lee Jordan! What have you done to those flowers?" she shrieked.

"I thought you *liked* the smell of butterbeer," Lee said, though he was having a hard time containing his laughter.

"Not for flowers!" Alicia said, and whacked him over the head with the flowers. They fell apart, revealing a small, velvet covered box. "Oh..."

The fifth year boys reached the bottom step to find Lavender and Parvati waiting for them, but no Hermione, and no Ginny. Lavender pounced on Seamus, and dragged him into a corner, while Parvati grinned at the rest of them.

"Hermione is still upstairs, Ron," she said, "and Ginny has already gone down to the Great Hall."

Harry really didn't want to know if she had directed that last statement towards him or Dean. "Let's go down, then," he said, not really caring if Parvati thought he was eager to see Ginny. He was.

"You go," Ron said. He hadn't taken his eyes off of the girls' staircase, and he didn't seem to notice Crookshanks rubbing up against his legs. "Only, I think I'll wait for Hermione."

The other four exchanged grins, and climbed out of the portrait hole. Before they reached the Great Hall, Harry worried that it would look the way it had his second year, even though he knew that had been Lockhart's fault. Everyone just seemed more aware of Valentine's Day this year. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw everything looking completely normal.

Well, normal except for at least triple the usual amount of owls. They swooped in, spotted their targets, and dove towards the tables, completely ruining any semblance of a normal breakfast. Harry watched, fascinated anew at the wizard post. It really was amazingly efficient. As the four of them made their way over to the Gryffindor table, Harry spotted Ginny. She seemed to be keeping her face deliberately on her food, since she couldn't be that absorbed in breakfast, what with the pandemonium that existed around her. Harry tried to remember if the atmosphere had been this raucous last year, but all he could remember of Valentine's Day breakfast the year before was trying to ignore Cho and Cedric, and a long Quidditch conversation with Ron. Looking over at the Ravenclaw table, he saw an owl land in front of Cho, and watched her remove several white flowers from the holder attached to its leg. Then, she looked up at the boy who sat opposite her - Harry couldn't see who it was, because the boy's back was to him - and shook her head, but Harry could see her smile from clear across the room. He was glad that she seemed happy.

By this time, they had reached places at the table, and no sooner had they sat down than five owls landed in front of Parvati. She smiled happily as she removed their burdens, petting and feeding each one before sending them off again. Harry watched as she opened the cards and presents, but then his attention was distracted by Neville turning bright red and covering his face with his hands. That's when he noticed the huge bouquet of flowers three owls were delivering to the Hufflepuff table. This was yet another thing that wizards did better than Muggles, he thought. He remembered how, on the few times Uncle Vernon had bought Aunt Petunia roses, she'd had to fuss with them so that they'd live even a few days. But a few simple charms took care of that. He dug an elbow in Neville's ribs.

"I think you should look over there, mate," he said. "Did you really think she wouldn't like them?"

Neville took his face out of his hands, and waved back at Hannah. "No, but...she might have thought they were a bit much."

"Trust me, Neville," Parvati said, removing the burden from yet another owl, "no girl would think a bouquet of flowers a bit much."

Just then, Ron and Hermione showed up, both looking a bit pink and extremely happy. As Harry moved over to make room, he asked, "Where's Seamus and Lavender?"

"Aren't they with you?" Hermione asked. When everybody shook their heads, she added, "Well, they weren't in the common room..." She trailed off and looked uncertain. "Do you suppose I should...I mean, I am a prefect..."

"No," Dean said.

"Definitely not," Ron added, and Harry saw Neville shudder. That was enough for Hermione.

"I think you're right," she said, and reached for the pumpkin juice.

Harry turned back to his breakfast, but was interrupted by the arrival of another owl. He pushed it over to Parvati.

"Erm, Harry, I think you might want to open this yourself," she said, pushing it back. That's when Harry noticed his name, in writing he recognized, on the envelope. He almost knocked

over the pitcher of pumpkin juice grabbing for the owl. After he removed the small package and envelope, and sent the owl on its way, he just sat there for a moment, not opening anything. Ginny had sent him something for Valentine's Day. He couldn't believe it - he certainly hadn't expected it - and he just wanted to enjoy the fact for a moment.

"Aren't you going to open it, Harry?" Hermione asked, interrupting his thoughts.

He looked up at her and saw understanding on her face, but he saw impatience, too. She probably knew exactly what was in it. He smiled at her, and opened the envelope first.

Harry,

Thank you.

Ginny.

He stared at the note for a moment. She couldn't be thanking him for his gift, because she hadn't received it yet. He sneaked a look at her out of the corner of his eye, and saw that an owl had landed in front of her, but the flowers she was removing from it were white. *Probably Dean*, he thought, and then tried to clamp down on the wave of jealousy that threatened to overwhelm him. He had no right to be jealous of Dean sending her flowers. He stared back down at Ginny's note until he felt Hermione nudge him. She leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"Trust me, Harry, you want to open the present," she said.

So he did, but then he just stared at it, because he had no idea what it was. Well, he could see that it was a very small, absolutely clear ball attached to a short silver chain, with a clip on the other end of the chain. He held it up, watching the play of light in the ball as he twisted it, and then looked questioningly over at Hermione, who had a happy grin plastered on her face.

"It's a watch fob, Harry," she said quietly. Luckily, everyone else was absorbed in watching Parvati receive yet another owl and ignoring them. "You attach it to the chain of your pocket watch."

Harry drew in his breath sharply. Ginny had given him something to go along with the watch his mum had given his dad. He pulled out the pocket watch, his hands almost shaking, very careful not to open the watch, because he certainly didn't want Hermione to see what it would say right then. She had to help him clip the fob onto the watch, anyway. When they were done, Harry looked over at Ginny, hoping that he could convey his gratitude from across the room. He caught her eye, held up the watch, and then held it to his chest, not caring who was looking. He was rewarded by her lit-from-within smile, which he hadn't seen since before Christmas. Then, she held up his flowers, and the hair clip he'd sent her, and did the same thing. They must have been delivered while he was opening her present.

Suddenly, there was a hand waving furiously in front of his face.

"Oi, Potter," Ron said, sounding like he was having a hard time containing his laughter. "I don't need your watch to tell us that we're almost late for Potions right now."

Harry reluctantly withdrew his gaze from Ginny, giving her a small wave before he did. She waved back, and then they both turned away to start the day.

The first thing out of Snape's mouth as he swept into the classroom was a snide order to the girls to remove the flowers from their hair. The next thing was even better, when Pansy showed some reluctance to do so.

"Miss Parkinson, kindly show the brains that would be a credit to your house," he snapped, making the Gryffindors snicker. The class had gone downhill from there, though, as Snape's mood was evidently tied to the day, and Gryffindor ended the class by being fifty points down. The rest of the day went more smoothly, though Harry didn't know where to look when Professor Flitwick taught them the theory of the Wand-binding Charm performed at weddings. He'd also been hard put not to laugh when Professor Trelawney predicted that his true love would come from a large family. He caught even Parvati rolling her eyes at that.

All in all, the day hadn't been bad, but he was definitely looking forward to seeing Ginny in their Auror training class, last thing in the afternoon. He practically ran into the usual room, hoping that she was already there, and completely unprepared for what he saw. She was sitting on one of the desks, holding hands with Dean.

Harry was back out the door and leaning up against the wall in the corridor before he drew breath again. *All right, Potter, he told himself, think through this logically. Let's make Hermione proud. She wasn't really holding hands with him, it was almost as though she was holding him off. And she was wearing your flowers in her hair, held there by your hair clip.* He was almost certain that she'd seen him, too, though he knew Dean hadn't, and she hadn't dropped Dean's hands, or made any indication that she was doing something wrong. And she wasn't - Ginny had every right to hold hands with whomever she wanted. Most importantly, though, he knew Ginny, and he knew that she wouldn't lead on either him or Dean. The sight of the two of them with clasped hands might be imprinted on his eyelids, but he'd just have to live with that.

"Harry, why are you waiting out here? Is something wrong?"

Harry turned his head to look at Hermione, who he hadn't realized was standing next to him until she spoke. Ron stood next to her, looking equally worried.

"Nothing's wrong - Ginny's talking to Dean in there, so I thought I'd wait out here."

Before either Ron or Hermione could say anything, Dean walked out the door.

"Hey Ron, Hermione," he said, then stopped. "Harry," he said after a moment. He held Harry's gaze steadily, and Harry could almost feel the thoughts passing from Dean to him. *Treat her right. Make her happy.* He nodded, not breaking the eye contact, and Dean gave him a small smile before turning and walking away. Harry turned to Ron and Hermione, not sure what to say, but he was saved the trouble.

"I don't want to know," Ron said, before walking into the classroom. Hermione just smiled at Harry, and followed Ron.

Harry followed them both, his eyes seeking Ginny's as soon as he entered the room. She smiled at him, but didn't say anything, and Harry sat down at his desk and pulled out his wand, in preparation for the lesson. *It's amazing, he thought, how just a smile from her makes me so happy.* Then, Professor Moody thumped into the room, and all he could think about was the best sequence of charms and hexes needed to break through Moody's guard.

After the class, Harry headed off to the Great Hall for dinner with Ron and Hermione, still thinking about the lesson. He hadn't even come close to breaking through Moody's guard - none of them had. Of course, that was only to be expected, since Moody had been one of the Ministry's top Aurors, and probably still would be, if he were still on active duty. But it worried Harry. How would they ever be able to defeat Death Eaters, let alone Voldemort, if they could barely land a single hex on Moody? Even working together, he, Ron and Hermione hadn't touched him. The only people who had had been Fred and George, working together. Harry suspected that they were slightly telepathic with each other, which was wonderful - he just wished they could teach other people how to do it.

"Ground to Harry!"

"You're saying it wrong - it's 'Earth to Harry.'"

"All right - earth to Harry! Come in, Harry. Did I get that part right, Hermione?"

"Yes, that's right. Where are you, Harry?"

Harry stopped. "Are you teaching Ron Muggle slang, Hermione?"

"Well, Muggle slang from five years ago. I'm not exactly up on the current catch-phrases. Anyway, where were you? Pluto?"

"Sorry. Just thinking about the lesson. Why?"

"Because if you walk through the halls that out of it, you'll probably run into Snape," Ron said, then snorted when Harry looked around reflexively. "No, he's not here, but with your luck, you probably would. Besides, I wanted to ask you something. Did you give Ginny the flowers in her hair?"

Harry quickly looked away from Ron, meeting Hermione's gaze with a pleading look. She just shrugged and smiled at him.

"Erm...yeah?" he finally said.

"Did you give her the hair thingy, too?"

Harry sighed. He'd known that this would be a problem. "Yeah."

"You gave my sister a *claddaugh*?"

All right, *that* wasn't what he'd been expecting. A question about the price, he'd expected. As he floundered in confusion, Hermione spoke.

"Ron, I thought you were all right with Harry and Ginny."

"Yeah, but that was before he gave her a *claddaugh*! D'you know what it means?"

"Of course I know what it means, Ron! What I don't know is why it's a bad thing that Harry gave her one."

Harry decided that it was a good time to interrupt the argument. "I know what it means, too," he said. "The crown stands for loyalty, and the hands for friendship - are you saying that Ginny doesn't have either of those from me?"

"What about the heart, Harry?"

"It's not a ring, Ron," he said. "It's a *hair clip*."

Whatever Ron planned to say was disrupted by Hermione suddenly whooping with laughter. They walked off down the corridor, Ron shaking his head and supporting Hermione as they went. Harry started to follow.

"Harry?"

He turned immediately at the sound of Ginny's voice. She stood a little way away from him, with Brenna behind her. He thought he saw Brenna make shooing motions with her hands at Ginny, but if she did, Ginny didn't see them, because she didn't look at anything but Harry as she walked towards him.

"Thank you for the flowers, Harry," she said, as soon as she was close enough to speak quietly. "They're absolutely perfect - how did you know?"

Harry looked down at his feet. He wanted to say that he'd come up with the idea all by himself, but.... "I asked Hermione."

"Oh."

Harry sneaked a glance at her, and saw that she looked a little disgruntled. Then she shook her head, as though clearing it of some unwanted thought, and smiled at him.

"That was really sweet of you," she said. "And I really love the..." She trailed off, and motioned to the *claddaugh* hair clip with her hand.

"I...hope it wasn't too much," Harry said.

"No, no, not too much," Ginny said. Her eyes fixed for a moment on the pendant that he still wore on top of his robes, and then flew up to meet his with a sudden, almost burning intensity. Then she dropped her gaze again and took a deep breath. "Harry, I'm sorry about earlier, with Dean. I...he gave me some flowers, too, and I wanted to explain to him..." She trailed off again, and, in a swift motion, pressed her hands to her eyes.

"Ginny, you have nothing to be sorry about," Harry said. "If anything, I'm the one who should apologize. You said you wanted distance, and I haven't really given you that." He was reaching up to touch the clip in her hair, when she removed her hands from his eyes, and her right one met his. She gasped, and he almost did, too, at the jolt of electricity that he felt when he touched her hand. They stood there for another moment, staring at each other, then they each took a deep breath and a step backwards.

"I just...I don't want you to think..." Ginny said, then suddenly laughed. "This is silly, isn't it? Dean and I...we're just friends."

Even though he'd known that already, Harry felt his heart leap when she said it. Before he could say anything, though, he heard a sneering voice that he knew all too well.

"Weasley, you couldn't clash any more if you tried."

Ginny stiffened all over, and turned to face Draco Malfoy. The Slytherin stood a few feet away, leaning up against the wall. Harry cursed himself for having been so wrapped up in Ginny that Malfoy had been able to sneak up that close. *Some Auror I am*, he thought. He wondered how much Malfoy had heard.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Ginny asked, sounding as though her teeth were clenched together.

He pushed himself off the wall and sauntered over to them.

"I'm just trying to understand why you're wearing those vile pink flowers, when you were given some elegant, tasteful, and above all, complimentary white violets," he said. "Who had the excrable taste to give you those?"

"Harry did," Ginny said.

"Ah," Malfoy said, not even glancing at Harry, who was beginning to see red. "Weasley, pity is not an acceptable reason for you to wear pink flowers in your hair."

Ginny gasped. "How dare you?" she said, stepping in between a rigid Harry and Malfoy. "If you must know, these are my favorite flowers, and I think Harry showed wonderful taste to give them to me."

"Well, then you're the one with the excrable taste," he said, finally glancing at Harry before fixing his eyes once more on Ginny. "Really, Weasley, coming from your family, you just shouldn't throw away opportunities like this."

That was enough for Harry. He'd been holding himself back, knowing that Ginny would want to handle this herself, and that she could, but that was too much. He launched himself at Malfoy, finally understanding Ron's desire to use his bare hands, instead of going for his wand, every time Malfoy insulted Hermione. Before he'd done more than grab the Slytherin by his robes, though, he heard Professor McGonagall's voice echoing down the corridor.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy, what is happening here?"

Harry let go of Malfoy, still shaking with anger. He felt Ginny's hand on his arm, and he took a few deep breaths to try to calm down. Next to him, Malfoy didn't seem at all ruffled, though he did smooth down his robes in a deliberate manner.

McGonagall hardly seemed to notice, even though she said, "Fighting is not allowed in the corridors, you both know that. Five points from both of your houses."

Harry stared at her. Five? She'd taken twenty each from Ron and Malfoy just last week, for the exact same thing. And if there was one thing McGonagall was, it was scrupulously fair. He thought he saw compassion, of all strange things, in her eyes.

"Mr. Potter, the Headmaster wishes to see you now," she said, before turning and leading the way down the corridor.

"But, Professor," Harry said, not moving. He didn't want to leave Ginny alone with Malfoy.

"I'll be fine, Harry," Ginny said. She glanced at McGonagall, who had stopped and was motioning Harry to follow her. "I wonder..."

"Wonder what, Ginny?" Harry said.

"Never mind. You'll find out, whatever it is." She gazed up at him, a question in her eyes, and he nodded at her.

"Of course I'll tell you, whatever it is," he said, before turning and practically jogging to meet McGonagall. The last thing he heard as they turned the corner was Malfoy.

"Isn't that sweet - does he tell you everything? I'm not sure I'd want to hear everything Potter has to say."

Harry deliberately put him out of his mind. Ginny could take care of herself. Remembering the Yule Ball, he chuckled to himself. She certainly could.

"What's this about, Professor?" he asked, when he finally dragged his thoughts away from Ginny.

"The Headmaster will tell you that, Mr. Potter," she said firmly. "Here we are. Everlasting Gobstoppers."

When Harry reached the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, studying his hands, which were clasped together in front of him.

"Ah, Harry," he said, looking up with an unreadable expression in his eyes. "Do come in and sit down." However, once Harry did so, Dumbledore didn't say anything else. He just continued to study Harry, who felt as though he were in a Muggle lab experiment.

Suddenly, it was too much for him. He had no idea why Dumbledore had called him here, but, now that he *was* here, he decided to ask him something that had been bothering him for awhile.

"Sir, why did Hagrid die?"

For the first time that Harry had ever known, the Headmaster removed his half-moon spectacles and polished them. Continuing to watch his hands, Dumbledore said, "I'm not certain I know what you mean, Harry."

"Why did he die? There must be a better reason than that the giants didn't trust him."

At that, Dumbledore put back on his spectacles and looked keenly at Harry. "Why must there be?"

"Because there just has to be! Because Hagrid couldn't have died for no reason - not Hagrid!" Harry felt his hands shaking, and he clutched the arms of the chair to still them.

"Harry, sometimes people just die."

"But Hagrid didn't just die, he was killed!"

"Sometimes people are just killed. Not everything has a bigger meaning, some things are just senseless."

"So, Hagrid died a senseless death? How could you have let it happen?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, I am not omnipotent. Nor omniscient, though I'd rather you didn't repeat that outside of this office." He stopped, and smiled at Harry, but Harry didn't smile back. "Believe me, if I could have foreseen what happened, I never would have asked Hagrid to be an envoy. And yet, because of him, the giants have not joined Voldemort, and still might not. Is that reason enough for his death? I do not know, but I do know what Hagrid would have said."

Harry felt his eyes burn, and he swallowed around a huge lump in his throat. He dropped his eyes to his lap, not wanting the Headmaster to see them, and not wanting to see the tears in Dumbledore's eyes. A few minutes passed in silence, while Harry thought about Hagrid - the type of person he'd been, and how he would feel knowing that his death might actually help people. Then he remembered that he hadn't come to the Headmaster's office to talk about Hagrid.

"Sir, why did you call me here?"

Dumbledore looked searchingly at Harry for a moment before speaking, but apparently what he saw satisfied him. "Harry, I have some grave news for you. Earlier this evening, Death Eaters attacked your uncle's home. Your Uncle Vernon was killed."

Harry let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. It wasn't Sirius or Remus, which was what he'd been afraid of as soon as he'd heard the summons. And he couldn't honestly say that he felt too sorry - in fact, he wasn't quite sure how he should feel. He looked at Dumbledore, to see the Headmaster watching him closely.

"Sir," he said, not wanting to lower Dumbledore's opinion of him, but not wanting to lie, either, "I can't pretend to feel...well, devastated about this. They were not very good to me. I didn't wish them dead, but I..." He trailed off, not really wanting to say what he felt.

"I understand, Harry," Dumbledore said. "In some ways, I blame myself that you cannot feel sorrow at a relative's death. But, Harry, why do you say they? I only mentioned your Uncle Vernon."

"Of course, Dudley's at school, too, isn't he? Who...who's going to tell him?" He really didn't want to be the one, and he strongly suspected that Dudley wouldn't want him to do it, either. "Well, that will depend a great deal on you." Luckily, Dumbledore didn't wait for Harry to remark on that before continuing, because Harry didn't understand. "Your Aunt Petunia was not in the house during the attack, as well, and is actually down in the Infirmary."

"Why, if she wasn't in the house during the attack?"

"Your aunt was out shopping when the Death Eaters arrived. When she reached home again, it was a pile of rubble, with the Dark Mark floating above it." Harry was reminded of Ginny's vision. "Professor Figg and Sirius, along with two Aurors, were also there."

"Sir, if there were Aurors there, why didn't they stop the attack?"

"Unfortunately, they did not arrive until too late. Harry, I believe you are aware of the Ministry's official position on Voldemort."

"They don't believe he's back," Harry muttered.

"That's right. Thus, they don't take warnings of Death Eater attacks very seriously, even when the warnings come from a Seer. Fortunately, I do have some influence, and many Aurors have listened. However, I was not able to arrange for twenty-four hour supervision of Privet Drive, though we did have alarm wards around the house. The Death Eaters tore through them easily, of course, but they did let us know what happened."

Harry sighed. Sometimes, he almost thought he hated Fudge more than Voldemort. At least Voldemort was actively trying to do evil.

"What did Aunt Petunia do, when she came home to a destroyed house?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled for the first time since Harry entered the room. "According to Sirius, she let out a wild, high-pitched screech, and started attacking him."

"Why? She couldn't have actually recognized him - she didn't when he was on the news when he escaped from Azkaban."

"Sirius looked very different than he had when she last saw him, when he was on the news," Dumbledore said, and Harry agreed, remembering when he had compared Sirius' wanted poster with the picture taken at his parents' wedding. "At any event," Dumbledore continued, "Sirius decided that since she was hysterical, and since he didn't know where else to take her, he would bring her here, so she is down in the Infirmary under Madam Pomfrey's care."

Harry didn't know what to think. Aunt Petunia hadn't been terrible to him this past summer, but he still didn't know if he wanted her at Hogwarts. Dumbledore seemed to see some of this in his face.

"Harry, I know this won't be easy for you," he said. "I do hope, though, that you don't try to feel emotions you are not really feeling. Don't feel guilty, or ungrateful, because you might not feel the traditional signs of grief. Emotions are complicated things, and families, even more so."

Harry nodded. "Should I go down to the Infirmary to see her, sir?"

"Yes, and I know Sirius would like to speak with you as well. One more thing before you go, however. It appears, from the little that your aunt said coherently, that your uncle had been speculating wildly, and unfortunately, lately."

"Speculating?"

"With his money, Harry. Your aunt appears to think that she is...broke." Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore put up a hand to stop him. "We will, of course, look into this. But, if it is true...Harry, you are your aunt and your cousin's nearest relative. If they are destitute, you are all they have."

Chapter 28 Family

"What?" Ron said. "That's bloody ridiculous!"

"I know," Harry said, "but it's true, for all of that. Until we can find Aunt Marge, I'm stuck with the Dursleys. And if Aunt Marge won't help them out, then..." He trailed off, unable even to contemplate such a thing.

"Why wouldn't she?" Hermione asked.

The three of them were huddled around their usual table in the common room, their Potions books and notes spread out between them. The common room wasn't the best place to be talking about sensitive subjects like Sirius and Muggles in Hogwarts, but by the time Harry had burst in through the portrait hole after seeing Sirius and Professor Figg, it had been too late to go anywhere else. Hermione had suggested using their Potions work as a shield, and, though the common room was full of Gryffindors, most of them even studying, it had worked so far. Now, Harry pretended to be pointing something out to Hermione as he answered her question.

"From what I could make out, Aunt Petunia told Professor Figg and Snuffles that Aunt Marge never really liked her, she just put up with her for Uncle Vernon and Dudley's sake. She thinks that Aunt Marge might help out Dudley, as long as she could still afford her dogs and her holidays in Majorca, but not Aunt Petunia. Snuffles said she was...slightly hysterical." 'Slightly off her rocker' was what Sirius had really said, but Harry knew Hermione wouldn't like to hear that.

"Well, that's understandable, Harry," Hermione said. "She'd just seen her home and her life in ruins."

"Yes," Harry said, "but that's -" He broke off, because suddenly Ginny burst through the portrait hole, looked around wildly, and practically threw herself at the three of them.

"Harry, you'll never believe," she said, speaking in short gasps, as soon as she was close enough so they could hear and no one else could, "what I saw...I saw Si-Snuffles...he was..."

"We know all about that," Ron said when she paused for another breath. He waved a languid hand at her.

Ginny shut her mouth with a snap, her eyes flashing. She took a deep breath and let it out in a huff.

"You can't possibly," she said, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at her brother.

"Oh, yeah?" Ron said, crossing his own arms and glaring back. "Why not?" Even though he was sitting and she was standing, he barely had to crane his neck to look her in the eye.

"Because this is something only I know about," Ginny said, leaning towards him and pinning him to his chair with her glare. *How do the Weasley women do that?* Harry wondered. He remembered Mrs. Weasley chastising a towering, but cringing, Fred and George.

Ron was made of stern stuff, though. He glared right back. "Is that what you think? You think that everything about Harry belongs to you now, don't you? Well, you're wrong. We know what you're about to say, because Harry told us. I don't know how you found out - snooping around the hospital wing, I suppose - but Harry told us. So don't you go thinking you own him now!"

Harry felt his face burning, and he was fervently glad that both brother and sister were keeping their voices down, practically hissing their words. He tried to interrupt, but Ron and Ginny both ignored him, and Hermione just put a hand on his arm and shook her head at him.

"I don't think that, Ron, and you know it," Ginny said. "I'm not the one who needs to own people - I'm not the one who keeps secrets from his family - I'm not the one who puts his friends over his family!" Harry could see her practically shaking with anger.

"Oh, yeah?" Ron said. "What about Tom Riddle's diary, huh?"

Ginny and Harry gasped at that, and Harry felt Hermione kick Ron under the table. Ginny's gasp had apparently been a furious one, though.

"I wouldn't have needed to turn to Tom if you hadn't shut me out, Ron," she said, her voice finally rising. They were starting to attract some attention, and Harry looked around wildly for some help. The only other Weasley he saw was Fred, sitting in a corner with Angelina, and she seemed to be holding him back from interfering. "We were such good friends before you came to Hogwarts," Ginny continued, her angry voice not really matching her pleading words, "but after you met Harry and Hermione, you shut me out. Doesn't it say something that a girl with six brothers had to turn to an enchanted diary for friendship and understanding?"

Harry felt the pang of guilt that always happened whenever he thought of Ginny being so lonely she had to turn to a diary in her first year, because of him. He felt Hermione tense beside him, too, but after a moment he realized that she was suppressing laughter. He turned to stare at her, shocked. He certainly didn't feel like laughing right then.

"Oh, that's rich," Ron shot back, his voice rising a bit in turn. "When have you ever been understanding? It's always, 'Don't fight so much with Hermione, Ron,' and 'You know nothing about girls, Ron.' What about -" He broke off suddenly, glancing about wildly. When he realized that he was the subject of most of the common room's attention, his ears turned bright red, and he glared at all the Gryffindors staring at him.

Ginny wasn't done, though. "What about yourself? 'Don't embarrass me around Harry, Ginny,' and 'Stop following him around, he's not interested in a little girl like you -'" She stopped in her turn, her cheeks stained pink. She sat down abruptly and bent her head so her hair hid some of her face. She didn't look at Harry, even though he was staring at her.

Since it seemed like the argument was over for now, the rest of the Gryffindors went back to their own business. Neither Ron nor Ginny spoke or looked at each other, and Harry and Hermione exchanged baffled glances. Hermione lifted her eyebrows at him, and he shrugged back. He had no idea what just happened, how it blew up so quickly, or how to cope with it. Ginny had seemed so happy when she'd burst into the room; now she looked miserable, and Harry had no idea what to do. He had no experience in sibling fighting, after all, and when Ron and Hermione used to fight, one of them would stomp off at the end of it, and they'd both ignore the fight when they met again. Neither Ron nor Ginny looked like they were going to

do that, and Ron and Hermione's current make up strategy obviously wouldn't work in this case, either.

"So, erm, Ginny," Hermione finally said. "What did you see Snuffles do that you came tearing in here to tell us?"

"Oh!" Ginny said, raising her head suddenly and shaking back her hair. Now, she easily met Harry's eyes, her own sparkling, and he was glad that she could put the argument with Ron out of her mind. "I had a vision of Snuffles, Harry. He was wearing dress robes, and he was laughing. He looked so happy, Harry, so...carefree. It was wonderful to see."

"Ginny, that's incredible," Hermione said, which was a good thing, because Harry was speechless. While Ginny had been speaking, he could almost see a laughing, happy Sirius himself, and she was right - it was wonderful to see. Harry had never really known his godfather to be happy; there was always something horrible happening - usually to him - or someone to worry about - usually him. And, of course, the dark of Azkaban never really left Sirius' eyes. But if Ginny saw him happy - carefree and laughing - then he would be. Which meant...which meant a lot of things that Harry wasn't sure he should really think about right then. He knew he couldn't actually thank Ginny in words for what she'd given him, so he tried to do it with just a smile, and was rewarded by her own lit-from-within smile, which made him more speechless than ever.

Typically, Hermione wasn't, and this time, Harry was glad.

"Well, you won't believe what happened today, Ginny," she said. "Or actually, you probably will, because you saw it, didn't you? You'll have to talk to Snuffles or Professor Figg and compare your vision to what actually happened. I'd like to know how closely they match up, so we have a basis for your other visions. You won't mind telling me, will you, Ginny?"

"Of course not, Hermione, but...erm, could you start at the beginning?"

Harry tuned out as Hermione began to tell Ginny the story he had just told her and Ron. She told it much better, of course. He did enjoy watching Ron's gradual entrance into the conversation, though. At first, Ron held himself aloof, although Harry had seen him start when Ginny mentioned her vision. But soon he was embellishing Hermione's facts with his own opinions of the Dursleys, the Ministry, and even Dumbledore. He seemed to have forgotten all about his fight with Ginny by the time Hermione told of the Dark Mark floating over number four, Privet Drive.

"Just like you saw, huh, Ginny?" he said. "And you were right, Harry wasn't there."

Ginny gave him a look that told Harry she hadn't forgotten their argument, even if Ron had, but then she seemed to put it deliberately out of her mind in order to answer him. Harry shook his head, thinking that this was another thing he'd never understand - the brother-sister relationship.

"Yes, Ron, just like I saw," Ginny said, then took a deep breath and turned to Harry. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"Sorry?" Ron said, looking confused and upset. "Why are you sorry that the git who locked Harry in a cupboard is dead? I thought you l-" He broke off and just waved a hand at Harry and Ginny.

"Well, she can be sorry that Harry's forced to deal with the Dursleys," Hermione said. "Oh, I hadn't told you that part yet, Ginny. Apparently, the Dursleys have lost all of their money, so they're dependent on Harry."

"Well, I am sorry about that, though I know you'll do the right thing, Harry," Ginny said, her voice soft, but firm. "But I'm also sorry that your Uncle Vernon was killed by Death Eaters."

That was all she said, but somehow Harry knew what she meant. She was sorry that this was another death to blame on himself, even though he knew he shouldn't, and even though he never liked Uncle Vernon. No one should ever be killed by Death Eaters. And no one should ever be left destitute by them, maybe even especially not Muggles who wanted nothing to do with magic. He gave Ginny a small smile, which she returned after a moment of searching his eyes intensely.

"Where are your aunt and cousin right now, Harry?" she asked.

"Dudley's still at school - he doesn't know yet," Harry said. "And Aunt Petunia's down in the hospital wing."

"Why?" Ginny asked. "She wasn't hurt, was she?"

Ron snorted. "No, but she had hysterics and attacked Snuffles. No wonder she's in the hospital wing."

"Actually, she attacked Snuffles, but that's not when she had hysterics," Harry said. "See, Snuffles brought her back here, because he didn't know what else to do with her. But he couldn't just walk in the front doors, so he took her to Remus' hut first. Erm...Remus and Miss Stuart were there."

Ginny grinned suddenly, but Ron and Hermione looked blank.

"Why would that give Mrs. Dursley hysterics?" Hermione asked.

"Toby and Remus are together," Ginny said, the grin still spread across her face. "I'm sure Harry's aunt was shocked. She sounds like a prude."

"Oh," Hermione said, but Harry shook his head.

"It's worse than that. Remember how I told you that Aunt Petunia was almost nice to me this summer and gave me that picture of my parents' wedding? Well, back then she...fancied Remus."

"Ew," Ron said. Then, he closed his eyes and started muttering, "Malfoy the Bouncing Ferret, Malfoy the Bouncing Ferret..."

Ginny eyed him oddly. "What's with you, Ron?"

"I'm trying to replace the mental picture Harry just forced on me with something better," he said, making Harry and Ginny laugh.

"I still don't see why she would have hysterics," Hermione said, looking like she was trying not to laugh, too.

"She still seemed to fancy him this summer," Harry said.

"But, Harry," Hermione said, her eyes wide with shock, "she was *married*."

"That doesn't mean she was dead and buried," Ron said, making Hermione turn and glare at him.

Harry just shook his head. "I know that, Hermione. All I'm saying is how it looked to me. Anyway, she and Snuffles walked in on Remus and Miss Stuart, and she had hysterics. Make of that what you will."

"You know," Hermione said, "I thought Miss Stuart...I mean, she and Snuffles..."

She trailed off, then turned to Ginny, her eyebrows raised. "How long have you known about this?"

"A little while," Ginny said. "I think they're good for each other, and all of Toby and Snuffles' past history would just get in the way."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully, and then the two girls launched into a discussion of exactly why Remus and Miss Stuart would be good for each other. Harry listened in shocked amusement, but Ron tried to follow the conversation for a little while, before turning back to Harry.

"Blimey," he said. "It's like one of those Muggle soap plays Lavender and Dean are always talking about. And I understand it about as well."

Harry just laughed, but Hermione, demonstrating her usual ability to take part in two conversations at once, said, "Soap operas, Ron, not soap plays." Then she turned back to Ginny and said, "I can completely understand what attracted them to each other. They both feel guilty for something neither one of them can help, and they both feel ashamed of something they did to cope. It's a different type of guilt from Snuffles - he chose to do what makes him feel guilty."

From overhearing far too many conversations between Lavender and Parvati, Harry knew that this was the sort of thing girls liked to discuss. He just never expected Hermione to be one of those girls.

"Plus, Remus is awfully good-looking, isn't he?" Ginny said, which Harry really didn't need to hear. Besides, Ron had started to lightly bang his head down on the table, and Harry could see a grin starting to spread across Hermione's face.

"Can we come back to the issue at hand, please?" he asked plaintively.

Both girls turned towards him immediately, but neither one looked particularly contrite. In fact, there was something in the intensity of Ginny's gaze that made Harry's stomach do an odd flip-flop.

"Well, I have an idea," Hermione said, but then stopped. Since this was completely unlike Hermione, the rest of them just stared at her.

"I don't know if it's my place," she said, glancing back and forth between Ron and Ginny, "but maybe Mrs. Weasley could talk to Mrs. Dursley? It's been really helpful for my parents to talk to her, I know."

"Why not your mum?" Ron asked. "She knows first-hand about being a Muggle in the wizarding world."

Hermione looked flustered for a moment, then said, "It would take too long to bring her here. Your mum can Apparate to Hogsmeade."

"I think it's a wonderful idea," Ginny said, glaring at Ron for no reason that Harry could understand. "Mum explained things to the Longs, too."

"Yeah, but they wanted to hear what she had to say," Ron said. He kept eyeing Hermione strangely.

"Aunt Petunia won't," Harry said, trying to keep the conversation on track, "and she already knows about the magical world, even though she doesn't like it. The part I don't know how to explain to her is the money. She's going to be furious that I had all this money and I didn't share it with them. Especially because it means that my mum had all this money, and she didn't..." He trailed off, and didn't look at anybody. He was glad none of them commented on that last sentence.

"And she's going to expect you to help her out now," Ginny said thoughtfully. "She's not going to see any reason why you wouldn't."

"What, the years of abuse and neglect aren't reason enough?" Ron said, rolling his eyes at his sister.

Harry shook his head. "Ginny's right," he said. "That's Aunt Petunia all over, especially because of Dudley." He paused a moment, then took a deep breath. "It would...I'd like to have Mrs. Weasley with me when I talk to Aunt Petunia, but I don't want to impose..." He trailed off, and Ron gave a huge snort.

"Stuff it, Harry," he said. "You know Mum thinks you're part of the family - how many Weasley jumpers will it take to convince you?"

"Remember your hand on our clock, Harry," Ginny said softly.

Harry ducked his head so none of them could see his eyes. He had the same reaction whenever he thought of his hand on the Weasley clock.

"So," Hermione said briskly, "how will we contact Mrs. Weasley? An owl would take far too long."

"I'd better go see Dumbledore," Harry said. "Yes, I know it's after hours, Hermione, but I don't think he'll mind."

Hermione nodded. "But don't go alone, Harry. Ron told me about the spy, and, besides, there's always Professor Snape."

"What spy?" Ginny asked.

"You stay here and tell Ginny about the spy, Hermione," Harry said. "Ron and I will go to Dumbledore." He did want a Weasley with him when he asked their mum for help - clock hand or no clock hand - and at least if Snape caught him and Ron, he wouldn't think they had snuck off to find a broom cupboard. At least, Harry hoped he wouldn't.

Luckily, none of the Hogwarts prowlers found the two of them, and Professor Dumbledore hadn't changed his password. Ron made a face when Harry said, "Everlasting Gobstoppers."

"Dumbledore has the oddest taste in sweets, hasn't he?" he said.

"Why?" Harry asked, as they stepped on the moving staircase, and it began to carry them upwards.

"You've never had one? You mean, Seamus hasn't forced one on you? Well, they really do last forever, for one thing."

"Why would someone make sweets that really last forever?" Harry asked. "Wouldn't people stop buying them?"

"See, they change flavors as you suck on them. They start with really good ones, like toffee and lemon, but then they move onto things like roast beef or milk, and then to hay or...seaweed. Bill says he had one that tasted like seaweed. How he knows what seaweed tastes like, I don't know, but that's what he says. And each Gobstopper has a different sequence of flavors."

"So maybe they don't really last forever, it's just that no one's ever sucked on one long enough to work through all the flavors," Harry said.

"Maybe," Ron said. "But you're welcome to try - bet you won't make it through the fish oil."

Harry laughed. "I won't make it through the milk," he said, just as the moving staircase deposited them at the door to Dumbledore's office. That made Harry sober. He was taking Dumbledore's advice seriously - he wasn't trying to make himself feel something about Uncle Vernon's death that he just wasn't feeling. He was still a little surprised at how easily he'd forgotten it, though. Between Ginny and Hermione's relationship talk and Ron's treatise on sweets, he'd put it almost completely out of his mind. He thought about taking out his pocket watch for a little guidance, but didn't like to with Ron right there, because he wasn't sure what it would say, or that he'd like what that said about him.

Just as Ron was starting to look at him funny for just standing there staring at Professor Dumbledore's door, Harry heard the headmaster say, "Come in, boys."

"Have you decided what you wish to do, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, as soon as he'd invited them to sit down and offered them both a sherbet lemon.

"Well, I'll help Aunt Petunia and Dudley out as much as I can, of course," Harry said, though he hadn't really realized that he'd decided that until it came out of his mouth. He could almost feel the indignant stare Ron was giving him, but he knew this was the right thing to do. "I want to ask Mrs. Weasley if she would help me explain things to Aunt Petunia," he continued, studiously avoiding Ron's eyes. Unfortunately, that meant that he met Dumbledore's, and the understanding in them was almost too much for him. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure exactly why he wanted Mrs. Weasley there so much, but he knew he did.

"Of course, Harry," was all Professor Dumbledore said. He reached for a jar, took out some powder, and tossed it into the fire. "The Burrow," he said, then turned to look at Harry.

Harry knelt down in front of the fire, but the thought of just sticking his head into it...he knew it was safe, he'd seen Sirius do it, after all, and it wasn't any different from flooing... He was very glad Ron wasn't saying anything. He took a deep breath and plunged his head into the now purple fire.

Suddenly, he felt as though he had been transported to the Burrow, even though he knew most of his body was still back at Hogwarts. Everything was crystal clear, and he could smell something spicy baking.

"Erm...Mrs. Weasley? Mr. Weasley?" he said, but when no one came, he realized that he'd have to shout. "Hello?" he called.

There was a sudden, arrested feel to the house, then Mr. Weasley, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill came running in through the door to the living room.

"Harry!" all three of them said, then Mrs. Weasley added, "Is everything all right? Ginny, the boys - nothing's happened?" She put a hand over her heart and stared intensely at him.

"No, no, they're all fine," Harry said quickly. "It's just...I'd like to ask for your help, if I may." It felt very odd to know that to the Weasleys he looked like a disembodied head, and even odder not to feel like one.

"If you may?" Mrs. Weasley said, taking a deep breath before walking over to a cupboard and pulling out a covered plate. "Don't be silly, Harry, of course we'll help you in any way you can. Would you like a biscuit? They're still warm."

Harry felt tears pricking his eyes for some reason, but he ignored them and nodded. Mrs. Weasley picked a biscuit up with some tongs and popped it into Harry's mouth. It *was* still warm, and it tasted heavenly.

"Is this about your uncle, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked, while Harry was still chewing. He and Bill had sat down at the kitchen table where Harry could easily see them. He wasn't surprised that the Weasleys knew what had happened on Privet Drive.

"Well, partly," he said, after he'd swallowed. "It's more about Aunt Petunia. I have to explain to her about the money I have, and why I never told them about it before. And then, I have to help her decide what she wants to do now, if she'll let me. Dudley hasn't been told yet, either,

and obviously Remus isn't a good person to send with Aunt Petunia to break the news. And I was hoping -" He broke off, suddenly realizing that he was babbling. He never babbled.

"What, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked. She hadn't taken a seat at the table; she still stood very close to him, and her face was full of sympathy.

Harry swallowed, resolved not to babble again. "I was hoping you could help me talk to her, Mrs. Weasley," he said.

"Of course I will, dear," she said. "Would you like me to come to Hogwarts, or are you going to bring her here?"

Harry thought of Aunt Petunia's probable reaction to the Burrow and shuddered. "Hogwarts, please," he said. "But not until tomorrow - Madam Pomfrey gave her some Dreamless Sleep potion. I went down there earlier to talk to her, and she was out cold."

"That's fine, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "I'll come along early, so we can talk, if you want."

"I'd like that," Harry said, ducking his head.

"Let us know if there's anything else we can do, Harry," Mr. Weasley said.

Harry nodded, not really trusting himself to speak.

"Have another biscuit before you go," Mrs. Weasley said, picking one up with the tongs. "And give Ginny and the boys our love."

Harry was glad that he was busy chewing, and didn't have to answer that, as he pulled his head out of the fire. He was still chewing as he stood up and turned back to Dumbledore and Ron, who sniffed suspiciously.

"Mum baked ginger snaps, didn't she?" he asked, and then rolled his eyes as Harry swallowed and nodded.

"So, Harry, what is the plan?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling at the two of them.

"Mrs. Weasley is going to come here tomorrow morning," Harry said. "Would it...would it be..."

"You can meet her here after breakfast," Dumbledore said. "Now, I think you both should return to Gryffindor. Don't brood over this tonight, Harry."

Harry promised that he wouldn't, and he and Ron headed back through the halls.

"Better not let Ginny know you had a ginger snap and didn't bring one back for her," Ron said, as they climbed through the portrait hole. "They're her favorite."

That was good advice, but as soon as they made their way over to where Ginny and Hermione sat, Ginny sniffed suspiciously, exactly like Ron had in Dumbledore's office.

"I smell Mum's ginger snaps," she said. "Ron, did you bring one back for me?"

Ron shook his head and grinned widely, pointing at Harry. "I didn't have one, but Harry did, and he didn't bring any back for any of us."

"Oh," Ginny said. "Harry, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Harry nodded and followed her to a secluded corner, trying to ignore Ron's, "Go easy on him, Gin."

"Ginny, I'm sorry I didn't bring you a biscuit," he started, but she quickly interrupted him.

"Oh, Harry, don't be silly. You don't really think I'm mad at you, do you? Honestly. No, I just wanted to ask for your advice about something, and this seemed like a good chance to do it without making Ron nervous."

"Oh," Harry said. He really had thought she was mad, and he was beginning to suspect that Ginny might make quite a good actress. "What is it?"

She suddenly dropped her eyes to her hands, which she was twisting convulsively in her lap.

"Right before I had the vision of Snuffles," she almost whispered, "I had another one. It was...oh, Harry, Death Eaters were attacking Dean's family!"

Harry had been leaning forward, trying to catch her every word, but at that he sat back. Whatever he'd been expecting, it hadn't been that, though it certainly made sense.

"Are you...are you sure, Ginny?" he asked.

She nodded, then dropped her voice even further. "I Saw Death Eaters torturing Dean's mother - he's shown me pictures of his parents, so I knew it was her."

"Torturing?"

Ginny nodded again, and she kept nodding as she spoke, as though she couldn't stop. "They used *Crucio*, and Dean's mum was in such pain, she was screaming and crying, and his dad tried to help, but the Death Eaters held him back, I don't know why -"

"Why do they do anything?" Harry muttered.

"And then Dean's dad managed to break free - he shook one of them off, then punched out another, and threw himself down next to Dean's mum...and then, the vision ended." She put both hands up to her eyes for a moment, then dropped them back down into her lap.

"Ginny, you know what this means?" Harry said slowly. "You didn't See the Death Eaters actually murder Dean's parents - maybe they won't. Maybe the Aurors will reach them in time and stop them."

"Do you really think so?" Ginny said, looking up at him through her eyelashes, her eyes full of hope. "That's what Toby said, but...none of my visions has done any good at all, and I can't help thinking this one won't, either." She kept her eyes fixed on his, as though pleading with him for reassurance, and for once, he could give it to her.

"One of your visions has already done a lot of good, Ginny," he said, putting a hand on hers, where she clasped them in her lap. "I really needed to hear about your vision of Snuffles right then, and I think he will be happy to hear about it, too."

"Toby said she'd tell him," Ginny said, dropping her gaze to where his hand rested on hers.

"I'm glad," he said. "Say, Ginny, when did you have this vision of Dean's parents? If you just had the one about Snuffles."

"Oh," she said, looking back up at him, her eyes sparkling. "I had the one about Dean's parents first, and then the one about Snuffles, one right after the other. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Erm...yeah?" Harry said.

"Honestly, Harry, did you never listen to Toby? She told us about this - when a new Seer is becoming more comfortable with her talent, visions often come very quickly to her, almost on top of each other. It's starting to happen, Harry."

"That *is* wonderful, Ginny," Harry said, and meant it. Aside from the obvious benefits of having a fully-functioning Seer, if Ginny felt that she was becoming comfortable with her talent...he looked down into her eyes, turned upwards towards his. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was breathing quickly...and suddenly, Harry remembered that they were in the common room, with at least two of her brothers right there.

"So, what did you want to ask my advice about?" he asked quickly, drawing back a little. He didn't think he imagined the slight disappointment he saw in Ginny's eyes. He hoped he didn't. At any rate, she dropped her eyes again.

"Well, should I tell Dean?" she asked. "You've lived with this, Harry, you know what it's like to have forewarning of an event. Is that...do you think Dean would want to know?"

Harry thought about the visions he and Ginny had had about him. They'd all foretold of death and destruction, and he hadn't liked a single one. And she was right, none of her visions had helped - they'd hadn't been able to prevent the attack on the Creeveys', or the one on Privet Drive. Maybe they could prevent this one, but Ginny had seen Dean's mother being tortured... Harry groaned and turned away from Ginny, burying his head in his hands.

"I don't know, Ginny. You know Dean better than I do, I think, even if I have shared a dorm with him for all these years. But, Ginny," he said, turning back to her and looking her straight in the eye. "I know what I would want. I'd want to know. That way, if the worst did happen, at least I'd know I did everything that could be done."

Ginny nodded, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"And another thing, Ginny," Harry added. "If the worst did happen, and someone who I considered a friend had known about it beforehand and hadn't told me...well, I don't think I'd consider that person a friend anymore."

Ginny gasped, and her eyes opened wide. She obviously hadn't thought of it that way before. It was the only way Harry could think of it, though - he was coming to realize that trust was very important to him. He knew he still hadn't wiped out all of his jealousy towards Dean, no

matter what Ginny had told him, but he also knew that Ginny needed friends, and he wasn't going to sit back and watch while she lost one.

Ginny reached out and touched his hand, sending shivers up his arm.

"Thank you, Harry," she said. Her lips parted slightly, as though to say something more, but she didn't speak again. Harry couldn't take his eyes off of her lips, and he felt his cheeks burning, though he couldn't say quite why. *She's got brothers, and they're right here*, he told himself firmly. *I'm sure Ron is watching our every move.*

"Erm...happy birthday, Ginny," he said, and managed to drag his eyes back up to meet hers. This time, he could definitely see the disappointment, and it made his heart sing.

She withdrew from him in turn, even moving back a little on the sofa, which didn't.

"Thanks, Harry," she said dully.

"And, erm, thank you for my watch fob," he said, pulling his watch out of his pocket. "This means so much to me." He felt desperate, because he didn't want her to think he didn't want to kiss her. He certainly did, but this was neither the time nor the place.

In his hurry, when he pulled the watch out of his pocket, it flipped open. Harry didn't notice at first, because he was reaching for the fob, but when he heard Ginny gasp, he looked down. "What are you waiting for - Christmas?" it said. Harry felt himself go red all over, and he couldn't meet Ginny's eyes.

"I think I'd better go talk to Dean," Ginny said, in a strangled voice. Then she did something for which Harry would forever be grateful. She leaned over and kissed him - on the cheek, but this wasn't like the kiss she'd given him to thank him for saving her life. He could feel that her lips were slightly parted against his cheek, and she lingered for several moments - long enough, at any rate, for him to clutch at her arm - but she pulled away before he could really react. As she walked away, his eyes hungrily following her, she reached up to touch the *claddagh* clip she still wore in her hair. Harry watched her, still, as she approached Dean, and then led him into another corner and began speaking to him earnestly. Only then, did Harry look around.

He felt as though he'd been put in the Total Body Bind. Four pairs of eyes, three Weasley, one Granger, stared at him, pinning him to his seat. Apparently, George had returned from wherever he'd been before, and Harry could almost feel the big brother, protective energy shooting toward him from Fred, George and Ron. Somehow, he managed to stand and make his way back over to Ron and Hermione, since Ron, according to Hermione, was 'all right' with him and Ginny.

Ron met his approach with, "Did my sister just kiss you? Ew."

Harry couldn't help but laugh. It was nice to know that, no matter what life-threatening or life-changing event had just taken place, Ron could always make him laugh.

Chapter 29 A Tricky Situation

Harry wasn't laughing later that night, as he lay in bed, completely unable to sleep. As Dobby had gone through his usual embarrassing ritual of tucking him in, he'd said, "Dobby is sorry that the bad, bad man is dead!" He'd then looked around wildly for a moment, and would have hit himself over the head with the fireplace tongs if Harry hadn't leapt out of bed and stopped him. This had had the effect of dragging Harry's thoughts back to the Dursleys, but that wasn't what was keeping him awake. He kept replaying the scene with Ginny in the common room over and over in his head, and even after a few hours, he couldn't decide if he wasn't sleeping because of happiness, or frustration.

When morning light finally started filtering in through the windows, Harry got out of bed, dressed quickly, and slipped down to the common room. It was too early to go down to breakfast, but he felt that if he stayed in bed one moment more, he'd go insane. He headed over to the corner where he'd left his books the night before, but stopped when a voice spoke out of the near darkness, making him jump.

"How do you stand it, Harry?"

"What? Is that you, Dean?" Harry asked. He could barely make out the other boy in the shadows near the magically banked fire, but he slowly picked his way over to him. He hadn't even realized Dean hadn't been in the dormitory during his long, sleepless night. "What did you ask?" he added, when he'd reached Dean and sat down in a chair across from him.

"How do you stand it? How do you live with the blood on your hands?"

Harry sat there, rigid with shock. He remembered Cho asking him that exact same question on the shore by the lake, the day Ginny had had her first vision of the Dark Mark. Ginny had helped him answer it then, but she wasn't here now, and he really didn't know what to say to Dean. He did realize that Dean wasn't lashing out at him, he was lashing out at himself, but that didn't help him answer the question.

"Well...I guess I...erm, I don't, really," he finally said. "I mean, I don't do it very well. Hermione and Ginny are always telling me that none of it is my fault, but...it's hard to believe them sometimes."

"Yeah," Dean said. He didn't say anything else for awhile, and Harry just sat there with him, both of them lost in their thoughts. Finally, Dean stirred. "Ginny said the same thing to me...she kept going on about the difference between causality and blame...but, really, what is the difference? The plain truth is that if I hadn't been a wizard, my parents wouldn't be attacked. My mum wouldn't be -" he choked on the word, "tortured."

"But maybe they won't now," Harry said. "I mean, because of what Ginny Saw, there'll be protection for them, when there wouldn't have been before."

He heard rather than saw Dean shake his head.

"Ginny Saw it," he said, "so I know it will come true. My mum will be tortured, because of me. So I ask you again, Harry, how do you live with it? How do you keep going, and do all the things you do, with this...this burden hanging over you?"

Harry thought about that. What had Ginny said when Cho had asked that question? Almost all he could remember was how surprised he'd been that she had stood up for him.

"I suppose I just do," he said slowly. "I think about it, of course - Hermione says too much - but I try to just live." As he said this, he realized that it was the simple truth, and he realized something else. "And I have to. *You* have to. If we don't, then Voldemort wins. Prejudice wins. Evil wins. We can't let that happen, Dean." He could feel Dean's eyes boring into him, and he shut his mouth with a snap. He couldn't believe he'd just said all of that, and to Dean, of all people.

Suddenly, Dean stood up, towering over where Harry sat in his chair.

"Good answer," was all he said, before turning and heading up towards their dormitory.

Harry only sat still for another moment before realizing that he could not, *could not*, just sit and think right now. He had to talk to somebody. He didn't have the energy to force Ron to wake up, he didn't want to be caught sneaking into the girls' dormitory to talk to Ginny or Hermione...suddenly, he remembered Sirius. Since Sirius could never enter the castle as a human, it was easy for Harry to forget that he had a godfather living nearby, on whom he could rely. But that was one reason why Sirius was here, after all, to be here when Harry needed him. He needed him right now.

He returned to his dormitory briefly to fetch his outdoor things and the invisibility cloak. No snores were coming from Dean's bed, but the curtains were drawn, and Harry hoped that Dean had fallen asleep. Under the invisibility cloak, he made his way down to Remus' hut without incident, and it wasn't until he'd already knocked on the door that he thought that Sirius and Remus would probably still be asleep. He'd almost turned away and headed back to the castle before the door opened, and a very sleepy Remus poked his head out.

"Who's there?" he asked, coming awake quickly when he saw no one.

Harry pulled the invisibility cloak off his head, and was immediately hustled into the hut.

"Harry," Remus said, as he bustled about, preparing tea, "you know you shouldn't be wandering about in the middle of the night like this. Not that we're not glad to see you, of course." He indicated that Harry should sit down at the table and handed him a cup of tea.

"It's not the middle of the night," Harry said.

"It bloody well is the middle of the night," a voice grumbled from under the covers piled on the sofa. "Do you see the sun yet? Who says it's morning?" An eye poked out from among the covers, and suddenly, Sirius sat up, his hair looking almost like Harry's usually did. "Harry! Is something wrong - Ron, Hermione, Ginny?"

"Everyone's fine," Harry said quickly. "Well, except for Dean."

"Dean?" Sirius said. He swung his legs off the sofa and onto the floor, then tried to stand up and walk over to the table, but the blankets were still wrapped around his legs, so he only managed an ungainly lurch. Harry watched him, fascinated at how much the hut felt like a home.

"Dean Thomas," Remus said, setting out a teacup for Sirius and beginning to prepare breakfast. "The boy whose parents were in Ginny's vision."

"Oh," Sirius said. He took a sip of tea, looking over the rim of the cup at Harry. "How is Ginny?"

Harry felt himself turning red. "She's fine," he said, looking down at his own teacup. "She was upset, of course, but I think she feels better now."

"That's good, Harry," Remus said, casting a reproving look in Sirius' direction, "but how is Dean?"

"Erm," Harry said. He took a deep breath. "He asked me for advice, erm, on how to deal with it." He felt Sirius make an abortive move towards him, and he was glad his godfather hadn't actually touched him. Maybe if he could imagine he was alone in the room, he could actually get this out. "I didn't know what to tell him. I mean...I *hate* this. It's not something I chose, and it's not something I understand. *Why* does Voldemort want to kill me so much? *Why* is he willing to concentrate so much of his energy on me?"

"We don't know that, Harry," Sirius said. "But there's something in you that he needs to defeat, and until he's gone, you will always be in danger. We'll try to protect you as much as we can..."

"What did you say to Dean, Harry?" Remus asked after a moment of silence. He slid a plate in front of Harry, who looked down at the eggs and sausages, and wasn't quite sure what to do with them. He picked up his fork, but just fiddled with it.

"I said...I said that I just did. Live with it, I mean. I don't really know how. And that it was important to do that, or Voldemort would win." He was staring at his fingers playing with the fork, so he was surprised to feel a hand on each of his shoulders. He looked up to see Sirius on one side of him, and Remus on the other.

"That's exactly right, Harry," Sirius said, his dark eyes boring holes into Harry's. "Life is what defeats Voldemort - life, and effort, and love. I know it's hard sometimes..." He trailed off, his gaze sliding away from Harry's.

Harry didn't like the look on his godfather's face. He turned to Remus.

"Well, you're certainly living," he said, trying to smile. "Why didn't you tell me? You told Ginny." His voice turned bitter as he spoke, which surprised him. He hadn't realized that he'd resented not knowing about Remus and Miss Stuart so much.

"I didn't," Remus said, taking his hand off of Harry's shoulder and bustling about the kitchen again. "Toby did. And I should have said something to you, Harry. I'm sorry."

"What Moony is trying to say," Sirius said, lightly punching Harry in the shoulder, and popping one of the sausages from Harry's plate into his mouth, before beginning to eat his own breakfast, "is that he's still in too much shock to tell anyone. Toby had to tell me, too. Me," he added, putting one hand over his heart and looking up at Remus mournfully, "his bestest, bestest friend."

Harry couldn't help grinning at that, and Remus smiled, too, though he sent a sudden shower of blue sparks over his shoulder at Sirius, who pretended to be mortally wounded before

returning to his breakfast. Harry felt a little better, knowing he wasn't the only one who hadn't heard about it from Remus himself. *Not everything is about you*, he told himself. *Get over it*. He picked up his fork again, and this time, he actually ate his breakfast.

When Harry returned to the castle, escorted by Remus, students were just starting to file into the Great Hall for their breakfast. Harry hesitated, torn between heading up to Dumbledore's office right away, or waiting until he'd seen Ginny, Ron and Hermione. He knew they'd be worried if they didn't see him, but he really wanted to get this morning over with as quickly as possible.

Remus seemed to read his mind. "Why don't you go up to Dumbledore's office, Harry," he said. "I'll let Ginny, Ron and Hermione know where you are." Harry had told him and Sirius about the plan for this morning, only to find that they already knew.

Harry smiled his thanks to Remus and started up the stairs. He passed Lee and Alicia, looking blissfully happy, and George and Brenna, deep in an intense discussion. When George saw him, he raised his arm, motioning him over, but Brenna put her hand on his arm and shook her head at Harry. He was just as glad. Whatever George wanted could wait - he had enough to think about right at that moment.

Mrs. Weasley had already arrived when Harry reached Dumbledore's office; Harry found her cooing over Fawkes, who looked more resigned than anything else.

"Harry, dear," she said, swiftly crossing the room to envelope him in a hug.

Harry allowed himself to enjoy the hug for only a moment before pulling away.

"What am I going to say to her?" he asked suddenly, noticing but ignoring the smile that played around Mrs. Weasley's lips as he spoke.

"Well," she said, leading him over to one of the comfortable chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk and sitting down in the other one, "what do you want to say to her?"

"Seriously?" Harry asked, staring at her. "I want to ask why she treated me the way she did. She knew I was magic, knew magic existed, and yet she...and I'm her sister's son! How could she treat me - how could she treat anyone the way she did? Did she really think she could torture the magic out of me, and does that really make it right?"

"Are you going to ask her those questions, Harry?"

He shook his head, hoping that she wouldn't ask him why not. She didn't; she just sat in her chair hands clasped in her lap, watching him with softened eyes. He wasn't quite sure why he knew he wouldn't ask Aunt Petunia those questions. He could have any time this past summer, but he hadn't done it then, either. Maybe it was because however much he wanted to ask, he wasn't sure he'd like her answers.

"Besides," he said, after a few moments' silence, "it would be frightfully inappropriate to quiz her on her motives now, wouldn't it?"

"Well, she does have her own problems at the moment," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling slightly. "But, Harry, you're entitled to answers to those questions whenever you want them. Be sure not to forget that."

Harry shook his head, then rubbed both hands over his face and through his hair.

"She's really not going to understand about the money," he said.

"You might be surprised, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said softly.

He broke off making his hair stand on end more than usual, and stared at her.

"Aunt Petunia's not like you, Mrs. Weasley," he said.

She smiled. "Call me Molly, dear," she said. "And you still might be surprised."

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Harry said. "Besides, there isn't much time before lessons."

"Albus said you could miss your morning lessons, dear."

"I know," Harry said, standing up, "but my second lesson is Potions, and I really don't want to give Snape any more ammunition. He doesn't need it, after all."

They made their way down to the hospital wing, passing the hubbub-filled Great Hall. Harry heard Aunt Petunia before he saw her.

"What *is* that? It looks disgusting. You're not expecting me to *drink* that, are you?"

Apparently, Madam Pomfrey did expect her to drink whatever it was, and had her methods of making her do it, because Aunt Petunia was still sputtering when they entered the room. Madam Pomfrey gave Harry a sympathetic look before walking away, carrying the now-empty glass.

"*There* you are," Aunt Petunia said, as soon as she'd recovered. "Why haven't you been here before this?"

"I came last night, but you were asleep," Harry said. "How are you feeling?"

"How do you expect? That horrible woman woke me up to give me some dreadful medicine, and I couldn't fall back to sleep after that. I've just been sitting here, thinking about everything..." She had started off standing up, with her arms crossed over her chest, but she sank down onto the bed, hanging her head.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia," Harry said, pulling a chair over from beside one of the other beds so Molly could sit down. "This is Molly Weasley," he added. "She's here to help explain things to you."

"What needs to be explained? My husband has been murdered, and my son and I are destitute, and it's all because of you and your abnormality."

Harry felt that he should be shocked that she would say such things to her own nephew, but he just wasn't. He knew Aunt Petunia, and besides, Dean had said much the same, to say nothing of all the times he'd thought it himself.

"That is not true," Molly said. "Your husband was murdered by an evil man, solely because he is an evil man."

Part of Harry was grateful to her for saying that, but another part of him was just tired of hearing it. Whatever the difference between blame and causality, as Dean had put it, the end result was the same. Uncle Vernon had died because his nephew was Harry Potter. There was no getting around that. Besides, he knew Aunt Petunia wouldn't listen.

"Don't give me that," she snapped at Molly, then turned to Harry. "Fetch me that picture on the table there," she said to him. Harry followed her pointing finger, to see one of the many family portraits the Dursleys had had taken. It was well within Aunt Petunia's reach, from where she sat on the bed. He wasn't surprised, though, and he started to stand up to obey her. Before he finished standing, Molly put a hand on his arm to stop him.

"Do you really think it's a good idea to antagonize Harry now?" she asked Aunt Petunia, quietly but firmly.

Aunt Petunia slumped even more.

"I know," she said, staring down between her feet at the floor. "Don't think I don't see the irony of it all. Of course, he owes it to me for everything Vernon and I did for him. I hope he's not so ungrateful as to admit it." She seemed to be trying to forget that Harry was in the room, and he just sat there, willing to go along with it.

"I don't think Harry is ungrateful," Molly said. "He's here, isn't he?"

Aunt Petunia's head snapped up suddenly, and she glared at him.

"Does that mean you're going to do your duty, boy?"

Harry looked down at his feet, remembering all the times he'd lain in his cupboard and dreamed of a day when the Dursleys needed to rely on him. In his daydreams, he'd always, always turned them down. He'd known it wasn't right, known that he probably wouldn't do it, if it came right down to it, but it had been a wonderful dream. If he helped Aunt Petunia and Dudley now, he'd have to give it up. That made him angry, but what made him even angrier was knowing that he couldn't not take care of them. There was something in him that just wouldn't let him turn his back on his relatives, even though they'd been absolutely horrible to him every moment of his life.

He looked back up at Aunt Petunia and nodded.

She didn't say thank you, didn't even smile at him, but Molly did, and seeing her reminded Harry of Ginny. Ginny had expected him to what he should - no, more than that, she'd known he would do it. Known it in every fiber of her being, that was how sure she'd sounded. She would have done it, Harry knew, just as she always did her duty, always did what was right. She'd certainly learned from the one time she hadn't. And it was that quality that drew him to her more than any other. She made him good, just by being so herself.

Aunt Petunia seemed completely unaware that Harry was undergoing such soul-searching.

"How will you help us?" she asked.

This was what Harry had been dreading the most. He looked to Molly for help.

"Harry has inherited some money from his parents," she said, sounding as though it was the most usual thing in the world, which, come to think of it, it was.

"You...you have?" Aunt Petunia asked, finally turning completely to Harry, and he braced himself for her anger. "We won't be...completely destitute?"

Harry shook his head, completely surprised. She sounded relieved, not angry. "No, of course not. But, Aunt Petunia, what about Aunt Marge?"

Aunt Petunia sniffed. "Marge might help Dudley, but not me. Well, she might if I promised to live with her and take care of her dogs. But even then...no, I don't think I can count on Marge. And I wouldn't want to." She stood up, and began pacing back and forth in front of her bed. "But what can I do? Where can I go? I...don't really have any friends...not close enough to take me in, at any rate. The house is destroyed..."

Harry didn't know what to say. It was amazing, hearing Aunt Petunia admitting all of this, but at the same time, it made his world feel slightly wobbly. Besides, he really didn't know where she could go. She couldn't stay at Hogwarts, that was certain.

"You could come stay with us for awhile, until you've found something else," Molly said, standing up and putting a hand on Aunt Petunia's arm, forcing her to stop pacing. "We'll think of something."

Harry was surprised to see tears in Aunt Petunia's eyes. "I could? I -" She broke off for a moment, and her eyes hardened. She looked Molly up and down, and Harry watched her mouth twist into a sneer. Before she could say anything, though, he spoke.

"Don't even say it, Aunt Petunia," he said. "Did you know that Mr. Weasley works for the Ministry of Magic?"

Molly turned to stare at him, obviously confused, but Harry knew Aunt Petunia understood him quite well. He was sick of people looking down on the Weasleys, and he wasn't going to have his aunt do it, too, no matter what she thought Molly's clothes indicated about their class. And she did understand him; her eyes widened, and she obviously changed what she had been about to say.

"I suppose your house is full of...of magic?" she said.

Harry rolled his eyes; surely, she could have come up with something better than that. Molly still seemed confused, but she didn't say anything, just shrugged and nodded.

Aunt Petunia swallowed. "Well, at least it is a house. I don't suppose I have much choice."

Harry drew in a breath, about to tell Aunt Petunia that she'd better be grateful to Molly for taking her in, but Molly waved at him to be silent.

"So, what did you do before you had Dudley?" she asked instead, leading Aunt Petunia back to the bed and sitting down next to her.

"I was V-Vernon's secretary," Aunt Petunia said quietly.

"Well, there are always openings for secretaries," Molly said. "You could find a job in either the Muggle or the wizarding world, I should think."

"Why would I want a job in the wizarding world?" Aunt Petunia said. "I want to get as far away from this mess as possible. If I don't, next time it might be my Duddy-kins who's murdered."

Harry thought that she had a point, and he could tell Molly did, too, so they left it at that. Aunt Petunia started gathering the few things Sirius and Professor Figg had been able to save from the ruined house.

"What about Dudley?" Harry asked suddenly. "Who's going to tell him?"

"We could Apparate to his school as soon as you've settled in at the Burrow," Molly said to Aunt Petunia. "Would you like someone else there with us, Remus perhaps?"

Harry gasped when she said that, then realized that Molly didn't know about Remus and Aunt Petunia's past. Aunt Petunia didn't gasp; she just stiffened, then shook her head.

"No, thank you. I think the two of us will be just fine."

As Harry watched them leave the hospital wing, each of them carrying one of the two suitcases that was all that was left of the house on Privet Drive, all he could think was, "*How?*"

By the time he made his way down to the Potions corridor, there were only a few minutes left before the lesson began. Ron and Hermione were waiting for him.

"Harry, where were you this morning?" Hermione asked, as soon as he was within earshot.

Harry waited until he could speak quietly. "You know where I was, talking to Aunt Petunia in the hospital wing. Didn't Remus tell you?"

Hermione shook her head. "I mean early this morning. Ron woke up, and you weren't there. We were worried about you, Harry."

Harry looked down at his feet. "I went to see Snuffles," he said.

"You could have left a note," Ron said quietly.

Harry looked up. Somehow, the look in Ron's eyes told him more than all of Hermione's words just how worried they'd been.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I will next time."

Ron just nodded, accepting this, but Hermione said, "Harry, you know you shouldn't wander about by yourself, it's too dangerous, especially now. It's irresponsible of you, to put yourself in danger. We worry so much about you."

"Isn't that sweet, Potter, they worry about you," came the sneering voice of Draco Malfoy

from behind Harry. "Are these your new mummy and daddy? How appropriate that one of them is a disgrace to wizard kind, and the other is a Mudblood."

Harry whirled around to face him, and he could feel Ron stiffening beside him, but before either of them could do anything, Hermione said, "Stay away from us, Malfoy. Ginny's taught me the Pepper Spray Charm, and believe me, I'd love to use it on you."

"You think I want to touch you, Mudblood?" Malfoy said, not moving from where he stood. "No real wizard would want to touch you."

"Except a Weasley," Harry said, grabbing Ron before he could launch himself at Malfoy. He was very deliberately not reaching for his wand. He remembered what had happened the last time he and Malfoy had dueled outside of Snape's classroom. "Isn't that what you want, Malfoy, to be touched by a Weasley? Not that she ever would."

"If the four of you would cease this truly mature discussion of your love lives, perhaps you would join my lesson," Snape said from behind Harry, Ron and Hermione.

The three of them turned as one, and filed into the classroom. Hermione, reprising the role she played in so many Potions lessons, was chanting, "Ignore him, ignore him," at Ron, but Harry didn't have any trouble ignoring Malfoy once the lesson started. For one thing, Snape hadn't given out any detentions, or taken any points from Gryffindor, which had surprised him, and for another, his eye was caught by Dean, who seemed to have been waiting for him to enter. Dean nodded at Harry, and gave him a small smile, which Harry returned. Apart from looking exhausted, he seemed much better than he had that morning in the common room, and Harry hoped that meant that he'd come to terms with Ginny's vision. There really were more important things than Draco Malfoy.

Besides, Snape's lesson was actually very interesting, which Harry was beginning to notice was the case more and more often this year. They were studying the Endurance Potion, which enables wizards to keep fighting, long after they should have collapsed from their wounds. This came at a price, of course - once the wizard finally did collapse, his recovery would be much slower and less certain. All the same, Harry could see how the potion would be very useful to both Aurors and Death Eaters. He knew Ginny wouldn't like his next thought - that the Gryffindors in the class would be the Aurors, and the Slytherins the Death Eaters - but he couldn't help it. Something about Snape's lessons always brought out the worst in him, especially right after a confrontation with Malfoy. He was glad to escape at the end of the lesson.

Ron seemed glad, too, until Harry realized that the real reason he practically ran out of the classroom and all the way up to the Great Hall was to avoid Malfoy. He kept muttering, even after they'd started eating lunch, but both Harry and Hermione knew better than to answer him. They ate in this strange half-silence until Ginny sat down next to Harry.

"Why do we need to know how to change lead into gold, anyway?" she asked, dropping her bookbag on the seat next to her, making it shake. "It's not as though any gold we make is valid currency, anyway." She looked at the three of them, then focused on her brother. "What's with him?" she asked, nudging Harry.

"Malfoy," Harry said.

"Honestly, Ron, just ignore him," she said, reaching for some shepherd's pie. "He's not worth it."

"Not all of us can use the Pepper Spray Charm on him, you know," Ron said.

"You mean you *want* Malfoy to touch you?" Ginny asked him, her eyes wide.

Ron tried to keep a straight face, but he couldn't, and the rest of them burst out laughing, too.

After they'd calmed down again, Ron sighed.

"I know he's not worth it," he said to Ginny, "but somehow I can't stop myself. I just get so furious when he insults our family, or Her-Hermione." His eyes flicked to Hermione, who had turned pink.

Ginny smiled at him. "I know, and we love you for it, you big oaf." She reached across the table and flicked a finger against his nose.

Ron looked down suddenly, and Harry suspected that Hermione had taken his hand under the table. He looked away, to find Ginny grinning at him. He couldn't help but grin back.

Suddenly, Hermione drew a big breath. "How did your meeting with your aunt go, Harry?" she asked.

"All right," Harry said, putting down his fork. "She blames me for Uncle Vernon's death, of course."

Hermione opened her mouth again, but Ginny shook her head at her, then put her hand on Harry's arm and gave it a soft squeeze. Harry turned to her, his mouth open in shock, and it was a good thing he caught sight of Ron's disgusted face out of the corner of his eye, or otherwise the look on Ginny's might have made him break down. She understood, she'd *been* there. He knew it, and it was the most wonderful feeling. For some reason, so was knowing that Ron was disgusted, and because of that, he was able to break eye contact with Ginny.

"She's actually gone to the Burrow," he said, turning back to his lunch.

"Really?" Ginny said. "That's...odd." She didn't remove her hand from Harry's arm, which made eating rather difficult, but he didn't mind.

"Odd," Ron said, staring at Harry. "Well, that's one word for it, I suppose." He looked from Harry, to Ginny, to Hermione, and then burst out, "Doesn't anyone else think this is just wrong? After the way she's treated you your whole life, and how she thinks of *us*...why do you all want to help her?"

"What should we do, Ron, abandon her when she's destitute?" Ginny said. "How would that change anything - how would she learn anything? Would leaving her out on the street make you feel better?"

Ron shrugged, but Harry had the feeling that it probably would. It made him feel good, that he had a friend who would be so ruthless on his behalf, but he also knew that he, himself, could never be like that. He looked over at Ginny, just as happy that she would adamantly oppose

abandoning Aunt Petunia, and suddenly noticed a gold chain around her neck, peeking out from under her collar. He couldn't be sure, but he thought that it might be the necklace he'd given her, and that almost made him forget that he even had an aunt. He looked down at Ginny's hand, still resting on his arm, and swallowed.

Ginny was still glaring at her brother, and after a few more moments, Ron said, "I suppose not." He didn't look happy, but then Hermione leaned over to whisper in his ear, and whatever she said cheered him up, because the rest of the lunch was spent thinking up strange and unusual careers for Aunt Petunia in the wizarding world. Harry's favorite actually came from Hermione, who suggested that Aunt Petunia would make a wonderful housekeeper at the Malfoys' mansion.

After lunch, Ron and Hermione, who had a free period, headed off to the library to study (or so they said), and Ginny started the long climb up to the North Tower for her regular Divination class, rolling her eyes as she left. Now that she knew she was a true Seer, she felt that Trelawney's Divination class was completely useless, but Miss Stuart said that she could still learn things from it.

"You never know when you might notice something in a vision because you learned something in Divination," she'd told Ginny, when she'd wanted to drop the class. "So far, your visions have been straight-forward, if not always easily understandable, but you might have some that are truly symbolic. You need to know the symbols to interpret those types of visions."

Harry climbed up to a different tower for his lesson with Professor Sinistra. Theo was already there, sitting cross-legged on a desk with his eyes closed, and all the other chairs and desks in the room floating a foot off the floor. As Harry walked in, Professor Sinistra's big teacher's desk rose, as well.

Harry stopped just inside the door, crossed his arms over his chest, and said, "Does she know you're doing that?"

Theo didn't open his eyes, and the desks and chairs stayed in the air. "No," he said. "D'you think she'll mind?"

"Well, I do," Harry said. "I'd like to sit down."

"What's wrong with the floor?" Theo asked, finally opening his eyes, and cocking an eyebrow at Harry. "Precious Potter can't sit on the floor?"

"You'd like to think that, wouldn't you?" Harry said. He flopped down into a cross-legged position on the floor, leaned back onto his hands, and grinned at Theo. Theo just nodded, and closed his eyes again, but he was grinning, too.

"What is going on here?" Professor Sinistra asked from the doorway.

Now all of the desks and chairs fell to the floor. Theo grinned unrepentantly at Sinistra.

"I was just practicing," he said.

"Next time, practice with something other than furniture," she said. "And not people, either," she added, apparently noticing the same glint in Theo's eye that Harry had. She walked over

to her desk, examining it carefully, as though to make sure it had taken no harm. Then she turned back to them, leaning against the desk.

"Now, how about some real practicing?" she said.

What Professor Sinistra called `practicing`, Harry called `totally useless`. He was occasionally able to tap into Theo's help to boost his power, but today was not one of those days. It annoyed him, because Sinistra could do it at will. Theo had told him and told him that she was the only one besides his own family who could, but it still annoyed Harry. If he could do it sometimes, why couldn't he do it at others? He'd been so frustrated that he'd asked Hermione for help. She'd been fascinated, of course, but when Sinistra let her try, she couldn't tap into Theo at all, and she hadn't been able to offer any insights into Harry's problems. At least, she hadn't to him; he'd seen her and Sinistra talking after their session, but that could have just been about Arithmancy, which was Hermione's favorite subject.

All the same, Harry and Theo started trying. Harry didn't bother to get up from the floor; usually, Sinistra told him to relax as much as possible, and he felt pretty relaxed right then. Usually, though, she spent the whole time speaking to him in a calm tone, almost like a Muggle hypnotist, to relax him even further. Today, she just perched on her desk and watched.

The change didn't help. The few times Harry had been able to do it, he'd felt Theo's push as an almost tangible force, an ocean of power waiting and eager to be released. And when he had tapped into it, the sudden invincibility he'd felt had almost scared him. He knew he wasn't invincible, no matter what the popular press might think, and to have that feeling worried him. He'd wondered if that fear might have been what was preventing him from reaching Theo, but he'd done it a few times after that, so he suspected that that wasn't it.

Today, he felt nothing. Suddenly, he stopped trying, opened his eyes, and shook his head.

"This is pointless," he said to Sinistra. "I think the times I've done it have been just flukes, and it's never going to be reliable."

"No patience, Harry?" Theo said. He was still sitting cross-legged on a desk, but, though his tone sounded jocular, he looked troubled.

Sinistra waved at him to be quiet.

"How do you feel right now, Harry?" she asked.

Harry stared at her. How did she think he felt? "I feel frustrated," he said.

She gave him a small smile. "Obviously," she said. "But, besides that. Do you feel impatient, annoyed, angry?"

"Oh, impatient, I guess," Harry said, grinning at Theo.

"I thought so," Sinistra said. "Harry, I think that you need to be in a certain mood to tap into Theo's help. I don't know why - I certainly don't - but that's what I think is happening."

Harry thought about that. The few times he'd been able to do it, he'd been...he didn't think he liked this. "What mood is that?" he asked, eyeing her warily.

"Angry, Harry," she said. "I think you need to be angry. Do you want to try?"

Theo burst out laughing, and even Harry smiled weakly. Professor Sinistra was worse than a grown-up Hermione: all logic and experimentation. She looked between the two boys, obviously confused as to why they thought what she'd said funny.

Harry's smile faded quickly, though. He really didn't like the fact that it took anger to enable him to connect to Theo. He remembered earlier in the year, when Professor Moody tested them on resisting the Furious Curse; he'd had a very hard time with it, and even now wasn't altogether confident of his ability to resist it. He really didn't think of himself as an angry person, and he didn't understand why it seemed to be such a part of his magic. Still, he knew he needed to try.

"All right," he said.

"Try to make yourself angry," Sinistra said.

Theo rolled his eyes at her, which luckily she didn't see. It made Harry smile, though, which rather defeated the purpose of what he was trying to do. He closed his eyes and thought about anger. What made him angry? He remembered the scene earlier that day with Malfoy, but that wasn't enough. He hadn't really been angry then, he'd just been annoyed, he realized. That was because...because he knew that Malfoy wouldn't touch him, Ron, or Hermione, at least not until Ron attacked him like he usually did. Ginny, though...Malfoy definitely wanted to touch Ginny. She wouldn't let him, of course, but just the thought of Malfoy daring to touch her, touching her hair, or her skin... He felt the anger building up inside him, and he deliberately fed it, imagining the scene in the corridor the day before. "I don't think I'd want Potter to tell me everything," Malfoy had said. Harry imagined that after that, he'd stepped closer to Ginny and reached out to touch her hair. For a moment, he remembered that Ginny would blast Malfoy with the Pepper Spray Charm if he ever dared, but he put that out of his mind. What if she didn't? Malfoy would run his fingers through her hair, he'd roughly tilt her head up towards his, he'd lower his mouth towards hers -

Suddenly, Harry felt that ocean of power, just waiting for him to release it. He reached for it, gripped his wand tightly, and, in an instant, there were no desks or chairs left in the room - they were all smouldering piles of ash. Both Theo and Sinistra fell to the floor, and Harry let go of the power, scrambling up to see if they were all right. They'd both landed safely, and Sinistra immediately started talking about the practical applications of their discovery, seemingly not caring that she had no furniture in her classroom anymore. Harry didn't want to hear any of it.

"You're right, professor, I need to be angry," he said, interrupting her. "I...I don't want to talk about this right now." He picked up his bag, and walked out of the room.

He was through the front doors of the castle almost before he realized it. The afternoon sun shone brightly, and reflected off the snow in all directions, making Harry squint. He saw a trail of footprints through the snow, and he followed them, not to find the person who'd made them, just to have a direction in which to go. He did find the person, though, sitting on the

bench by the lake, and it was Ginny. She didn't look at him as he approached; her gaze was fixed on her arms, which she was holding in an odd position in her lap.

"Ginny?" Harry said, coming to stand in front of her. "Why aren't you in Divination?"

"I had another vision," she said, still not looking at him.

"In *Divination*?" Harry asked.

At that, Ginny did look at him. She gave a sudden gasp, and burst out laughing.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, once she'd regained her composure. "I needed that."

"Seriously, though, how did you have a vision in Trelawney's class? And aren't you cold, sitting on that stone bench?"

Ginny shook her head and giggled. "Honestly, Harry, sometimes your Muggle upbringing really shows through. I put a Warming Charm on it, of course. Here," she added, patting the bench beside her. "Sit, sit."

Harry did, slightly gingerly. Not that he didn't trust Ginny's charm, but it just made sense that a bench outside on a February day would be cold. It wasn't - it was toasty warm, and Harry smiled at Ginny.

"So, how did you have a vision in Divination? You did crystal balls last year, right?"

Ginny nodded. "We're doing tarot cards now, but Trelawney was droning on and on, and I'd done the reading, so it wasn't anything new she was saying. And her crystal ball was sitting right next to me, uncovered. I didn't mean to look into it; I was just looking at nothing, you know? Of course, that's the way it usually happens..." She trailed off, and looked down at her arms again.

After a moment of silence, Harry asked her, "Are you going to tell me what it was?"

She took a deep breath, then looked him in the eye. "No," she said.

Harry just sat there, completely stunned.

"It's just...it's personal," she said. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I don't think I could...it would be too embarrassing." Her voice dropped as she spoke, and the last word was practically a whisper.

Harry heard it, though, and felt better. He could live with that. He didn't want her to feel that she couldn't tell him everything, but he couldn't expect her to tell him girly secrets. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear them, anyway.

"That's all right, Ginny," he said, and watched her smile at her arms.

She took another deep breath. "So, why are you out here?" she asked.

Now it was Harry's turn not to want to talk about something, but he made himself.

"I found out that the only times I can tap into Theo's augmenting power is when I'm angry," he said. "I don't like it."

"That is inconvenient," Ginny said. "Especially because you are angry so rarely."

"Remember the Furious Charm?" Harry said. "I hate that feeling, of not being able to control my anger. I don't want to be like that."

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said, turning towards him on the bench, and putting a hand on his arm. "You're the most in control person I've ever met. Sometimes it's even a little disconcerting, especially for people who...don't know you well. I'm quite certain that if you need to feel anger to tap Theo's power, you'll be able to, and then control it again afterwards."

"You think so?" Harry asked, but he was having a hard time concentrating on her words. She looked so sure, so passionate, with her cheeks flushed, and her eyes sparkling. She was wearing a hooded cloak, and the hood was starting to fall down her back, letting the sun play on her hair, and glint off the *claddagh* hair clip. Harry caught his breath. She was just so beautiful...and, suddenly, he realized that they were alone, with none of her brothers around them. He reached up on hand and stroked her cheek with his thumb. She gave a slight gasp, but didn't pull away, so he reached up the other hand to touch her hair, and lowered her mouth to hers.

She tensed for a moment, and Harry almost pulled away, furious at himself, but then she relaxed and leaned in to him. His whole world came down to this one moment, this one fact - he was kissing Ginny Weasley, and she was kissing him back. For this one moment, he could forget the anger, forget the world. Everything was Ginny.

Chapter 30 Different Virtues

Now each of these four founders

Formed their own house, for each

Did value different virtues

In the ones they had to teach.

--- *The Sorting Hat, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

The next few weeks seemed to Harry to be divided between revising for the O.W.L.s and Quidditch, which was much too much time spent on schoolwork, in his opinion. Hermione rewrote their timetables, with much more studying on them, and much less fun. Ron, of course, said, "I thought we were revising! What were we doing, if we weren't?", but Harry wasn't too surprised that he went along with it. What did surprise him a bit was that the rest of the fifth-year Gryffindors did, too. Many afternoons found them as a group, huddled around a table in the library, feverishly reading and scribbling, or hanging on Hermione's every word as she explained some tiny detail about Potions or Transfiguration. This did lead to some interesting situations. Hermione became so angry at Lavender and Seamus' seeming inability to keep their hands off of each other that she ordered them to sit at opposite ends of the table. Lavender didn't come to the study sessions for a good week after that, and Harry suspected that the atmosphere in the girls' dormitory was strained, to say the least. Hermione stood firm, though, and Lavender did come back, which made Harry happier than he had thought it would. He was surprised at how quickly he came to look forward to these sessions, and to feel something missing when even one of the Gryffindors wasn't there.

Quidditch took up almost as much of Harry's time. The annual Gryffindor-Slytherin match was coming up, and Angelina, though by no means as fanatical as Oliver Wood had been, was determined to see her team prepared for victory. They practiced constantly, in all conditions, and Harry loved every minute of it. He felt so alive on a broom, and that feeling he'd had the very first time he'd flown - that this was something easy, something fun, something he was meant to do - never really left him.

The only downside to being so busy was that Harry didn't have much time to spend with Ginny. Most evenings, even after an afternoon spent in the library, found the fifth-year Gryffindors still revising for the O.W.L.s under Hermione's watchful eye. Ginny often studied near them, but that just wasn't enough for Harry. And she was as busy as he was, between her training with Miss Stuart, which kept intensifying, her sessions with the centaurs, her Advanced Charms classes with Professor Flitwick, and her own studying. Harry remembered how much work he'd had as a fourth year - it wasn't anything near studying for the O.W.L.s, but it was still a lot.

It wasn't even that he wanted to sneak off to find a broom cupboard so he could kiss her, or not only that; he really wanted to talk to her. He was realizing that, even though they'd spent a lot of time together this past year, he actually knew very little about her. Of course, when he thought about things he'd like to know about her, he realized that he didn't even know the questions to ask. Spending most of your youth locked in a cupboard doesn't exactly lead to knowledge of how childhood works.

Ginny did come to some of his Quidditch practices, sitting in the stands with a book. Harry fussed over her to put the Warming Charm on the bench, which made her laugh at him, but he noticed that she didn't actually get much reading done while she was there. He had to endure some ribbing from Fred and George about Ginny, but he found that he didn't actually mind that, especially when they did it in earshot of Ginny herself. Hearing her tease Fred right back, with Angelina right there, was a joy to behold, especially when Katie and Alicia joined her. Harry had never had so much plain fun with the Quidditch team before. Very occasionally, Ginny managed to convince Hermione to join her in the stands, but she didn't really enjoy Quidditch for its own sake, so the two of them actually got some work done on those days. Harry noticed that Fred and George didn't tease Hermione nearly as much as they did him (even though Ron came in for his fair share), and though he felt petty about it, he couldn't help hoping that this meant that he was accepted as one of the Weasley family.

Of course, Harry received several owls from Molly Weasley over those weeks. Reading between the lines of her first owl, he realized that Dudley had thrown a temper-tantrum when his mother told him of his father's death and their change in circumstances. Hermione said that even Aunt Petunia must have been disgusted at that, but Molly didn't say anything to indicate that. Instead, Aunt Petunia seemed to have promised Dudley that Harry would ensure that he could stay at Smeltings. At Ginny's and Sirius' promptings, Harry wrote back to say that he didn't know why Dudley couldn't switch to a comprehensive school, like Stonewall, where Harry would have gone if he hadn't been a wizard. Aunt Petunia herself had sent him an owl in reply.

Dear Harry, it said,

Thank you for all of your assistance. I understand your reluctance to support your cousin in a public school. I hope that you, in turn, will understand that everything I earn must then go to supporting Dudley. I will have to rely on you for assistance longer than I had hoped I must.

Sincerely,

Aunt Petunia

After Harry read that letter to Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, he looked up to three stunned faces.

"Mental, that one," Ron finally said.

"I think...I think Mum must have made her write that letter," Ginny said.

"Or at least forced her to make it more polite," Hermione said, taking the letter from Harry and shaking her head as she re-read it. "She is so lucky to have you, Harry. I just wish I could be certain she knows that."

Harry was quite certain of the opposite, but the whole situation was beginning to strike him as funny. He didn't need all of the money he had, after all, and the Dursleys had supported him monetarily for years. Besides, the idea of Aunt Petunia working to support Dudley made him smile, even in the most boring History of Magic lessons.

One day after Charms, Professor Flitwick asked Harry to stay behind. Hermione looked worried for him, but Harry knew he hadn't done anything wrong, so he was able to approach the tiny professor with a smile. Flitwick smiled back.

"Ah, Harry," he said. "Brenna O'Keefe told me that you know of her efforts at creating a Communication Charm?" When Harry nodded, he added, "Good, good. We think - we hope - that she has made a breakthrough, and she wants to try it out. George Weasley has volunteered, of course, but Brenna and I think that she should try it with someone who's not so close to her. She has asked for you."

Harry met Professor Flitwick's eyes in surprise. He saw Brenna almost every day, but he couldn't say that he knew her very well. He understood why she wanted to use him. She knew she could trust him, and she knew he knew about the charm, so he was probably the most remote person with whom she could experiment. He just wasn't entirely certain that he wanted someone else in his head. Still, he knew that they really needed this charm to work, and that if he didn't do it, she'd just try with George again, so he told Professor Flitwick that he could come back that evening after dinner. Hermione wouldn't be happy that he would miss the Transfiguration revision session she had planned, but he knew she'd understand. After all, she was spending quite a lot of time, herself, on offensive charm after offensive charm for the same Advanced Charms class.

Harry wasn't at all surprised to find George waiting for him that evening, in addition to Brenna and Professor Flitwick. George sat on top of one of the desks, his arms crossed over his chest. Brenna stood next to Professor Flitwick, their heads on a level with each other's, though she stood on the floor, and he on a pile of books.

"Hi, Harry," Brenna said, coming towards him to greet him. "Thank you for agreeing to do this," she added quietly. For the first time that Harry could remember, she actually looked him in the eye.

"I still think it should be me," George said, from his perch on the desk. "No offense, Harry. But, I mean, I wouldn't exactly mind if you made me black out."

Brenna turned pink, but she grinned. "I know, George," she said.

"We'll proceed as we planned, George," Professor Flitwick said. "When you're ready, Harry, Brenna."

Brenna nodded. "Okay, Harry, why don't you sit down here," she said, leading him over to a chair. "I'm going to stand over there, near the windows. If you don't hear me, in your mind, tell me, and I'll move closer until you do."

At first, Harry thought she'd been taking lessons from Hermione, but then he realized that she was nervous. He tried to smile reassuringly at her, but she didn't seem to notice. She took out her wand, gripped it tightly, took a deep breath, and murmured her Charm. Her eyes bored into Harry's from across the room, and he closed his own as he heard her voice in his mind without seeing her lips move.

Harry, do you hear me?

Green grass and wind...clouds in the sky...warm breeze...sun on skin...laughter...

Harry, can you...

Why do they not understand? Why do they never understand? Why is it wrong to love to learn? Why can I not read outside? Why do I have to go to church when nothing there makes sense? Why can Aine go to Corin's birthday party, and I can't? Why am I different?

Harry, what is...

"Brenna Mary O'Keefe, what have I told you over and over again? No books in the barn!" "I hope that's not an owl I see, Brenna. What have I told you about owls in this house?" "Still awake, little Mary? Big day ahead of us tomorrow - put that book away." "Brenna, however did you do that? If you can't get down from that tree, how did you get up there in the first place?" "You made your teacher's nose grow, little Mary? Oh, I had so hoped..." "What have I told you, Brenna? Chores first, then homework." "Why are you crying, Brenna? This Cedric Diggory wasn't even in Ravenclaw." "Brenna, who's George? Only, Mum's got your owl from him." "I suppose we have to let you go, little Mary..."

Harry...

"RAVENCLAW!" "Full marks, Miss O'Keefe." "Ten points to Ravenclaw, Miss O'Keefe." "Ask Brenna, she'll know." "Can you believe what those Weasley twins did, Brenna? I thought I'd die laughing when that snowball hit Professor Quirrell's turban!" "Five points to Ravenclaw, Miss O'Keefe." "Dementors - oh, no, Brenna, dementors again - what is that? A Patronus? I should have known that..." "It doesn't matter if no one asks us to the Yule Ball, does it, Brenna? We can both go stag. At least Cho's going with a champion - up Ravenclaw!" "Ten points from Ravenclaw, Miss O'Keefe, and be grateful it isn't more." "Well done, Miss O'Keefe! Look, everyone, Miss O'Keefe's done it." "Full marks again, Miss O'Keefe. Excellent essay."

Harry, wait...

"Oh, Brenna, I'm going to miss you so much!" "There's a lot of girls in Ravenclaw this year, aren't there?" "Brenna, d'you want to study together? We could meet in the library after dinner..." "Mum's been unbearable for months now. I wish I could go to Hogwarts with you, Brenna..." "Just because you like to hide out in the library and never come out, doesn't mean all Ravenclaws do!" "I'm so glad we were sorted together, aren't you, Brenna?" "Oh, he's definitely got his eye on you, Brenna. Just wait, he'll ask you to the Yule Ball for sure." "One of the Weasley twins? Brenna, are you insane?"

Harry...

Moonlight on snow...snowflakes on red hair...a quick breath of cologne...breathe in, breathe out...a rough thumb across skin...a low chuckle...warm, caring eyes...

HARRY!

"What?" Harry said, flailing his arms to push away the hands that he suddenly felt holding his head. He heard a squeak, and opened his eyes to see Professor Flitwick on his back on the floor, his short arms and legs waving in the air like a turtle's. Harry looked around to see Brenna kneeling by the window, her eyes wide. He could hear her harsh breathing from where he sat. George knelt beside her, and kept trying to take her into his arms, but she resisted every attempt.

Harry stood and helped Professor Flitwick to his feet.

"Sorry, professor," he said. "But...what happened?"

"That's a good question, Harry," Professor Flitwick said. "Perhaps the two of you were just too close, spatially. Or perhaps the element of Confundus Brenna incorporated into her charm - to quiet both of your subconscious minds, you know - wasn't strong enough. What exactly did you experience, Harry?"

The tiny professor looked up at Harry, the only thing in his eyes curiosity. Harry had to look away, turning back to Brenna and George, still kneeling by the window. Brenna didn't seem to have heard Flitwick's assessment; Harry could see her lips moving, but she seemed turned in upon herself. She didn't even seem to notice George as he helped her to stand, then released her so she could walk forward.

As she neared Harry, he could finally hear what she was muttering. "I will not run. I will not run."

Harry stared at her in confusion. He had no idea why she would feel like she had to run from him, but as he opened his mouth to ask her, he was distracted by Professor Flitwick reaching up to touch his arm.

"Harry?" he said, then added, "Why don't we all sit down."

Harry and George arranged chairs for the four of them in a loose semi-circle. Brenna sat down in one as though she hardly realized it was there, and Professor Flitwick climbed up into another, then turned his inquisitive look upon Harry.

"Erm..." Harry said, but then paused. He wasn't at all comfortable with talking about this, but he supposed if Brenna didn't mind, he had no right to, either. Besides, if he didn't tell them what had happened, the experiment would have been simply a waste of time. After a last glance at Brenna, which she didn't return, he continued.

"I did hear Brenna's voice in my head, like she was talking to me. Asking a question, I think," he added, frowning. What exactly she had said was fading quickly, lost in everything else that had come from her mind to his.

"That's good, Harry," Flitwick said, nodding his head briskly. "It's much more than has happened before." He turned a reproachful look up on George as he said this, then turned back to Harry. "That wasn't everything, though, was it?"

"No," Harry said. "I think...I think it was a series of memories...being sorted into Ravenclaw...the Yule Ball...both of them...getting an owl from George...Snape taking away points...turning my teacher's hair blue - no, wait, that's my memory, not Brenna's." He stared straight ahead, trying to sort out his thoughts. Suddenly, he noticed something he never had before: Professor Flitwick had his own version of the Weasley clock on the back wall of his classroom. His version had hundreds of blue and bronze hands, almost all of them clumped together at "Studying", "Eating," or "Sleeping". There were a few outliers sitting on "Detention" and "You Don't Want to Know", but only one on "Desperately Needing Your Help". Harry couldn't help but wonder if Professor McGonagall had a similar clock and, if so, how many times his, Ron's, and Hermione's hands had rested on one of the two last spaces.

"Harry?" Professor Flitwick's voice said from much closer than Harry expected, making him jump. He tore his gaze away from the clock to see the professor standing on his chair, which was now right next to Harry's. He held his wand in one hand.

"George reported the same difficulty with separating his memories from Brenna's," Flitwick said. "I have a charm that will help, if you'll allow me." He gestured with his wand towards Harry's head.

"Yes, please," Harry said, nodding his head vigorously. He really didn't enjoy remembering putting on lip gloss or kissing George. Not to mention some things that almost made him resigned to not having a family. "No offense, Brenna," he added, craning his neck to look at her. She turned pink, and the wan smile she gave him was brief, but at least she met his eyes.

Flitwick smiled at him, touched the tip of his wand to Harry's head, and murmured something so quietly that Harry couldn't quite hear it, even though he was so close. Harry felt a tugging sensation, almost as though his brain was being pulled in several directions at once inside his skull, and he closed his eyes to try to lessen the dizziness he felt. He couldn't quite tell what the charm was doing to his mind, which was odd, but just out of comprehension he could feel a sorting, or an organizing, or maybe a separating. He wasn't sure, but anything had to be better than not being entirely certain if the memory he had of breath-taking kisses in the darkened library was his or Brenna's. He hoped it was his, but he had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't, because he knew Ginny wasn't taller than he was. He knew the memory of receiving a perfect mark on a Potions essay wasn't his, but at the same time, it felt like his, and that was just wrong.

Suddenly, Professor Flitwick snapped his fingers near Harry's ear, and the tugging pulled taut, then snapped as well. He'd been right - he hadn't kissed Ginny in the library, not yet, at least. And Snape still hated him enough to never give him a perfect mark, even if he deserved it, which he never did, anyway. The world stopped wobbling, and Harry opened his eyes with a sigh.

"Thanks, professor," he said. "That's much better."

"You're welcome, Harry," Flitwick said, hopping down from the chair and walking over to Brenna. "How are you, my dear?" he asked, patting her arm and smiling up at her.

She smiled back, almost as though she couldn't help it.

"I'll be fine, professor," she said, "just as soon as I figure out what's wrong with this charm. I don't understand it."

"I don't either, but I don't think right now is the time to worry about it. Let's both sleep on it, and then at our next class, we'll talk about what might have gone wrong. Right now, I think you need to put it out of your mind."

Brenna just stared at him, and Harry had to turn a snort of laughter into a cough. Despite having taught at Hogwarts for years, including during the last Voldemort war, Professor Flitwick had somehow managed to keep an amazingly optimistic outlook on life. Harry envied him, and from the memories Brenna had sent to him, he suspected that she did, too. She didn't say anything like that, though; she just smiled at her head of house, and agreed with him. Then she did something that surprised Professor Flitwick almost as much as it did

Harry; she bent down and kissed his high, domed forehead. Flitwick squeaked, then waved a hand at all three of them, shoos them out of the room.

As the three of them walked down the corridor, Harry tried to think of something to say. He couldn't remember a time when he'd ever felt more awkward - not nervous, or apprehensive, just awkward. Professor Flitwick's charm had helped him organize the memories in his head into two categories, his own and Brenna's, but they were all still there. He remembered playing hide and seek in a hay-loft and saying his prayers to his father just as well as he remembered being beaten up by Dudley and the spiders in the cupboard under the stairs. He almost wished that he could submerge himself into some of her memories of things he had never had, but he felt too guilty to do that.

"Harry, could I talk to you?" Brenna asked suddenly, breaking the strange-feeling silence.

Harry just nodded, and she turned and opened the door to an empty classroom. It was a Muggle Studies classroom, and Harry looked around, surprised to see a large collection of Muggle toys spread out around the room. He'd never expected to see jump ropes, Star Wars action figures, or hula hoops at Hogwarts. Brenna walked over to one of the desks, picked up the Rubik's cube that was lying on it, and sat down while beginning to fiddle with it.

"George," she said, without looking up.

George looked at her for a long moment, then shrugged. "Well, if you're determined to rob the cradle, not much I can do about it," he said, not taking his eyes off of her until she finally looked at him and gave him a quick grin. He then reached over and rubbed his knuckles in Harry's hair, though he must have known that couldn't really make it look any worse, and left the room.

Brenna returned her gaze to the Rubik's cube, which, Harry noticed, she was quickly and efficiently solving.

"Harry, I'm really sorry for what I did to you," she said, still watching her fingers. "I honestly didn't think that would happen, but that's no excuse. I don't have any right to burden you with my memories."

Harry watched her, amazed. She knew - *she knew* - what he was burdened with, and she worried about adding to it. It continually amazed him, this caring that he received from so many people.

"That's all right," he said slowly. "I agreed to do it, you know."

"Yes," she said, suddenly raising her head and looking him in the eye. Then, she shook her head, sighed, and looked back down.

"And...you know, some of those memories were...nice," Harry said.

A light flush spread across Brenna's cheeks. "Which ones?" she asked, slightly breathlessly.

Harry had to laugh. "Not *those*," he said, and watched her cheeks turn even pinker. Then, he sobered. "Just...it's nice to be able to remember having a mum."

Brenna laughed, a sharp, twisted sound. "Even *my* mum?"

Harry nodded. "Even your mum. Any mum."

"Oh," she said. She'd finished solving the Rubik's cube, and she put it, perfectly color-coded and organized, on the desk next to her. She hopped off the desk and walked over to him. Slowly, she reached up to gently trace the scar on his forehead. He held quite still, even though he usually didn't like people touching his scar.

"I'm glad those memories give you comfort," she said. Her voice was slightly hoarse, and Harry had the sudden fear that she was going to cry. He still didn't move, not wanting to set her off, since he hadn't a clue what he should do if she did.

Luckily, she didn't. Instead, she smiled up at him, patted his arm, and said, "I'll see you tomorrow, Harry." She turned and began to leave the room, but before she closed the door behind her, Harry spoke.

"Brenna, why did you tell yourself not to run, back there?" he asked.

She paused, looking back at him, her hand still on the doorknob.

"Because it's what I do," she said, then closed the door carefully behind her.

Harry stood and stared at the closed door for a moment, then put his hand up to touch his scar. He closed his eyes, reached back into memory, and heard the soft, clear tones of a mother singing a lullaby.

The next few days were too busy to think about new memories or intriguing Ravenclaws, and one morning, Harry was shaken from a sound sleep by a very excited Ron.

"C'mon, Harry," he said, as he tried to pull on his shirt at the same time he brushed his hair, "It's the Slytherin match today, y'know."

Harry watched him with sleepy amusement. "Yeah, I know," he said, climbing out of bed and rummaging in his trunk for clean socks. It actually felt nice to do that - Dobby was usually there waiting for him to wake up, or waking him up, and he rarely had the chance to do simple tasks like this himself anymore. But Ron's enthusiasm for Quidditch exceeded Dobby's for Harry, and the two boys slipped down to the common room before anyone else in the dormitory stirred.

No one was in the common room, and though Harry had to admit he was sorry not to see Ginny, he knew he couldn't expect her to be up at the crack of dawn just because he had a match at mid-morning. After all, he wouldn't be awake yet, either, if he'd had his own say in the matter. Ron led the way out the portrait hole and down to the Great Hall, rapidly running through strategies as he went. Harry mostly tuned him out; they'd covered their strategies extremely well in their practices, and, besides, he was still sleepy. When they reached the Great Hall, they found it almost deserted. A few Ravenclaws were already there, their books spread out in front of their plates, and Angelina Johnson sat at the Gryffindor table. Ron immediately made his way over to her and sat down next to her, not missing a beat in his conversation with himself. Angelina stared at him for a moment, then joined the conversation without any trouble. Harry just ate his breakfast, letting the talk roll over and through him.

Once he'd finished, he moved his plate out of the way and put his head down on his arms, thinking that at least he could close his eyes, even though he knew he wouldn't fall asleep in the middle of the Great Hall.

Suddenly, a hand shook him awake, and he heard Ron say, "C'mon, mate, it's time." He took his head off his arms to see Ginny and Hermione sitting across from him, grinning.

"Harry, who's Aine?" Hermione asked, causing him to gasp and turn wildly to Ginny.

"You were talking in your sleep," she said. Her voice sounded flat and tight.

"She's Brenna's sister," Harry said quickly. "I suppose I was dreaming her..." he trailed off, trying to remember the dream. "What did I say?"

Hermione opened her mouth to tell him, but Ginny cut her off.

"It doesn't matter," she said, sounding much better, suddenly. Harry had told all three of them about the failed charm as soon as he'd come back from the session. Now, Ginny reached across the table and traced a line down his cheek, and when Harry's hand followed hers, he realized that he had a sleep-line from the sleeve of his robe. He grinned sheepishly at her and rolled his eyes towards her brother, who was hopping from one foot to the other in his excitement. Ginny and Hermione both laughed.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione said.

"Not that you need it," Ginny said. "Go show Malfoy how to be a real Seeker." Her voice twisted slightly on Malfoy's name, but when Harry looked concerned, she shook her head and smiled at him. She made shooing motions with her hands, and Ron tugged on Harry's arm, so he contented himself with merely smiling back, hoping that that was enough.

When the whole Gryffindor team was gathered, in their Quidditch robes and clutching their brooms, Angelina stood in front of them and cleared her throat.

"All right, team," she said. "This is Slytherin, and we're going to beat them. Let's do it!" She nodded decisively, then started towards the door.

"That's it?" Fred said.

"That was pathetic," George said.

"It was obvious," Fred said.

"It was pointless," George said.

"It was...short," Fred said.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"I liked it!" they both said, then shouldered their brooms and marched out after Angelina. The rest of the team followed, fighting smiles until they realized that Angelina was grinning, too.

They marched out onto the field to the cheers of three-quarters of the crowd. As always, everyone wanted Slytherin to lose, even though the Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs knew that if Gryffindor won this match, they basically had the Quidditch cup locked up for yet another year. Harry looked up to the usual Gryffindor section of the stands, but had a hard time finding it, because not only Gryffindors sat there. The normal sea of red and gold scarves was broken up by people wearing blue and bronze, and yellow and black. He finally picked out Ginny and Hermione, sitting in a multi-hued crowd. Ginny had Brenna on one side, and Hermione sat next to Theo. It looked as though they were all gripping hands. He also noticed Dobby and Winky sitting high up in the stands, little Gryffindor scarves around their necks, and he hoped that Dobby wouldn't feel like he had to 'help' Harry in any way during the match. He didn't see Remus anywhere, and, though he peered at every shadowy corner he could find, he didn't see a big, black dog, either. He tried not to let that bother him - he knew Sirius and Remus would be there if they could. Miss Stuart was sitting with the teachers, wearing her own Gryffindor scarf, and she waved at Harry. Snape sat nearby, an even deeper than usual sneer on his face, which Harry hoped was because of the support for Gryffindor from most of the school. He also wondered what Ginny thought of this overwhelming hatred of Slytherin, but he didn't have long to think about it, as Madam Hooch had the captains shake hands, and then blew her whistle.

Harry kicked off into the air, feeling the familiar rush of pleasure and rightness he always felt when he flew. He squinted around for the Snitch, trying to keep watch on the Chasers at the same time. Some of Angelina's strategies involved using him as diversionary tactics, and, though he was proud that she trusted him enough to catch the Snitch even when busy, he knew he had a difficult match ahead of him. He hoped that listening to Lee Jordan's commentary would help.

"And Katie Bell has the Quaffle, heading for goal - nice bludger work there by Fred or George Weasley, don't know which. You know, they really should wear different hats or something, so I can tell them apart --"

"Jordan!" Professor McGonagall said. "Keep to the match!"

"Sorry, professor. Bell tosses the Quaffle to Johnson - pretty Porksoff Ploy, there - and Johnson's now heading for goal, oh, no, nice stop by Slytherin Keeper Millicent Bulstrode. New this year, and quite...erm...solid."

"Jordan!"

Harry grinned, remembering Hermione being held under Millicent Bulstrode's armpit at the infamous dueling club, their second year. She certainly was solid, but she was also turning out to be an excellent Keeper, and Angelina was worried about her.

"Just goes to show, Slytherin beats Weasleys any day, doesn't it, Potter?" Malfoy shouted.

Harry could almost hear Ginny in his head, chanting, "Ignore him, ignore him." Besides, he realized that Angelina was beginning the Griffiths Attack Formation, so he dove towards the play without even looking at Malfoy.

"And Potter dives, has he seen the Snitch?" Jordan said. "He seems to be swerving in and around the Chasers - I can't see who has the Quaffle - oh, it's Alicia Spinnet - stunningly beautiful, she is, too --"

"JORDAN!"

"And Gryffindor scores!"

Harry flew back up to hover over the action again, his eyes darting around for any signs of the Snitch. Malfoy seemed to have just watched him as he flew among the Chasers, instead of taking advantage of his absence to look for the Snitch. Angelina had been counting on that. A Bludger came hurtling up towards him, but he dodged it easily, and George winked at him as he flew past to intercept it.

The match continued that way, with Harry occasionally entering the fray to help out the Chasers, and, every time, Malfoy watched what he was doing, instead of looking for the Snitch. Harry could tell that the rest of the Slytherin team wasn't happy with Malfoy, by the looks they were giving him, but even with Angelina's new strategies, the game remained close, because of Millicent's good play. Harry could almost feel Ron's frustration from the goal posts, and when he'd executed a tricky maneuver Angelina had invented that involved flying in between Katie, who had the Quaffle, and Millicent, very close to the edge of the scoring area, he could hear Ginny's voice calling his name above everyone else's. He grinned, especially when he saw Malfoy scowl. Oddly, the game was very clean - usually Slytherin cheated every chance they could, making Madam Hooch stop play with foul after foul, but not today. Harry couldn't help but be impressed at Slytherin's new captain, a sixth year named Geraden Gard.

Malfoy wasn't, though, and he took it out on Harry.

"So, Potter, I couldn't help noticing Weasley's wrists sticking out of his stupid jumper," he said. "Have they run out of enough money even to buy yarn?"

Harry willed himself to ignore him. He kept his eyes on the field and saw Katie score another goal. He forced his teeth to unclench.

Malfoy maneuvered his broom closer.

"You know," he said, taking one hand off of his broom and holding it dramatically to his head, "I think you should help them out, Potter. You have all that money...why should your best friend's family not benefit?"

Harry darted a quick look at him, mostly in shock that Malfoy would forget the match this much. He wasn't even looking for the Snitch; he was completely focused on Harry. He seemed to misinterpret Harry's look, because he kept talking.

"What a good thing your parents died, eh, Potter?"

Harry still kept his eyes on the match, but he felt his face reddening, and he was almost glad that a Bludger swept through the air at that point, almost hitting him. When he'd dodged it, he was able to ask, through gritted teeth, "What do you mean, Malfoy?"

"Now you have all that money, and you can help out the destitute. Say, maybe you already are!"

Harry couldn't help himself; he gave a short bark of laughter. "Malfoy, you have no idea," he said. The Weasleys would never let him help, especially Ron. He wanted to - he wanted so much to repay them for everything they'd done for him - but he knew that, not only would they refuse any money he offered, but also that money could never truly equal the love and acceptance they'd lavished on him.

As usual, Malfoy misunderstood him.

"Really," he drawled, his voice so full of anticipatory glee that Harry actually looked at him, wondering what he would say. When Malfoy saw that he had Harry's attention, he shrugged and started polishing his broom handle with his sleeve. In the back of Harry's mind, he thought how strange it was that they were having this conversation in the middle of a Quidditch match. He could hear the cheers and groans of the crowd as a Slytherin Chaser managed to score on Ron. Finally, Malfoy looked up.

"You're already helping out the Weasleys?" he said. "How lucky they are to have such a pretty daughter, don't you think?"

Harry gaped at him, not following his train of thought at all. Malfoy laughed at him.

"So, Potter, how much are you paying Ginny, anyway?"

Suddenly, everything in the world turned red, except for Malfoy's laughing face. Forgetting the match, forgetting that they were fifty feet up in the air, Harry shrieked, "How dare you?" and launched himself at Malfoy. He had a glimpse of Malfoy's smirk before he dodged out of his way, and he could hear his laugh as he shot past him and almost out of bounds. The crowd gasped, then settled down again as Harry turned back towards the center of the pitch.

Harry knew that he was being stupid, knew that the match was more important than any empty insults Malfoy could hurl at Ginny, but he couldn't help himself. He launched himself at Malfoy again, but again he missed. This time, though, in the middle of his laugh, Malfoy gave a gasp, and by the time Harry turned back around, he was already diving for the Snitch.

Harry instantly dove after him, but he knew it was probably too late. He could hear Lee's commentary, which was spot on, as usual.

"M-Malfoy's diving for the Snitch, with Potter on his tail," he said, his voice slightly hollow. "'Course, they both have Firebolts now, and that's such a fast broom that the one who gets the first jump usually...Potter can do it, though, don't worry."

"Jordan!"

All right, not always spot on, Harry thought. He could feel how far behind he was, and the sight of Malfoy's back in front of him made him more furious than ever. How dare Malfoy say that about Ginny? As though he would - as though *she* would! She was much too good for that, too...oh, the notion was so silly that Harry knew he shouldn't be this angry, and yet he was. His whole world was focused on one thing - getting to Malfoy and making him pay for what he'd said. He'd pay...oh, he'd pay...he'd eat dirt in front of Ginny when Harry was done with him...that stupid smirk would be wiped off his face for good...Ginny would be so happy...Ginny...

Suddenly, Harry felt an ocean of power inside his head, pushing through him, fighting to break free. Without thinking about it, without really remembering where that power might have come from, Harry opened the floodgates in his mind. His broom shot forward, moving so fast he almost lost his grip on the handle. He easily caught up with Malfoy now, and he let go of the broom with one hand, trying to reach Malfoy's throat. His hand closed around something.

"And Potter has caught the Snitch! Gryffindor wins!"

A moment later, Harry was mobbed by red and gold blurs. He tried to break free to reach Malfoy, but Angelina had him in a strangle hold, and by the time she calmed down enough to let go, Malfoy had disappeared, along with the rest of the Slytherin team. Harry stared down at the Snitch, still clasped in his hand. He'd won. He'd beaten Malfoy at Quidditch, even though he hadn't been trying. Funny how the thought of the victory made his mouth feel like sandpaper.

"Harry!"

He turned and caught a mouthful of bushy, brown hair as Hermione threw herself at him. Sometime during the match, her braid had either come undone, or been torn undone, because her hair had never looked wilder. Ron didn't seem to care, though, as he picked her up and whirled her around in his happiness. Harry looked around for Ginny, hoping that she hadn't noticed his confrontation with Malfoy.

She stood a little ways away, with Theo and Katie next to her. So much for that hope. When he turned towards her, she came forward, her eyebrows lifted.

"Congratulations, Harry," she said, standing very close to him, but not touching him. The wild celebration swirled around them.

Harry swallowed. "Thanks," he said.

"So," she said, reaching up and tugging the collar of his robes straight, "what were you and Malfoy doing up there?"

"Seeker tactics?" Harry said, hoping to be able to leave it at that.

She looked up at him, her brown eyes open and trusting, and he knew he couldn't.

"He was just saying...stuff," he said.

"Stuff?"

"Stuff. Ginny..." He trailed off, looking a question down at her.

Slowly, she nodded, then put her hands on his shoulders and stood on tiptoe.

"I'm glad you beat him," she said, and kissed him.

Harry heard whistles and catcalls from the crowd that still surrounded them, but he didn't care. Her skin and hair felt chilled under his fingers, but her lips were warm, and the warmth spread from them, through his, and to every part of his body.

"Oi, Potter! You can't snog my sister in the middle of the Quidditch pitch!"

Harry and Ginny broke apart at the unmistakable sound of a Weasley defending his sister's honour, but Fred's tone had sounded more amused than angry. Harry looked around to see most of Gryffindor and many Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs smiling appreciatively at him. He turned back to Ginny to see how she was reacting, and found her grinning at him. He smiled back, feeling suddenly happy and carefree. What did he care about Malfoy, anyway?

"Harry, can we talk?"

And, just as suddenly, he came back down to earth. It was Theo, and Harry knew exactly what he was going to say. He told Ginny he'd meet her in the common room, and picked up his broom, which he couldn't even remember having dropped. Suddenly, he realized that he was practically trembling, and guessed it was reaction from the confrontation with Malfoy. He walked slowly, so he didn't give away how shaky his legs felt, and he and Theo wandered a little way away from the rapidly dispersing crowd.

"Harry," Theo started, but Harry interrupted him.

"I'm sorry, Theo, I know I shouldn't have done that," he said quickly. "I didn't really know what I was doing when I did it. I was just so angry..." He trailed off, staring out and around the pitch. It amazed him how quickly his anger flared at the thought of someone insulting Ginny. Once again, he hadn't even thought of magic; all he'd thought about was getting his hands on Malfoy. It had been instinctual, and it had left him feeling drained.

"I know," Theo said.

Harry brought his gaze back from the goal posts to stare at him.

"You - you know?"

"Of course I know. Professor Sinistra warned me that something like this would probably happen, but it wasn't really necessary. I'm just glad it didn't happen during your next match."

My next match? Harry thought. *Oh, right, Hufflepuff.*

"It won't, Theo, I promise. But...can you block your power off, just in case?"

Theo gave him a quick smile, but shook his head.

"It's just there, all the time. You think you had problems with random magic, growing up - imagine if you had a younger brother with whom you could link to create even more havoc. Believe me, if there were a way to stop people from tapping into me, I would have found it. No, you'll just have to learn to stop yourself, Harry. If my brothers can do it, so can you."

Harry nodded. Control, that's what he needed. He'd have to learn to control his anger, or at least to manage it. Suddenly, he smiled. Ginny believed that he could do it, and he believed in Ginny.

"I am sorry, though," he said, turning back to Theo.

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Theo said. "Just don't do it again, now that you know the temptation. You had to feel that yourself - I couldn't warn you about it." He patted Harry on the back, making him stagger. When Harry recovered, he saw Theo looking back across the pitch towards the changing rooms, where a lone figure stood.

"I wish you could come to the party," he said suddenly. "You and Brenna, and...everyone who supported us. It doesn't seem fair, somehow."

Theo flashed him a grin. "Don't worry, Harry. We'll have our own celebration. And don't forget, you haven't won the Cup yet - you still have to get past Hufflepuff!"

"That's right," Harry said, feeling a strange happiness bubbling up inside him as they started walking back across the pitch. "I hear tell they have a pretty good side, too. Any tips you can give me?"

"You wish, Potter," Theo said. They'd reached the changing room doors now, and Katie smiled at them both as they approached.

"Ron's waiting for you, Harry," she said. Suddenly, she reached up and put her hands over Theo's ears. "You know that was a brilliant catch, right?" She grinned at him, then tugged on Theo's arm. "C'mon, it's cold out here."

Theo let her tug futilely for a moment, watching her with tender amusement. Harry looked away, feeling like an intruder, so he didn't see Theo's final pat on his back coming. He caught himself on the doorframe, and then made his way inside, shaking his head as he went.

Ron greeted him with enthusiasm, seemingly so caught up in reliving the match that he forgot to question him about Malfoy. Or maybe Ron had been so busy himself that he hadn't even noticed the confrontation above him. Harry hoped so, but he knew he couldn't hope that Hermione hadn't. She'd been over-excited after the match, but he knew she'd say something later.

After they'd climbed up the last flight of stairs to the tower, though, Ron paused before giving the Fat Lady the password.

"Who was it Malfoy insulted, Harry?" he asked. "Your family, or Ginny?"

Harry stared at him. Ron looked back, with the same trusting gaze Ginny had given him earlier. They trusted him, enough to ask the question, but to accept it if he didn't want to tell him. They knew him, too, knew that he wouldn't have acted the way he had without provocation. They had no idea how much that meant to him.

"Both," he said.

Ron held his gaze a moment longer, then nodded and opened the portrait hole.

Chapter 31 A Party and a Picnic

Harry pushed open the Fat Lady's portrait and heard, to his surprise, complete silence. As he climbed in, though, he realized why it was so quiet. Fred stood on a table near the fireplace, hands held over his head, and the rest of Gryffindor watched and waited to hear what he would say.

"And here he is, ladies and gentlemen, our hero, our savior, our Seeker, Harry Potter!"

Harry stiffened all over, and he knew his face must look as red as the wall-hangings to all the students turning to look at him. He didn't think he could say anything if his life depended on it - he knew he wasn't really the hero, after all - and he just stood there, barely hearing the cheers that made the walls ring, until Ron pushed him from behind.

"Budge up there, mate," Ron said. "What's going on?"

Harry automatically took a step to the side, allowing Ron to climb through, too. He heard a thump from the direction of Fred's table, and then George's voice rang out over the din.

"And we can't forget the other half of the dynamic duo, the best Keeper this school's seen since Oliver Wood, our Ickle Ronniekins!"

Ron's ears turned red, and he glared at George, but after he heard the mass of Gryffindors applauding him, he stopped glaring, and beamed around at everyone. Fred and George started directing traffic from atop their perch, and a path opened up between Harry and Ron, and the table. Ron started through immediately, only pausing long enough to grab Harry's arm firmly, before he could slip away into the crowd. Before he knew it, Harry found himself being pulled up onto the table-top by Fred, and trying to suppress the sudden dizziness he felt at being confronted by so many upturned faces. He barely listened as Fred and George, constantly interrupting and finishing each other's sentences, rehashed the entire match, to the accompaniment of cheers and gasps from the rest of the room. He just shifted from foot to foot, and wished that it was over. He did look around to see where Lee was - he usually led these post-match recaps - and saw him sitting on the arm of one of the big, squishy chairs. He had his arm around Alicia, who sat, with Katie, smushed together in the chair. Angelina perched on the other arm, cheering with all her might. Lee wasn't, though; from the way he kept putting a hand to his throat and swallowing, Harry suspected that he wouldn't be able to speak for the rest of the evening.

Harry's eye was caught by a flash of fire-red, and he looked involuntarily in Ginny's direction. He'd been avoiding it, because he still wasn't sure exactly what to say to her, and Fred's lauding him as a hero hadn't helped. He just *wasn't*, and he knew he couldn't pretend with Ginny. He should have known better, though. She locked gazes with him, her eyes holding only happiness, pride, and understanding. Harry started to jump down from the table to go to her, when Fred suddenly draped an arm around his shoulders.

"And then Harry, here, completely faked out Malfoy, leading him on to actually think he could catch the Snitch," - here, he paused for the assembled throng to snicker and jeer - "before pulling off the most brilliant catch he's ever made!"

"And that's saying a lot!" George sang out from right behind Harry, making him jump, and the crowd break out into the loudest cheers yet.

Harry just stood there, hating every second. He hadn't been faking out Malfoy, he hadn't made a brilliant catch, he'd just gotten lucky, and used somebody else to achieve his ends. And even though Theo said he was all right with it, this once, *he* wasn't. He couldn't say any of that, though, because it wasn't his secret to tell. It was Theo's, and while he knew Theo wouldn't mind him telling Ginny, Ron and Hermione, especially since they knew part of it already, he certainly couldn't tell all of Gryffindor. So, he had to just stand there, letting the adulation of his housemates wash over him. Ordinarily, Quidditch was the one thing for which he didn't mind being praised, because he knew he was really being praised for his own talent, but this time he wasn't, and that hurt.

Just then, the portrait hole opened, and Professor McGonagall entered, making everyone quiet down immediately. She never attended the after-match parties, only appearing quite late in the evening to break it up and send everyone to bed. It had been the longest match Harry had ever played, but it wasn't even four in the afternoon yet, much too early for this. Everyone stared at McGonagall, who was at least smiling. It was a slightly wintery smile, but Harry was sure she wouldn't be smiling at all if something horrible had happened. The smile twisted a little when her eyes met Harry's, but he thought that was because she at least suspected what had happened between him and Theo. She held his gaze for a moment, but eventually looked away, allowing him to breathe a fervent sigh of relief.

"Well done, team, well done," she said, as she allowed the portrait to close behind her. She cast a look at Fred and George that said quite plainly that she knew whose idea it was to stand on the furniture, but she didn't say anything about it. "You all deserve an afternoon's entertainment, so enjoy your party," she continued, her eyes beginning to search the assembled throng. "Ah, Mr. Thomas, may I have a word with you?"

Everyone turned, as one, to the clump of students that included Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, and Dean. Ginny and Hermione were standing quite close to them, and Harry saw Ginny's hand lift, as though to reach out to Dean, but Dean either didn't see it, or didn't want to see it. He stood for a moment, locking eyes with McGonagall, but seemed to be comforted by what he saw there, because he turned back to Seamus, punched him lightly in the shoulder, and then walked toward the portrait hole, through the throng of Gryffindors, most of whom reached out and thumped him on the back or shoulders as he passed.

After the portrait closed behind him and McGonagall, the rest of the Gryffindors looked around at each other, clearly unsure of what to do. Harry saw Hermione put an arm around Ginny, who was gazing at the floor, and he used the opportunity of everyone's attention being elsewhere to jump off of the table and start towards her. As though his movement had broken a spell, suddenly everyone else started moving, too, and soon the noise level rose to its earlier heights. Ron had followed Harry, though, and so Fred and George, deprived of their quarries, were reduced to letting off a few Filibuster's Fireworks to get the party rolling again.

When Harry reached Ginny and Hermione, Hermione was patting Ginny's arm and saying, "You did everything you could, Ginny - no one could have prevented this!" She sounded slightly exasperated, which annoyed Harry. No one could blame Ginny for wanting to prevent all of the horrible things she saw in her visions, even if it wasn't possible. Hermione did look at him imploringly, though, so maybe she just felt that she didn't know what else to say.

Harry looked around to see if anyone else was paying attention to them, before putting his arms around Ginny. It was silly of him, he knew - everyone had seen their embrace on the Quidditch pitch - but he still felt self-conscious about showing affection publicly. He thought

that Ginny needed a hug right now, though, and by the way she gasped and clutched at him, he knew he was right.

"Didn't you see McGonagall's smile, Ginny?" he murmured into her hair. "She wouldn't have been smiling if Dean's parents had been killed." The din in the room was so loud that he wouldn't have been surprised if Ginny hadn't heard him, but apparently, even Hermione, still standing very close to them, could, because she sighed.

"Yes, but Ginny thinks they were still tortured, just like in her vision," she said.

Ginny pulled back slightly, so that she could look into Harry's eyes, though she stayed within the circle of his arms. He couldn't help but smile at her, even knowing how distressed she was.

"I did see her smile, Harry, and I saw what kind of smile it was - she didn't really look happy," she said, her voice pitched low, so he could hear her through the din.

Harry nodded. "But, Ginny, you couldn't really have expected to prevent what you Saw," he said. "You Saw it, so it was going to happen. You know that."

"And you prevented more than what you Saw from happening," Ron said, reaching out to pull on Ginny's ponytail. "I'm sure you did."

Ginny put her forehead down on Harry's shoulder and sighed. He hoped that everything he was feeling wasn't written across his face, but from the amused and affectionate look on Hermione's face, and the slightly disgusted one on Ron's, he suspected it was.

"I know," Ginny said, her voice slightly muffled. "I'm sorry to be so unreasonable."

They all quickly assured her that she wasn't being unreasonable (or very unreasonable, as Hermione put it) and then, as though to deliberately change the subject, Ron asked Harry, "What exactly did happen up there, mate?"

This time, it was Harry who sighed, before looking around for an empty group of chairs in a corner, away from the loudest students. He led the way over there, and they all settled in.

"Malfoy was saying...horrible things," he said, as quietly as he could. The other three leaned closer to hear him. "I don't need to go into that," he added, meeting and holding Ron's eyes. He felt Ginny shift beside him, but he really didn't want to tell her exactly what Malfoy had said. He didn't want to tell anyone that. "And...well, you saw...I went after him." He felt Ginny stiffen, and turned to look at her, surprised to see that she was stifling laughter.

Hermione didn't bother to hide hers. She let out a soft snort, and said, "Really, Harry, what were you thinking? Don't you know better than to go after someone on a broomstick? Didn't you learn anything in our first flying class ever?"

"I guess not," Harry said, glaring at her. "Anyway, by the time I realized he'd seen the Snitch, I was much too far behind to catch up. And I got so angry...more at myself, I think, than at him. You know, for letting him get to me. So I reached out to Theo - I didn't mean to," he added quickly, when Hermione drew in a breath, "but I did, and that gave me the extra push to catch the Snitch."

"Funny, it looked to me like you weren't even trying to catch the Snitch at that point," Hermione said. "I thought you were trying to punch Malfoy, or something like that."

Harry thought about that. What had he been thinking right then? Oddly, he couldn't quite remember - couldn't quite recapture the emotions that had been roiling through him. If that's the way Hermione remembered it, though, she was probably right. He gave her a weak smile.

"Well, I did catch the Snitch," he said.

"Yes, but you used someone else to do it, Harry. Someone who shouldn't have been -"

"Don't you think I know that, Hermione?" he said, resting his elbows on his knees and putting his head in his hands. "Why do you think Ron and I were so late coming back here? I've already explained and apologized to Theo, and he said he understood. He even said that he'd been expecting something like this, that he knew I'd be tempted by the power at some point. If you ask me, he was happy that it happened now, and not in the match against Hufflepuff."

"Well, that makes sense," Ron said.

"You'll have to guard against that, Harry," Hermione said.

"He knows that, Hermione," Ginny said, and Harry nodded.

"I promised Theo I would," he said. Then, he felt Hermione's hand on his head, and Ginny's on his shoulder, while Ron smacked his other shoulder. He didn't think he could look up if his life depended on it, so he kept his head buried in his hands while he swallowed convulsively and tried to get his emotions back under control.

After that, the four of them simply sat quietly, as the party whirled around them. Somehow, Harry didn't really feel like joining in the celebration, even though he was glad for everyone else that they'd won the match. Through the tumult, Harry felt Ginny give a little sigh, and then her head came down to rest on his shoulder. He sat rigidly for a moment, not sure what to do, but then he saw that Hermione sat in an almost identical position, her head on Ron's shoulder, and Ron had his arm around her. They weren't looking at Harry and Ginny, they both had their eyes closed, and Ron stroked Hermione's hair, still lying wild and unbraided on her shoulders, with one hand. Harry looked away - he felt uncomfortable watching such a private moment - but he slowly stretched his own arm around Ginny's shoulders. He held himself stiffly at first, hoping that was what she wanted him to do, but he soon forgot to feel nervous as she snuggled into his shoulder, giving another sigh. Her eyes were closed as well, he saw, but he kept his own open. He knew what all of them were thinking about - even talking about his problems with Malfoy and self-control couldn't take their minds off of Dean - and he knew they were safe in the Gryffindor common room, but he still, for some reason, felt the need to keep watch. So he was the only one who noticed the even greater commotion coming towards them from the portrait hole.

Suddenly, Dean was right there, throwing himself down on his knees in front of Harry and Ginny. He looked like he'd been crying recently, but all that was on his face now was joy. Harry was about to withdraw his arm, when Ginny's hand came up and held his so that he couldn't. She did raise her head from his shoulder, but he could feel her almost trembling. He didn't understand why - surely, she could see the way Dean was beaming, the same as he

could. He watched as Dean grabbed the hand that Ginny didn't have clutching Harry's, and said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Ginny sat up straight. "The attack didn't succeed? Your parents aren't hurt?"

Dean waved his other hand dismissively. "They're a little hurt, but they'll be fine. The important thing is that they weren't killed, Ginny. That's what you did - you saved my parents' lives!" He suddenly threw himself at her and enveloped her in a hug, which Harry would have been just as happy not to have witnessed. Ginny just stiffened, though, enduring it, and when Dean finally drew back, she had tears in her eyes.

"But...they were still hurt? The...Cruciatu?" she almost whispered, so that both Harry and Dean had to lean in very close to her to hear her. The party still continued unabated; someone throwing themselves on someone else wasn't exactly uncommon at Gryffindor parties. Ron and Hermione had noticed, of course, and now stood just behind Dean, along with Seamus, Lavender and Parvati.

"They'll be fine," Dean repeated, hugging her again, then leaping to his feet. "C'mon," he said to Seamus, Lavender and Parvati. "Now I feel like celebrating."

Ginny just watched him go, and at the look on her face, Harry tightened his arm around her. Her hands were balled into fists, her arms rigid.

"Doesn't he realize? Doesn't he know what the Cruciatu does?" she said, staring after Dean.

"Course he does," Ron said, kneeling down in front of her. "We all do. There are just more important things to Dean right now. Like the fact that his parents are still alive."

"I know that, Ron," Ginny said. "I just...how can he thank me? If I'd really helped, nothing at all would have happened! His parents would never have been hurt!"

"Ginny, you know that's not true," Harry said, taking one of her balled fists in his hands. "That's not the way visions work. Toby has told you that, over and over."

"Then it should be!" Ginny exploded. She shook him off and stood up, startling Ron so much he toppled over backwards. "What's the point of having this talent if I can't prevent things like this? And don't tell me I've asked these questions before," she added, turning to Harry, "because I know I have, and I'll ask them again. What does Toby know about it, anyway? She hasn't had a vision in fifteen years..." She trailed off, her eyes fixed on Harry, but he could tell she wasn't really seeing him. Suddenly, she whirled around. "I have to convince him it's not all right." She started to take a step over Ron, but he caught hold of her foot before she could.

"Who?" he asked her.

"Dean," she said. "He has to realize that they're still in danger!"

She stopped, because Hermione grabbed her shoulders and forced her to turn and look at her.

"He does," she said. "He knows it, Ginny! You know he does. But if he wants to celebrate what he has, why do you want to spoil it? Let him be happy, Ginny!"

Ginny just stood there, one foot still held by Ron, her upper body twisted around to face Hermione, and Harry could see how angry she was by how rigidly she held herself. He almost thought she would hit Hermione, but suddenly, she crumpled against her, instead.

"I don't know," she almost wailed. "Oh, Hermione..." The rest of what she said was muffled against Hermione's shoulder.

Harry jumped up and started reaching for her, but Hermione shook her head at him.

"C'mon, Ginny, let's get you upstairs," she said, putting one arm around Ginny's shoulders, and beginning to lead her towards the girls' dormitory stairs. Harry just watched them go, until the partying Gryffindors blocked his view.

"Some things, we'll just never understand," Ron said, from where he still sat on the floor. "Sisters. Girls. Hermione. Not in a million years."

"Yeah," Harry said, desperate to believe that it was just that. "Yeah."

"You know," Ron added, as he scrambled to his feet. "I think I'm going to go ask Dumbledore what happened. See how closely it matches my predictions."

"You predicted this?" Harry asked, turning to stare at him.

"Well, after Ginny's vision, it was pretty obvious something like this would happen. There have been Aurors on duty at the Thomas' all the time for awhile now."

"Then, how could the Death Eaters cast Cruciatius on Dean's mum, like Ginny Saw?"

"I don't know," Ron said, frowning over Harry's head towards the staircase to the girls' dormitory. "That's what I want to ask Dumbledore. You coming?"

Harry shook his head. "You'll get more from him than I will," he said. "He never tells me anything." Before Ron could say anything to that, he turned and headed for the stairs to the boys' dormitory. He didn't look back, and he barely noticed the party still going strong around him as he walked. He trudged up the stairs and sat down on the edge of his bed. Not bothering to kick off his shoes, he flopped over onto his side, but he sat up again, when he felt something jabbing into his hip. He reached into his pocket, and drew out his pocket watch, staring into the crystal ball fob as though he could really see something in its depths. But nothing appeared, and after a moment, he gave a short laugh and flicked open the watch.

"Despondent and exasperated," it said, which he knew without its help. Then, those words disappeared, and new ones formed. "Snap out of it."

Harry laughed again, and fell back onto his back on the bed. It was quite clear that Sirius had had a hand in the creation of this watch, though Toby might have said those same words, too. For that matter, maybe his mother had had the same blend of bracing practicality and determined humor. He would never know, though, because she'd been murdered. And Dean had just avoided the same thing. Why shouldn't he be happy? Harry knew that if his parents were alive right now, he wouldn't care if they were so badly hurt he'd have to take care of them forever. Why did Ginny want to take that away from Dean? And why had she turned to Hermione, and not to him? Wasn't he supposed to be there for her? He wanted to help her and

support her, not just enjoy her. It amazed him, this overwhelming feeling of tenderness towards her - towards them all, actually...all the Weasleys, Hermione, Sirius, Remus. He wanted to protect them all, and he new he couldn't.

Stop thinking about it, he told himself. *Listen to your mum and her friends - snap out of it*. But he still lay on his back on the bed, staring out of the window at the dark grey sky.

Some time later, Neville burst into the room.

"Hey, Harry," he said, as he rummaged through his trunk and pulled out parchment and a quill. "You'll never guess what's happened - they've announced a Hogsmeade weekend!"

"Really?" Harry said, pushing himself into a sitting position. There hadn't been any Hogsmeade weekends since before Christmas, and everyone had assumed it was because of the attacks. There had been rumors of a dance, to keep the students' minds off of being cooped up inside for so long, but nothing had come of that. "What made them change their minds?"

"Dunno," Neville said. He'd written several lines while Harry had sluggishly responded, and now he read over what he'd written, chewing on the end of his quill. "Suppose Dumbledore just decided it was safe enough. We can't stop all normal activity, just because of You-Know-Who, after all. That would be letting him win." He signed his name to the note with a flourish, then looked up at Harry with a small smile. "That's what Ginny always says, isn't it?"

Harry agreed absently, but his thoughts were focused on Neville's note.

"That's for Hannah, isn't it?" he asked. "You're asking her to go with you to Hogsmeade. Why? Aren't you seeing each other? Isn't it a...a given?"

Neville turned red, and looked down at his feet, but he shook his head firmly.

"Girls like to be asked," he said to his shoes. "That's what my Gran always tells me, and she's usually right about these things. Besides, remember how angry Hermione was when Ron didn't really ask her to the ball?"

"She told you about that?"

Neville looked up, holding Harry's gaze soberly. "Lots of people tell me things," he said. "You'd be surprised at the things I know."

He was obviously trying to tell Harry something, but Harry had no idea what.

"I suppose I'd better ask Ginny, then," he said, hoping that was it, but he couldn't help wondering if Ginny would still want to go with him.

Neville smiled at him, and after a moment, the smile widened. "Ron isn't going to make the same mistake twice," he said. "He asked Parvati to fetch Hermione down to the common room, as soon as he'd told everyone about Hogsmeade."

"*Ron* brought the news?" Harry asked. "How...how did he find out?" He knew how, of course, but he was surprised that Ron would make it that obvious that he knew more than the other students. He was also a little surprised at how much time had passed, while he had been wallowing in self-pity.

"He said he'd passed McGonagall in the hall, she told him, and he offered to tell us," Neville said.

Harry should have known better - obviously, Ron would have thought of a good story.

"Say, Harry, would you mind if I borrowed Hedwig?" Neville added. "If I go all the way to the owlery, I might as well go to the Hufflepuff common room, and ask someone to fetch Hannah."

As Harry tied Neville's note to Hedwig's leg, he realized two other odd things about the news, but he didn't want to share them with Neville. As soon as he was alone in the room again, though, he sat back down on his bed and stared at Hedwig's now empty cage. Why would Dumbledore decide to have a Hogsmeade weekend now, right after Dean's parents were attacked? Obviously, Muggle-born wizards were targeted, and, just as obviously, many of the students going to Hogsmeade would be Muggle-born. He knew Dumbledore must have a reason, though, and he supposed he would get it out of Ron. Whenever Ron came up to share his own news, that is. That was what hurt Harry the most - that Ron, straight from Dumbledore's office, would put asking Hermione to Hogsmeade over telling Harry about the attack. He knew it shouldn't hurt him, because he was happy his two best friends were together, but it did. He was being unreasonable, and he knew it, but that didn't change anything.

Suddenly, he realized that he actually envied Ron. And Neville. Anyone who was...well, normal, who could fancy a girl and do...normal things with her. He knew that both Neville and Ron realized the troubles that faced the wizarding world. And he knew that Ron, at least, expected to help him face those troubles. That was the difference, though - everyone expected Harry to be the one at the forefront of the fight. Expected it so much that they didn't even think about it anymore; it was just a given. Harry knew he would do it, knew he would do what must be done. But that didn't mean that he couldn't wish things were different.

Well, why can't they be? he asked himself. Not that he would really change things, just...well, take this Hogsmeade weekend. He could take Ginny, and just act like a normal boy for a day. He thought that she would like that, too; with her own burden of a talent, she knew all about wishing to be normal.

He climbed off the bed and pulled out his own quill and parchment. As he started his note, though, he had a sudden picture of what the day would be like. A trip to the Rowan and Oak, with Hermione lost in the stacks, and Ron grumbling about how long she was taking. A stop in at Honeyduke's, with the roles reversed. Listening to the two of them flirting by bickering all day long. As much as he enjoyed their company, this would be his first real date with Ginny, and he realized that he didn't want it to be a double one with Ron and Hermione. They'd probably feel the same way, come to think of it. So, all he had to do was mention it to Ron, and then he and Ginny could be alone...along with half the school, in Hogsmeade.

Harry rubbed the end of the quill along his scar as he thought. He'd found himself doing that quite a bit, ever since Brenna had touched it in the Muggle Studies classroom. He knew she couldn't have done anything to it - a seventeen-year-old witch, however bright, couldn't alter a curse scar like that - but ever since, he'd felt more like the scar could remind him of good things, rather than bad. Like Hermione, crying in his arms in the Owlery, telling him how much everyone loved him, and how they'd always be there for him. Like Ron, knowing he

would tell him the truth about Ginny. Like Mrs. Weasley, hugging him after the Third Task. Like his mother, dying because she loved him.

Several days after the Communication Charm had failed, Harry had been on his way to one of Hermione's review sessions, and had come across Brenna crying silently in the library. Of course, he'd asked her what was wrong, and she'd told him that she was crying over *his* memories. He hadn't realized the charm had worked both ways, and could hardly believe he hadn't even thought to ask. All at once, he'd felt horribly guilty - his memories weren't something he'd wish on anyone, after all, and Brenna had her own problems. But when he'd said something like that, she'd shaken her head.

"Oh, no, Harry," she'd said, tears still pouring down her cheeks. "You just don't understand." She had reached up and touched Harry's scar again. "Your mother died for you...there are mothers like that in the world. It's wonderful, knowing that, isn't it?"

Harry had just stared at her then, not sure what to say, but he'd thought about it often since then. It made him realize just how lucky he was, and just how many good things he had in life.

One of those good things was Ginny, and he really wanted to spend a day alone with her. Suddenly, he remembered the cave Sirius had hidden out in last year. They could take a picnic, like they had done in the autumn, but this time it would be just the two of them. It was only April, and rather chilly still, but he knew Ginny was an expert with Warming Charms, after all. He scribbled down an invitation, and had just time enough to wish he hadn't lent Hedwig to Neville, when Ron entered the room.

Ron's ears were a bright red, and he almost slammed the door shut behind him, difficult as that was to do with the heavy oak. He then proceeded to glare at it.

"I can't bloody *wait* until next year," he said, his hands balled into fists as he stared holes through the door. "At least then I'll only have Ginny teasing me. And Seamus and Dean."

"Ginny was teasing you?" Harry asked. If Ginny was back down in the common room, he wanted to see her.

"No, not this time; she's still up in her room," Ron said, finally turning to face Harry and sitting down on his bed. "But Fred and George -"

"And Seamus and Dean -"

"Do I tease them about Angelina and Brenna? I mean, lately?" he added, when Harry nodded vigorously. "I thought they *liked* Hermione."

"They do," Harry said, surprised. What *had* the twins been saying, to make Ron unsure of that?

"Then why do they deliberately try to embarrass her?" Ron said. "They're horrible. Any other girl would refuse to have anything to do with me after that."

"Not Hermione," Harry said.

"I know," Ron said. His eyes became a bit unfocused, and his face took on an almost sickly enraptured expression that Harry really didn't want to see.

"So, anyway," he said, looking away, "what did Dumbledore say?"

"Oh," Ron said, his attention snapping back to Harry. "We've got to convince Ginny this wasn't her fault, because it bloody well wasn't. If only that sodding Fudge and his miserable excuse for a Ministry would listen to Dumbledore..." He trailed off for a moment, and Harry was glad that Hermione wasn't here to listen to his language. "How they can argue with the vision of a True Seer, I don't know. I even wrote to Percy, y'know, but he just repeated the Ministry's bloody official position when he wrote back. Stupid git."

"But, what happened?" Harry asked. He shut his mouth after that, so he wouldn't say anything about Percy. He certainly agreed with Ron, but saying so wouldn't help anything.

"Fudge found out about the Aurors watching over people's families - you know, Dean, Brenna, Neville, people like that - and he recalled them."

"What? Didn't he know they were doing it for Dumbledore?"

Ron gave a barking laugh. "That only made it worse. Moody had to forcibly explain to him that what Aurors do on their off time is entirely their own business." Ron's eyes shone as he said that, and Harry couldn't blame him; the thought of exactly how Moody had explained things to Fudge cheered him up considerably. Then, Ron's eyes fell. "But there must be a spy in the Ministry - not that we didn't know that before - because the timing was just too bloody perfect. They knew there wouldn't be any Aurors protecting Dean's parents - they must have!" He jumped up and started to pace about the room.

Harry watched him, fascinated by this martial side of his friend. "I take it Sirius and Remus went to help?" he asked. Ever since he'd heard of the attack, he'd suspected that was why they hadn't been at his match.

Ron nodded. "Since everyone *else* had been called to the Ministry, they had to try to patrol everywhere. Y'know, we really need that Communication Charm of Brenna's, Harry. Do you think it would help if I offered to try it out?" He looked at Harry, his eyebrows lifted, but luckily didn't wait for a reply, because, for one, Harry didn't know, and for two, he suspected it wouldn't, because of Ron being George's brother. "Anyway, Remus and Sirius had to stay together, so that if they did find something, Remus could go for help." He took another turn around the room, then turned back to face Harry, waving his arms over his head as though he didn't know what else to do with them. It should have looked silly, but it didn't.

"Because of Fudge, two innocent Muggles almost died! Remus and Sirius saw the Death Eaters, Harry; they *heard* them cast the Cruciatus Curse. And Fudge wouldn't believe Remus, just because he didn't want to. Moody said that he even came really close to accusing Remus of sending the Dark Mark into the air himself -"

He broke off, because Harry had thrown his pillow across the room. He had to concentrate very hard on that pillow, because he could feel the connection to Theo waiting tantalizingly for him to reach out and use it. It was the first time he'd felt that when Theo wasn't nearby, but there wasn't anything he could use it *for*, so he just stood up and joined Ron in pacing the room.

Ron looked annoyed at himself. "I hadn't meant to tell you that," he said.

"Why not?"

Ron waved a hand at the pillow that lay wedged in between their two trunks, because Harry had thrown it so hard. Harry reached down and picked it up, then stood twisting it between his hands.

"What else?" he asked.

"What else?"

"What else did Fudge say?"

"Isn't that enough? He's bloody well not going to change his position, no matter how much proof there is. And this is our Minister of Magic!" Ron windmilled his arms over his head again, then collapsed on his back on his bed.

Harry stared at him. Ron seemed to be taking Fudge's incompetence much more personally than he was; but then, Ron had grown up in the wizarding world, with the Ministry of Magic his only real government. It was still difficult for Harry to imagine a greater wizarding authority than Dumbledore, and he still thought that the headmaster would convince Fudge somehow, though it was starting to look like it might be too late by the time he did. Thinking of Dumbledore reminded him of his other question for Ron.

"Neville said there's going to be a Hogsmeade weekend," he said.

Ron nodded. "Next weekend."

"Why?" Harry asked. "Won't it be dangerous?"

Ron sat up. "Yes, of course. But Dumbledore and Remus both insisted that the students desperately need some time away from school. Moody didn't like it -" he flashed Harry a sudden grin - "but he gave in. You won't believe the security there's going to be - more Aurors than you can imagine, because Fudge oh-so-graciously agreed to send some, and all of Dumbledore's off duty ones who aren't going to be guarding people's families at that time will be there, too." Suddenly, he jumped up. "I'm going back to the common room; I need to move. You coming, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. Ron looked at him for a long moment, then shook his own head.

"Fine, be a lazy prat," he said, tossing a smile over his shoulder at Harry as he left the room.

Harry sat and stared at the closed door, without really seeing it, until Hedwig flew back into the room. She had no note tied to her leg, so either she'd already delivered it to Neville, or Hannah had decided to give him her answer in person. Seeing her reminded him of the invitation he'd written for Ginny. He reread it, wondering if he should send it to her, after all. Dumbledore obviously didn't think Hogsmeade would be completely safe, no matter how much the students needed the visit, and Harry suspected that he wouldn't be happy to hear that two of his students went off by themselves, away from the protecting Aurors, just for a picnic. On the other hand, very few people knew about that cave, and none of them were Death Eaters...Harry quickly folded up the note, wrote Ginny's name on the outside, and attached it

to Hedwig's leg. He patted her, then, before he could change his mind, asked her to take it to Ginny. She cocked her head at him and hooted, but then spread her wings and flew off into the night.

The next weekend found Harry and Ginny walking up the long hill towards Sirius' cave. Harry was surprised at how easy it had been to escape everyone, let alone to plan a private picnic in the middle of a school full of adolescents. Of course, he had a secret weapon in Dobby. All he'd had to do was to tell Dobby that he and Ginny wanted to get away from everyone for some time alone, and that he was counting on Dobby to take care of everything, from the choice of picnic food to security in the cave. That had been enough - Dobby was so eager to prove to Harry that he could do all that, that Harry had no idea what was waiting for them in the cave. Not that it really mattered; all he'd wanted was some time alone with Ginny. Everything else was secondary.

They were walking very close together, occasionally bumping arms or hands as they climbed the hill. Harry wondered if he could take her hand, but thought he'd better wait until they'd finished climbing. He risked a glance at her, and saw her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining - he hoped with happiness, though it was probably from walking in the chilly April afternoon.

Ginny had joined Harry in the common room the morning after the Quidditch match, and immediately whispered in his ear that she'd love to go on a picnic with him. She hadn't mentioned, then or since, her strange reaction to Dean's happy news, and Harry hadn't felt comfortable bringing it up himself. He did want to know why she'd reacted that way, but he still didn't feel quite ready to about things like emotions with anyone, not even Ginny.

They finally reached the top of the hill and stood there for a moment to catch their breaths. Ginny turned and looked back the way they'd come, and Harry followed her gaze. He saw trees, mostly evergreens, but with some bare branches sprinkled among them, stretching down to the roof tops of Hogsmeade. It was too sparse to be called a true forest, but it was so different from the world of the Dursleys and Privet Drive that he couldn't help staring in wonder. The other times he'd been here, he'd been too preoccupied to notice.

Suddenly, he realized that Ginny was no longer standing beside him, and when he turned to see where she was, he saw her stopped in the mouth of the cave. She had an arrested look, as though she wasn't quite sure she wanted to continue, and he quickly walked over to stand beside her. What he saw was nothing more alarming than a large, fuzzy blanket spread on the floor of the cave, with an absolutely enormous picnic basket sitting on it. He definitely understood why Ginny had paused. Suddenly, his innocent picnic, which he'd set up just so the two of them could spend some time together without the whole of Gryffindor watching, didn't feel so innocent anymore.

It was, though, and he just had to keep telling himself that. He turned to Ginny, trying to reassure her with a smile, but before he could say anything, there was a loud pop.

"You is here, Harry Potter, sir, and Miss Wheezy!" Dobby said, as soon as he'd materialized in front of them. He seemed to notice their expressions, because he added, "I is hoping everything is satisfactory."

"Oh!" Ginny said, the word exploding out of her. "Oh, of course it is, Dobby. Everything is perfect." She smiled at him, took a deep breath, and then, without looking at Harry, took Harry's hand and stepped into the cave.

As Harry walked in beside her, the air suddenly felt warmer and...smelled odd. He sniffed, trying to place it. Some sort of flower, he realized, wrinkling up his nose. He felt Ginny's hand trembling slightly in his, and he risked a peek at her, only to see that she was struggling to hold in laughter. She didn't - she couldn't - think that he'd planned...all this...could she?

They reached the blanket, and Ginny swiftly knelt, putting a hand down to touch it. She hadn't let go of Harry's hand with her other one, so he was forced to kneel as well, and duplicated her action. The blanket did feel soft and fuzzy, and warm, and - Harry's eyes widened - padded. He hardly dared to breathe as he turned to Ginny, but all he saw in her eyes was amusement and fun. When he realized that she wasn't going to run screaming from the cave in disgust at him, he was able to let out his held breath and turn to Dobby.

"This is just right, Dobby, thank you," he said, making the house-elf's smile stretch almost past the sides of his face. "You thought of everything."

Ginny, who had crawled over to the picnic basket and begun opening it, choked with laughter, but Harry ignored her for the moment. She wasn't helping. He lowered his voice, though of course Ginny would be able to hear everything he said.

"You've taken care of the...security, right?"

Dobby nodded, his smile disappearing in an instant, and he actually saluted Harry.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir," he said. "Liny, Sammy, and I is guarding Harry Potter and Miss Wheezy well."

"Dobby, I told you to call me Ginny," Ginny said.

Dobby's bright green eyes opened even wider at that. He leaned in to whisper in Harry's ear.

"Ginny is a house-elf name," he said.

Harry almost burst out laughing, but he knew Dobby was perfectly serious, so he managed to keep a straight face.

"Thanks for everything, Dobby," he said, instead.

Dobby's smile returned, and then he disappeared with a loud crack.

"What did he say?" Ginny asked from the other corner of the blanket. She had been pulling food out of the basket while he'd been talking to Dobby.

Harry crawled over to her. "It seems that your name is also a house-elf one," he said. "Wow!" he added, as he surveyed all of the food. "How many people did Dobby think were coming?"

"You heard him, he knew it was just us," Ginny said, pulling out a pink-frosted layer cake and setting it beside two others she'd already laid out. "He must just think you'll eat this much." She met his eyes, her own twinkling. "And what about `Wheezy'? If that's not a house-elf name, I don't know what is. Besides, Winky calls me Ginny. Well, Miss Ginny, if you must know, but still."

Harry shrugged. "You'll have to ask him," he said, reaching for a bag of crisps, so he wouldn't have to look at her. He was beginning to feel his awkwardness return, and he didn't really know what to say to her. He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye, and looked over to see her shrugging out of her cloak.

"It's so lovely and warm in here," she said. "Dobby really did think of everything."

Harry couldn't help staring at her. She just looked so wonderful, sitting there with her cheeks flushed, and her eyes bright with laughter. She was wearing a dark purple jumper that somehow clung to her more than her usual jumpers did, and her hair was done almost the way it had been for the ball, with part of it piled on top of her head, and the rest spilling down over her shoulders. It shone, as usual, in a million different shades of red, and Harry really wished he could reach out and touch it. He knew he actually could, now, but he didn't want Ginny to think that he'd set up this picnic just so he could...well, snog her senseless, even though that was basically what he wanted to do.

"So," he said, desperately trying to think of something to say, "how's your Protection Charm coming along?" As soon as the words escaped his mouth, he could have bitten off his tongue. She *never* liked talking about her Protection Charm.

She definitely didn't want to now; he watched the light disappear from her eyes, and her cheeks go from delicately flushed to pale.

"I," she said, then stopped. Then, she looked up and fixed him with a gaze that reminded him strongly of her mother. "All right, suppose you've invented a charm that will only work a certain, very specific way - very definite, very unlikely circumstances have to be met before it will work. If it does work, it will work extremely well, but the necessary ingredients are so difficult to come by that it might as well not exist at all. Would you tell people? Would you say, 'By the way, there's this Protection Charm that will provide one person with a practically impervious shield, but in order for the charm to work, you both have to -'" She broke off suddenly, her hand to her mouth.

"You both have to what?" Harry asked. He remembered her telling Hermione months ago that 'it' had to be mutual, but he still didn't know what 'it' was.

Ginny shook her head, her eyes wide. "Anyway, would you tell people that? Raise their hopes, just to dash them down again?"

"I suppose not," Harry said. "But...would it really be so difficult to find what you need?"

"Not...not for some people," Ginny said. She looked down at her plate and picked up her sandwich, but put it back down again. "But it's something that could...cause pain to people if...oh, I can't explain without telling you what it is."

"Well, why can't you tell me, Ginny? I...I want you to tell me everything." Actually saying that last sentence was probably the hardest thing Harry had ever done, and he was quite proud of himself.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said, reaching a hand out to him. "I want that, too. But this...I can't, I just can't. Trust me?" She gazed into his eyes, her own big and pleading.

"Of course I do," Harry said, reaching his own hand out to grasp hers. Suddenly, he never knew exactly how, he was sitting right next to her, one hand tangled in her hair, and the other still clasping her hand.

"Ginny," he breathed, before covering her mouth with his own. She gave a little moan against his lips, and that was enough for him. When he actually started thinking again, he realized that her hair was every bit as messy as his always was, that he wasn't sure if he was so out of breath because of physical or emotional reasons, that quite a bit of time had passed, and that he'd done just what he'd been determined not to do. He pulled back, not quite able to remove his fingers from her hair, to look uncertainly into her eyes. They weren't quite focused at first, but after a moment, they fastened on his.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked, her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"I...I shouldn't have done that," he said, cursing himself and wishing his traitorous hand would start behaving itself. What must she think of him, that the first thing he'd done when he got her alone was to jump on top of her? And he still couldn't let go.

Ginny, though, gave him a small smile. "Why not, Harry?" she asked.

"Because...because I wanted this to be perfect," he said, but he still couldn't quite concentrate on anything other than the feel of her hair. It was just as soft and silky as he'd always thought it would be, and so alive... He came to himself when Ginny giggled.

"Harry, this *is* perfect," she said, turning her head so that her cheek brushed the hand still stroking her hair, sending shivers up his arm. "You're here, I'm here...do you know how long I've waited for this?"

Harry shook his head, and began tracing lines between her freckles with his finger. He still couldn't quite equate the Ginny who had made him sing get well cards and Valentines with the Ginny who was here with him right now. Or rather, he could see every step that she had taken to get from one to the other, but he still marvelled that she'd taken them. That *they'd* taken them.

"So," he murmured, fixing his eyes on her nose so he wouldn't be overwhelmed by the look in her eyes, "you don't need flowers and...and chocolates, you just need..." He trailed off, not able to finish that thought out loud.

"You," she finished for him, and laughed. "That's right, Harry. I'm a hopeless romantic, and quite shameless about it. Promise me you won't tell Ron."

Harry's gaze did fly up to hers at that, and what he saw there made him catch his breath. There was really only one thing he could do to relieve this happy pain he felt, so he brought his other hand up to her face, and rubbing both of her cheekbones with his thumbs, lowered his mouth to hers again.

The rest of the afternoon went like that, with quiet conversation intermingled with kissing. Harry really couldn't remember when he'd been so happy. He knew that the rest of the world was still out there, ready to pounce on them when they left the cave, but for this afternoon, the two of them were alone, and could enjoy it. Or rather, he thought they were alone.

They talked about a huge variety of things, from strange games the Weasleys had played as children, to Harry's experiences in Muggle primary schools, which held Ginny fascinated, to just how serious they thought Bill and Fleur were, to her blossoming friendships with her dormmates. Ginny tried to explain the other girls' point of view to Harry, though she was obviously hampered both by Harry's indignation at their treatment of her, and by her own deeply ingrained defense mechanism of mutual mistrust.

"They thought I wasn't a true Gryffindor, for giving in to the diary so easily," she said.

"But, Ginny," Harry said, staring at her in shock. "You resisted him for almost a year! That took such courage and determination..." He trailed off, gripping her hands tightly. "How dare they?"

"They've apologized, Harry," Ginny said, shrugging slightly. "Even Brie. I think they meant it. And I *like* having friends, y'know? Besides..."

"Besides, what?"

"Well, I can understand why they think it, that's all. I don't," she added, when he opened his mouth to speak. "Not anymore, anyway. But I understand why they do. The only one who knows about Joanna - that she's a magical diary, I mean, not a Muggle one - is Annis, and that's what really convinced me that I've finally put most of my demons from that time behind me."

Harry tried to keep the skeptical look out of his eyes. He knew that she was managing extremely well - much better than her silly dormmates would be - but battling those demons would be a life-long fight. But he knew she knew it, too, and he didn't exactly feel comfortable forcing her to face it.

"So, erm...how is Joanna?" he asked, to divert her attention.

Ginny giggled. "She's a diary, Harry, she doesn't really change much. But -" She broke off, gazing at him intently, then turned and began rummaging in her cloak. She pulled out a small book and a Self-Inking Quill. "You can ask her yourself," she said, opening the book. She wrote a string of letters on the blank page, and suddenly, it wasn't blank anymore. She covered the part that had writing on it with her hand, and wrote something new on the page, then held the book out to Harry, still covering the other part.

Harry eyed it with trepidation. He could vividly remember writing in Tom Riddle's diary, and the diary pulling him in to witness events that had happened in the past. At least this diary didn't swallow up the words as soon as Ginny had written them, the way Riddle's diary had. He could see quite clearly what she'd written.

"Hi, Joanna! I have Harry here with me, and I'd like to introduce him to you."

He could also see what the diary had said in reply.

"Hi, Ginny! I'd love to meet him."

Ginny was still holding the book and quill out to him, and he took the quill slowly. *This is silly*, he told himself. *You know this diary is safe - Molly gave it to Ginny, and it's from the*

same place as Hermione's. Besides, Ginny has been writing in it all year, and she had an astronomically worse experience with Riddle's than you did. Buck up, Potter. He took the quill, and wrote quickly.

"Hi, Joanna. I'm glad to meet you."

"Me, too, Harry," appeared on the page. "I've heard so much about you."

"Really?" Harry wrote. He looked up at Ginny, who had her eyes fixed on him, not the diary. He couldn't help but wonder what she'd told Joanna about him.

"I won't ask," he wrote firmly.

"Good, because I wouldn't tell you, anyway," Joanna wrote back. "Besides, I have a question of my own. Ginny said that you two were going to Hogsmeade today, but you're not there. Why not?"

Harry stared down at the words on the page in shock. How did the diary know where they were?

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked.

Harry turned the diary towards her and watched her cheeks turn pink as she read.

"I forgot about that," she said, taking the quill back from Harry. He watched over her shoulder as she wrote.

"We're quite close to Hogsmeade, Joanna. We're in the same cave we came to that time before, with Remus and Sirius."

"But Remus and Sirius aren't with you right now, correct? You said you were going on a date with Harry."

Harry couldn't help glancing at Ginny's face at that, and watched her turn even pinker.

"We're alone, Joanna," she wrote. "But -"

"But nothing, young lady. Now, you two march right back to Hogsmeade, where you'll be safe. If you don't, I'll tell Gwen, who'll tell Hermione. You don't want me to do that."

"Joanna, you wouldn't do that," Ginny wrote.

"Oh, yes, I would. What are the two of you thinking? *Breila*, you know how important both of you are - it's positively irresponsible of you to go wandering off like that. I'm terrified for you right now."

Ginny looked up at Harry and sighed. "I suppose we'd better go," she said. "I think we're safe here with Dobby's protection, but I know I won't be able to convince Joanna. I'm sorry, Harry, I should have known better than to bring her out."

"That's all right, Ginny," Harry said. "We'd have had to be leaving soon anyway. Besides...I'm glad she's so worried about you."

"Oh, you," Ginny said, then leaned over and kissed him on the tip of his nose.

Harry sat there in shock, while she wrote back to Joanna. There was something about that gesture - a familiarity, an understanding - that affected him more than the earlier kisses they'd shared. Well, almost.

The two of them packed up the remains of the picnic into the basket, then walked out of the cave. At the entrance, Ginny turned around and looked all over the cave, then turned back to Harry and smiled at him. He smiled back and, after calling out good-byes and thank-yous to Dobby, they headed back to Hogsmeade.

They reached the Three Broomsticks in time for a butterbeer, and no one seemed to suspect that they hadn't been in the village the whole time. Most people had paired off for most of the day, but now the pub was full of couples merging into larger groups. Harry and Ginny joined an already full table consisting of Ron, Hermione, Neville, Hannah, Seamus, Lavender, Dean, Parvati, Padma, and a sixth-year Ravenclaw boy Harry didn't really know. Before they reached the table, he asked Ginny if she would rather they sit with her dormmates; he could see them squeezed, along with four boys, in a booth in the back corner. He was relieved when she shook her head, because he didn't know any of them very well, and he wasn't feeling very charitable towards them after what she'd told him in the cave. Besides, Ron and Hermione were waving at them, though Hermione gave Harry a quizzical look as they approached. He grinned at her, silently daring her to try to guess where they'd been.

This was fun, too, this loud and boisterous crowd. It was nice to forget about the outside world for awhile, and just be normal teenagers. He hadn't seen either Ron or Hermione so relaxed in quite awhile, and he was glad to see Dean talking so cheerfully with Padma. He didn't know Padma very well, but it seemed like she took the world slightly more seriously than her twin did, and Harry thought that would suit Dean. As soon as he'd thought that, though, he had to grin at himself; he knew he only hoped Dean and Padma would get together so that he wouldn't have to worry about Dean still being interested in Ginny.

When Professor Figg came into the pub to tell everyone that it was time to head back to the school, there was a collective groan, but no one really protested. The students poured out of the pub and streamed down the road to Hogwarts, flanked by teachers and Aurors. Harry was amazed at how easily, it seemed, his fellow students could take their guardians for granted, and he saw Hermione looking around as well, her eyes wide. She must have noticed him watching her, because she gave him a small smile.

"I do hope we don't just accept this as normal," she said, quietly enough that only Harry, Ginny, and Ron could hear her. All three of them nodded and the rest of the walk back was a silent one, for them at least.

When they reached the main entrance, Professor McGonagall was there to greet them.

"Miss Granger?" she said. "Would you please come with me?"

Chapter 32 Illogical Feelings

Hermione stopped precisely where she was, eyes wide as she stared at Professor McGonagall. Ron immediately put an arm around her shoulders, and Ginny grabbed one of her hands and held on tightly. Harry stood behind them, hoping against hope that it wasn't what they all thought it was, and wishing he could help Hermione more than just by putting a hand on her shoulder.

Professor McGonagall looked over the tableau the four of them made, and sighed.

"I suppose the rest of you had better come, as well," she said, before turning and leading the way inside.

The sea of students parted for them easily, and afterwards, Harry would remember individual faces quite clearly. Brenna's, paler even than usual. Natalie MacDonald's, with tears already pouring down her cheeks as she watched them. Cho's, utterly closed and blank. Katie's, full of sympathy. And Draco Malfoy's, full of glee. He didn't say anything, of course, with Professor McGonagall right there, but Harry knew exactly what he was thinking, and he could only hope that Hermione didn't see him. He could feel Ron seething from two paces away, though, so he suspected that she had.

Professor McGonagall led the way up to the headmaster's office, giving the password as "Self-flossing Stringmints." That made Harry more hopeful. It would be an exceedingly cruel password if Hermione's parents had been...hurt, and Dumbledore simply wasn't that cruel. Harry saw Hermione perk up, too, and she practically ran up the last few steps and threw herself into the room.

When he reached the door, Harry saw her with her arms around her mother's neck, and her father patting her back. He entered the room, and then leaned weakly against the wall, waves of relief washing over him. He truly didn't know what he would have done if Hermione's parents had been killed. He suspected that it would have been the last straw, that he would have had to leave Hogwarts and face Voldemort on his own, even with the full knowledge that he would die. He just wouldn't have been able to live with himself if one of his best friends' parents had died, simply because their daughter was close to him.

As soon as he'd thought that, he felt guilty, knowing what both Hermione and Ginny would say if they knew. Watching Hermione's violent joy was painful right then, so he looked at Ginny, and was surprised to see that she was also leaning back against the wall, guilt written plainly across her features. He had no idea what that was about, but before he could say anything to her, Mr. Granger detached himself from his wife and daughter, and turned to Dumbledore.

"I would like to thank Remus and Sirius again before we leave," he said. "Are they nearby?"

Dumbledore smiled, but Harry couldn't help but notice that the usual twinkle was missing from his eyes.

"They will return shortly," he said. "Sirius suffered a slight injury, but he cannot be treated in the hospital wing, so Remus took him down to his hut. He will be fine," he added, turning to Harry, who had pushed himself off the wall and taken a step towards the door.

"How was Sirius hurt?" Hermione asked, her voice muffled by her mother's shoulder.

"He didn't move quickly enough," Remus said, suddenly appearing in the doorway. "Age, you know - it happens to all of us."

"That's quite enough, Moony," Sirius said from behind him. "And, speaking of not moving quickly enough..."

"Oh, you want to enter the room, Padfoot, is that it?" Remus said. "Hmm. Let's see. Shall I -"

But whatever he was going to say next was interrupted, as Sirius pushed him from behind, making him stagger slightly, grin, and step to one side. Sirius then came into the room, smiling, too, his eyes searching for Harry, and then relaxing slightly as he found him.

Only slightly, though. Despite their horseplay, Harry could tell that something was deeply troubling both of them, and he noticed Ron watching them narrowly, as well. Hermione didn't seem to notice, though, as she threw herself at one and then the other, thanking them over and over for saving her parents.

"Not another word, Hermione, you knew we would," Remus said.

"Don't be ridiculous, Moony," Sirius said. "You can thank me all you like, Hermione. It's been a long time since I've been hugged by a beautiful woman."

"Hey!" Ron said, but he smiled at Sirius, who grinned back.

Hermione blushed, smiled, and looked down at her feet. Mrs. Granger watched her, her face filled with such love that Harry had to look away. He could never have that, and no matter how happy he was for Hermione, no matter how guilty his envy made him feel, he did envy her.

"Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said, suddenly turning to where the headmaster still sat behind his desk, with Professor McGonagall standing beside him, "may I show my parents Gryffindor Tower? I know it's not usually allowed..."

She trailed off, and Harry and Ron exchanged gleeful looks behind her back. Hermione Granger, trying to circumvent a rule?

"I think we can arrange that," Professor Dumbledore said, "but it will depend on your Head of House." He smiled up at Professor McGonagall.

McGonagall gave the slightly-less-prim-than-usual smile that Harry only saw on her face when she looked at Hermione.

"Of course you may, Miss Granger," she said.

Hermione's face lit up, and she started babbling to her parents about all of the magical things they would see on their way through the halls of Hogwarts. She led the way out the door, but as Harry prepared to follow her, he caught Dumbledore's eye, and read the unmistakable message in it. So, he returned to leaning against the wall, and watched as Mr. and Mrs. Granger, Professor McGonagall, and Ginny followed Hermione. He tried to catch Ginny's eye

as she left, but didn't manage it; she looked a little dazed, he thought, but that was probably because of Hermione, who still hadn't drawn breath.

"What *is* it," Ron said, bringing Harry's thoughts back into the room. "There's obviously something wrong with the two of you." He still leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. "Don't try to hide it. It's bloody obvious."

Harry instinctively looked at Dumbledore when Ron said that, but the headmaster's smile only widened at the borderline profanity.

"I don't think that Sirius or Remus will try to hide anything from you and Harry," he said, ostensibly to Ron. Then, he turned and pinned Sirius with a look that had no twinkle in it. "Will you?"

Sirius sighed, and the gaiety that had felt so false to Harry melted off of him.

"All right, all right," he said, sitting down in one of the chairs and running a hand through his hair. Remus still stood near the door, his eyes looking deep and worried as they fixed on his friend.

"We didn't have any trouble reaching the Grangers in time," Sirius said. "That really was a brilliant idea of yours, Ron, to put a ward on their house that would tell us when anyone used magic there."

Harry gazed at his friend in wonder. That *was* a brilliant idea, and Ron had never even mentioned it to him. Ron's ears were bright red, and he shook his head.

"So, what happened? Did you catch anyone?" he asked.

"The instant the Death Eaters Apparated there, the ward went off, and Remus and I Apparated there ourselves. You know, we'll have to do something about that," he added, drawing a small ball out of his pocket. It reminded Harry of a Remembrall, though it was smaller, because it was quite clear. "The whole time we were there, fighting the Death Eaters, this bloody thing kept wriggling and buzzing in my pocket."

"Well," Ron said, taking the two steps he needed to reach Sirius and picking up the ball. "That's what it's designed to do. I suppose you could have left it behind when you Apparated...but then, what if something had happened at someone else's house? Did it turn the right color?"

"Yes," Remus said. "It worked perfectly, Ron, and I, for one, was far too busy to be bothered by a little movement in one of my pockets in the middle of a battle. Sirius is just being a bit of a prat."

"A battle?" Harry said. "How many Death Eaters were there?"

"Just five," Sirius said. "And two of them were Crabbe and Goyle, Senior, who hardly count."

"Then what's the problem?" Ron asked again. "*Didn't* you catch anyone? Wasn't that the point?" He gave the ward ball back to Sirius, then stood looking down at the older man, his

arms crossed. "If the wards worked perfectly, and you had no problems with the Death Eaters, what's wrong?"

Harry looked over to Dumbledore, to see how he was taking this blatant cross examination of a member of the Order of the Phoenix by a mere student. Far from looking disapproving, as Harry had expected, Dumbledore actually looked satisfied. Even proud. Suddenly, he turned to meet Harry's eyes, and Harry was relieved to see the twinkle back.

Meanwhile, Sirius still didn't seem to want to answer Ron. Remus finally let out a grunt of disgust, and walked over to sit next to him.

"One of the five was Wormtail, that's what Padfoot doesn't want to say," he said.

"Really?" Harry said. "Did...did you catch him?" As soon as he'd asked, he wished he hadn't, because it was quite obvious they hadn't. If they had, Sirius wouldn't be acting this way.

"I tried, Harry," Sirius said. He gazed at Harry, who still stood leaning against the wall. "I...I did. But..."

"But protecting the Grangers was more important," Harry finished for him, wondering why he looked worried.

Sirius just gaped at him, and Dumbledore chuckled.

"You really do need to get to know your godson better, if you didn't know he'd react that way, Sirius," Dumbledore said. "One of Mr. Potter's most admirable traits is his inherent moral center."

Harry felt himself turn red, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Ron wasn't helping; Harry could see the glee in his eyes, and knew he'd be in for some teasing later on. At least now he knew what was wrong with Sirius.

"You'll catch him someday," he told his godfather. "I know you will."

Sirius looked for a moment like he was going to jump up and hug Harry, and Harry was grateful that he didn't. Being hugged by Hermione or Molly, not to mention Ginny, was one thing, but being hugged by Sirius would be a different thing altogether.

"Erm...what are Hermione's parents going to do now?" he asked, more just to say something than because he really wanted to know.

"What do you mean, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, studying him over the tops of his spectacles.

"Well, are they going to stay here, at Hogwarts?" Harry asked. "Or are they going to join Aunt Petunia at the Burrow?" He grinned inwardly at the thought of Hermione's parents, who had loved the Burrow, showing Aunt Petunia exactly how to be good house guests. Molly never complained, of course, but Aunt Petunia definitely did, and every letter made it more and more clear that she hadn't improved with the transition to the wizarding world.

"Why would they?" Ron asked, his eyebrows raised.

"I think the Grangers would prefer to return to their home," Dumbledore said.

"But...but isn't that dangerous?" Harry asked. "What if they're attacked again?"

"Then maybe we'll actually catch Wormtail," Sirius said, causing Harry to stare at him. Did he really mean to use the Grangers, who had no magical means to protect themselves, as bait?

Remus put a hand on Sirius' arm, and smiled up at Harry reassuringly.

"It isn't very likely that they will be attacked again, Harry," he said. "Not now that Voldemort knows how well-protected they are."

"No, what we need to worry about is what Voldemort's going to do next," Ron said, beginning to pace around the room. "His last two attacks have failed, or mostly failed, in Dean's parents' case. What will he do to make sure the next one succeeds?"

"That is a discussion for another time, I think," Dumbledore said.

His eyes were fixed on Sirius, who had put his head back into his hands. Harry wanted to go comfort him, but he just didn't know what to do.

"Right," Ron said. "Erm...I'm really glad the wards worked well, anyway. Perhaps we should go and see how Hermione's doing?"

Now it was Harry's turn to smirk at him, and as he watched the tips of Ron's ears turn pink, he exchanged an amused glance with Remus. Actually, what amused Harry the most was how much less embarrassed Ron was than he used to be at being caught thinking about Hermione. Dumbledore smiled, too, but he gratified Ron by shooing them out of his office, and telling them it was their duty to check up on Hermione. So, with a last smile at Sirius, which his godfather didn't see, Harry followed Ron out the door, and practically wore out his legs trying to keep up with him on the way to Gryffindor Tower.

They found Mr. and Mrs. Granger being entertained by Fred and George, who were showing off some of their inventions. As they climbed through the portrait hole, they heard Fred tell Neville that it was his duty, as a friend of Hermione's, and though Fred hadn't said what 'it' was, Harry wasn't at all surprised to see a large canary standing near the Grangers when they reached them, instead of Neville. Hermione looked distraught, but Mr. Granger roared with laughter, and Mrs. Granger reached out to pet Neville-the-canary. Unfortunately, at that moment, he molted and then changed back into a human with a pop, which caused Mrs. Granger to give a little shriek. That caused her husband to laugh even harder, and she did smile.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione said, once they were close enough, "can't you do something? Your horrid brothers...I don't think my parents need this right now."

"I don't know, Hermione, they look like they're enjoying it," Ron said, moving behind her and wrapping his arms around her. She stiffened for a moment, and then relaxed into his embrace, giving a little sigh. Ron whispered something in her ear that made her smile and shake her head.

"I'm fine, now," she said, her eyes never really leaving her parents.

"Y'know, I don't think McGonagall handled that very well," Ron said, this time loud enough for Harry, who still stood next to them, to hear. "She should have told you straight off that your parents were fine."

Harry hadn't thought about that before - everything had happened so quickly - but now he realized that Ron was right. The way McGonagall had greeted them had certainly made it seem like something was wrong. He knew Hermione would never agree that a professor could have handled something badly, though, so before she and Ron could start arguing, he decided to provide a diversion.

"Where's Ginny?" he asked.

"Oh," Hermione said, looking around. "She went upstairs as soon as we got here, but she said she'd be right back down." She frowned and looked at Harry, her nose wrinkled in thought. "She seemed awfully quiet, didn't she? Did something happen today?"

Harry thought guiltily of everything that had happened that day in the cave, knowing that Ron wouldn't be happy about any of it. But he also knew that wasn't why Ginny was acting strangely, because she'd been fine up until they'd reached the castle again.

"Should I go up and find her?" he asked.

Hermione gasped. "You can't do that, Harry," she said. "You know that."

"Right," Harry said, rolling his eyes. It really was ridiculous - Ginny might need him, and he couldn't go to her, just because she was in the girls' dormitory.

Hermione must have thought that he meant to go anyway, because she said very quickly, "I'll go," and almost ran up the stairs. Harry tried not to think about following her, and to distract himself, joined the group clustered around the Grangers.

"So, tell me," Fred was saying to Mrs. Granger, "has Hermione always had this unholy drive to be the best at everything? Should have been a Slytherin, that she should." His voice sounded grave, but his eyes were dancing.

"And such a poor taste in men?" George added, watching Ron carefully for his reaction.

Ron just snorted. "Well, she did have a crush on Lockhart, if that tells you anything," he said.

Mrs. Granger laughed. "Was he the *terribly handsome* teacher who wrote so many books? I kept telling Hermione that no one could be expected to memorize six textbooks, but she just wouldn't listen." She seemed to be ignoring Fred's question.

"That's the one," Ron said. "'Course, Lockhart probably did expect us to memorize them - after all, who wouldn't want to have every detail of how he defeated that werewolf in the felly-tone booth at hand whenever you might want it?"

Both of the Grangers looked a little confused at that, but just as Harry was about to explain to them what Ron had really meant, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see one of Ginny's dormmates - the small, blonde one - standing next to him.

"Hermione asked if you and Ron would come up to our dorm," she said.

"Really," Harry said, smiling slightly. He could just imagine how much it had cost Hermione to do such an about-face. He lost his smile quickly, though. What was wrong with Ginny? He grabbed Ron by the arm, said, "Ginny needs us," and led the way up the stairs. As they walked, he turned to the girl.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't know your name."

"Annis," she said, blushing a little.

Harry couldn't imagine why she was blushing, so he ignored it. Ginny had told him that Annis was the only one of her dormmates who she'd told about Joanna, so he knew she trusted her.

"What's wrong with Ginny?" he asked.

"She thinks that she should have seen Hermione's parents being attacked," Annis said. She spoke very quietly, so that Harry had to strain to hear her, as they trooped up the stairs. Suddenly, she stopped, and Harry and Ron stopped with her.

"I didn't know Ginny was a Seer - none of us did. How...how long has she been?"

Harry turned to Ron, not sure what to say. He knew Ginny and Toby didn't want the whole world to know Ginny was a Seer, but obviously Annis already knew.

Ron shrugged at Harry, then turned to Annis.

"Since this past summer," he said.

"Oh," Annis said. She started walking again. "It's such a huge responsibility, isn't it? Poor Ginny."

That made Harry feel better. He could definitely see why Ginny wanted to be friends with this girl.

When they reached the fourth-year girls' dorm, they found another of Ginny's dormmates sitting on Ginny's bed and staring in shock at Hermione, who had Ginny by the shoulders and was shaking her so hard the bed shook, too.

"Hermione!" Harry and Ron both said, and ran to them, Ron to pry Hermione's hands off of Ginny's shoulders, and Harry to put his arms around Ginny. She didn't push him away, but she submitted to his embrace very stiffly.

"Fine," Hermione almost spat. "Maybe you can talk some sense into her. She won't listen to me. Honestly, Ginny, you can't blame yourself every time something bad happens, and you didn't see it beforehand. It's going to happen quite often, you know. You can't save the world all by yourself." She glared at Ginny for a moment, which Ginny couldn't see, because she'd dropped her head onto Harry's shoulder. "The pair of you are well suited, I will say that," Hermione added.

Ron snorted, and Harry couldn't help smiling - he thought they were, too, after all, if not for the reason she did - but Ginny didn't look up.

"Ginny," he said into her hair. "Maybe you didn't See it, because nothing really happened. Hermione's parents weren't hurt, because R- the Aurors got there in time."

"I should have," Ginny said, her voice muffled by his shoulder. "Hermione's my friend, and I should have."

Hermione just threw her hands up in the air and shook her head.

"But, Ginny," Ron said, "we didn't need you to See this. We bloody well knew that Hermione's parents would be attacked. There's been twenty-four hour surveillance on her house for months."

He caught Harry's eye as he said that, and Harry nodded. Ginny might trust Annis and her other dormmate with the fact that she was a Seer, but the knowledge that Ron was training with Dumbledore was different.

"I know that, Ron," Ginny said, finally raising her head to glare at her brother, "but knowing that a vision didn't turn out to be necessary isn't going to stop me from feeling that I should have had one anyway. I know it's illogical, but that's the way I feel."

Harry certainly understood that. "Now you know how I feel," he said.

Ginny gasped, then giggled and nodded. "I suppose I do." She smiled into Harry's eyes, and he smiled back.

Suddenly, Ron cleared his throat loudly, and Harry and Ginny looked away from each other, both blushing slightly.

"Erm, Ginny?" Annis said. She was still standing closer to the door than the bed. "Is this...this Seer thing something you don't want anyone to know about? I mean, Velvet and I won't tell anyone, if that's what you want."

Ginny sighed. "I don't know," she said. "I suppose it'll get out eventually, anyway."

"Yes," Hermione said, reaching out her hand, and putting it on Ginny's arm, "but it's probably better to put that day off as long as possible, don't you think?" She turned to Annis. "Would the two of you mind keeping this to yourselves? We don't want the whole world pestering Ginny to tell them their futures."

"We don't mind, do we, Velvet?" Annis said, and Harry realized that he had heard her correctly before. He'd heard some rather odd names since he'd entered the wizarding world, but 'Velvet' was one of the oddest.

Velvet shook her head, making her ponytail swing back and forth, practically hitting her cheeks.

"Not as long as Ginny tells *our* futures," she said.

Harry thought she was serious until Ginny laughed, and then he could see the twinkle in Velvet's eye.

"Besides," she added, now smiling faintly, "you don't need to be a Seer to tell Annis' future. She's going to marry Gryffydd, have a long career in the Ministry, and have two children, one boy and one girl, who will both be paragons of virtue. The only worry they will ever cause their parents will be whether they'll be sorted into Gryffindor or Ravenclaw."

"Velvet!" Annis said, her cheeks bright red.

Ginny, though, burst out laughing. "It's so true, Annis," she said in gasps, through her laughter. Velvet snickered, and even Annis smiled.

Harry watched all three of them. Was this how girls talked normally? Hermione was certainly smiling, her eyes bright as she looked at Annis. Well, he could certainly leave Ginny to them - she obviously wouldn't be able to brood on her perceived failure with Velvet nearby. He stood up and touched her cheek softly.

"We'd better get back downstairs, before McGonagall finds out we're here," he said. "And Hermione's parents are probably wondering where she is."

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, jumping up from the bed. "Who knows what Fred and George are doing to them."

"Wait, I'm coming with you," Ginny said, standing up herself and linking her arm with Harry's. "I want to show your dad something new Professor Flitwick taught me."

So, all six of them trooped back down to the common room and joined in the impromptu party that lasted well into the night.

The Grangers returned to their home the next morning, and life at Hogwarts returned to normal. The O.W.L.s, as Hermione constantly reminded them, were in just a month, and there really wasn't time to do much more than revise for them. Somehow, Harry and Ron squeezed in Quidditch practices, but the rest of the team was even busier, studying for their N.E.W.T.s, so there weren't as many of those as before. Besides, they'd have to lose spectacularly to Hufflepuff for them to lose the Quidditch Cup, and even Angelina, paranoid as she was about Quidditch, had to admit that was pretty unlikely.

They did still have their Auror training classes, which continued to be extremely challenging. One day in mid-May, just a week before the O.W.L.s, they entered the classroom to find both Remus and Professor Moody there, along with a young Slytherin boy that Harry didn't know. Harry stopped short and looked at Remus in confusion. Why would they want a Slytherin to know about the extra training some of the students were receiving?

Remus smiled back at him. "We will explain Mr. Overhill's presence when everyone arrives," he said.

Harry took his seat beside Ginny, but he still eyed the Slytherin suspiciously. He didn't look like he was planning anything, or even noticing much of anything; in fact, he looked almost terrified. Harry exchanged looks with Ron, who just shrugged his shoulders. He saw Ginny

roll her eyes next to him, but that didn't stop him from thinking that the Slytherin just shouldn't be there.

Everyone waited in silence until George and Brenna, the last two to arrive, entered the room, both a little pink and wind-blown. They sobered quickly, though, when they took in the mood of the room, and swiftly took their seats.

"All right," Professor Moody said, from his usual perch on the teacher's desk at the front of the room. "You've all become almost competent at flinging curses and counter-curses around, so if you came across a particularly careless Death Eater, I suppose you might survive long enough for help to arrive."

He glowered at them, fixing each with his magical eye in turn. Harry met his gaze steadily, not because he disagreed with him, but because he agreed. He knew they all had a long way to go before they could face a fully trained wizard in the field.

"However," Moody continued, "there are some things that you can't defeat with a simple curse or counter-curse. Some things that take actual strength of mind. Some things that it's better to avoid altogether, so remember, constant vigilance!"

He finished in a mild bellow, but they had all heard that particular phrase so often, that it had lost most of its effect on them. Several weeks earlier, Harry had even noticed Fred and Theo exchanging money after Moody had said it, and could only suppose that they'd bet on how long it would take him. They weren't doing that now, though; everyone stared at Moody, wondering what he would say next.

Instead, it was Remus who spoke. "All of you have actually faced this before, though not all at close range. But it is something that most of you will likely have to face, and you must be prepared for it. Do you remember the train ride here at the beginning of my previous year of teaching?"

Harry felt Ginny stiffen beside him, and could see Ron and Hermione's heads turn towards him out of the corner of his eye. He just stared at Remus. A dementor. That's what Remus and Moody meant, that's what they needed to be ready to face. At least he knew he could; he felt Ginny begin to tremble beside him - he could only imagine what she heard when a dementor was near - and he reached out for her hand, but he didn't take his eyes off of Remus. He knew he could fight off a dementor, but he wasn't looking forward to showing off his Patronus to everyone. He could trust all of the people in this room; he knew that. And he would trust them with his life, but his Patronus was the one thing he had that came directly from his father. Remus must have seen some of that in his eyes, because he smiled reassuringly down at him.

"That's right," he said to the class at large, "we're talking about dementors. Now, we could never bring a real dementor into Hogwarts, but, luckily, we have a perfectly good substitute. Can anyone tell me what I have in my briefcase?"

Everyone just eyed the briefcase warily, but finally Hermione said, "A boggart?"

"That's right, Hermione," Remus said, but before he could continue, Hermione interrupted him.

"But, Professor, Harry's boggart isn't a dementor anymore. How will this work?"

Harry felt himself turn red as Fred, George, Theo, and Brenna turned to look at him. *Thanks, Hermione*, he thought. *Expose my insecurities in front of everyone*. Now it was Ginny's turn to give his hand a squeeze.

"Fortunately, one of my third-years can make up for that," Remus said. He held out his hand to the young Slytherin, who had been sitting quietly, in a chair away from the rest of the group. Now, he stood and walked over to Remus and Moody. Harry could see him swallowing convulsively.

"This is Julian Overhill," Remus said, smiling at the boy. "He has kindly offered to assist us today. Now," he went on, turning back to the class, "the way to fight a dementor is with a charm. I know that several of you are very talented in Charms..."

Harry tuned him out, since he'd heard all of this before. He really didn't want to do this. He knew he had to; when Voldemort managed to arrange for the dementors to leave Azkaban, as Ron thought he would, they certainly wouldn't ask if Harry *wanted* them to come near him before they did so. But perhaps Remus wouldn't force him to face Julian's boggart-dementor now, since, after all, he already knew how to cast a Patronus.

"Harry?" Remus said, breaking him out of his reflections. "Would you please join the lesson?"

Harry looked up into his eyes, and saw that they were full of affection and understanding. But they were filled with something else, too, and he knew without a doubt that he would be conjuring a Patronus today.

"Now that Harry's joined us once more, we'll try it again," Remus said, and the whole room said, "*Expecto Patronum*," in unison.

"Very well," he said. "Everyone, please stand over by that wall, so Julian can open the briefcase. We don't want anyone else coming too close to the boggart, or it won't be a dementor anymore. When it is your turn to face the dementor, please stand here." He traced a line in the air with his wand, and it settled down onto the floor, glowing faintly. "That way, the boggart-dementor will sense you as a dementor, but not as a boggart. Can anyone tell me why that is?"

Hermione and Brenna both opened their mouths to answer, but before either one of them could say anything, Professor Moody gave a short, barking laugh.

"You're babbling, Lupin," he almost growled. "We have plenty of chocolate here, and these kids can handle this. Get on with it."

Remus sighed. "All right," he said. "I will go first. Please take your places, and watch carefully."

Everyone except Remus and Julian lined up along one wall of the classroom. Professor Moody leaned his shoulders against it, and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked the picture of indolent relaxation, but Harry saw the tip of the handle of his wand peeking out from his sleeve, where he could reach it easily. No one said a word as Remus took his place at the line on the floor. He nodded to Julian, who took a deep breath, and opened the briefcase.

The dementor emerged, and even though it was all the way across the room, Harry instantly felt cold, and the room seemed to darken around him a bit. He heard a whispering, and knew what it must be, but it was quiet enough that he couldn't hear the actual words, so he could ignore it for now. He could see Julian standing rigidly, behind and a little to the left of the dementor, but it wasn't paying attention to him. Instead, it moved slowly towards Remus.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Remus shouted, and a large, silvery form shot out of his wand and chased the dementor back into the briefcase. Julian shut it with a snap.

All of the students let out their breath in one gasp, but not even a dementor could frighten Fred Weasley for long.

"Why is his Patronus a wolf?" he whispered in Harry's ear. "I wouldn't have expected that."

Harry just shrugged, but inwardly he was grinning, and that did more for him than the chocolate Moody passed around. Remus' Patronus hadn't been a wolf, it had been a big, shaggy dog, and Harry knew he wasn't the only one who recognized Padfoot. He smiled at Remus, who smiled back, though it was a wan effort. That made Harry sober again.

"Is everyone all right?" Moody asked. When no one said anything, he added, "I think we'll go in order of age. Black, you're up."

Theo nodded, and strode up to the line on the floor. It took him three tries, and even then, the badger that shot out of his wand wasn't quite strong enough to completely vanquish the dementor. Remus told him that was enough for today, and made him sit down with a big slab of chocolate. George had even more problems; no one could quite tell exactly what his Patronus was. Fred, on the other hand, surprised them all by producing a truly powerful Patronus on his first try, but unfortunately it made them all laugh so hard that they had to give the boggart some time before it would come out of the briefcase again. This gave George and Theo plenty of time to recover, and tease Fred for having his mum as his Patronus. Even Ginny, who'd been looking so pale that her freckles looked almost black, perked up a bit, telling Fred that she thought it was cute, and that she knew Angelina would, too. Fred just growled at her, and went back to munching on his chocolate.

After a quarter of an hour, Remus said they could continue, so Brenna took her place at the line. Her Patronus was quite obviously an owl, and just as obviously wasn't up to the task of defeating the dementor. She took a seat, white and trembling, and George put an arm around her shoulders while she sat and stared at her chocolate.

Then, it was Hermione's turn. Harry wasn't at all surprised when she produced a strong Patronus on her second try, but he was surprised to see that it was a wolf. He turned to look at Remus, who seemed equally surprised. Hermione blushed, but she looked at Remus, too, and held his gaze.

"You believed in me," she said after a moment. "Even when...when I almost let you down, you believed in me."

Harry thought she must be talking about what happened in the Shrieking Shack, because what else could she be talking about? He watched, as Remus studied Hermione for a long moment, then smiled.

"You're welcome, Hermione," he said.

Ron smiled proudly at Hermione, as she rejoined them near the wall. Then, he took a deep breath, and walked up to the line on the floor, muttering to himself as he went. His first try left him collapsed on the floor, and so did his second, but each time, he stood up again, saying that it hadn't been a happy enough memory. The third time, he must have found a wonderful one, because his Patronus shot out of his wand, solidly silver. Harry and Hermione both gasped, and Hermione grabbed Harry's hand. Ron's Patronus was a chess knight, just like the ones in Professor McGonagall's giant chess set that had helped to guard the Sorcerer's Stone. When Ron turned and walked back to them, his ears bright red, Hermione threw an arm around his neck, still not letting go of Harry's hand. Harry felt himself turning red, and he closed his eyes against the curious looks they were getting from everyone else, but he felt a strange tingle in his stomach that wasn't unpleasant.

"Hermione," he could hear Ron murmuring into her hair, "it's just a Patronus."

"I know," Hermione said, letting go of both of them suddenly, and brushing her hand over her eyes. "But it's *your* Patronus, Ron, and it's...it's..." She trailed off, and turned to Harry.

"Yeah," Harry said to both of them. "It's...it's...it's bloody brilliant, that's what it is."

Ron gave a shout of laughter, and only laughed harder when Hermione said, "Harry!" in the tone she usually reserved for Ron when he swore. Harry shared a happy smile with Ginny, and then stepped forward to take his place at the line. He thought he knew what his happy memory would be. He nodded to Julian, who sighed. The younger boy looked exhausted, and no wonder. Harry wasn't sure he would have been able to face a dementor that many times and still be willing to do it again. He could only imagine what Julian heard every time the dementor came out, but even if it weren't as horrible as what Harry heard, it still took great courage to face it over and over again. Harry smiled at Julian, trying to convey an apology with only a look. He'd obviously misjudged the Slytherin - whatever would Ginny say?

Julian opened the briefcase, and the dementor began gliding towards Harry. He tried to fix his mind on how happy he'd been just a few moments before, but suddenly he heard something he wasn't at all expecting.

"Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever," Professor McGonagall said.

Harry looked around wildly, but he didn't see his Head of House anywhere. Just the dementor, still gliding towards him.

"She won't wake," said a soft voice, and then Harry heard the laughing. It wasn't quite the same laughter he usually heard, that cold, hard laugh; it was mixed with another that was just as cold and hard, but somehow more human. And then the words came faster.

"...there isn't much life left in her...stand aside, girl...not Harry!...her skeleton..."

And the laughter, green and hard, chilling him to the bone.

"Expecto Patronum!"

"Harry!"

Harry opened his eyes to see Ginny's warm brown ones gazing down at him. She looked like she was about to cry. But she was *there*, she hadn't been killed by Tom Riddle, down in the Chamber, so he couldn't understand why she was crying.

"Here," someone said in a gruff voice. "Have some chocolate."

Harry tore his eyes from Ginny to see Remus and Professor Moody standing over him, Moody holding out a piece of chocolate to him. He sat up and took it, starting to feel better as soon as he bit into it.

"What happened, Harry?" Remus asked, his eyes shining with concern. "You haven't had a problem with a dementor since your third year."

Harry looked down at his chocolate. "It wasn't what I was expecting. I didn't hear the same thing I've always heard, or not only that."

"What did you hear?" Ron asked, but Harry just shook his head. He didn't understand why he'd heard what he'd heard, but he wasn't about to try to figure it out in front of everyone. He'd ask Hermione if she knew of anything like this happening before, or maybe Remus. Right now, he just wanted to prove, mostly to himself, that he could still defeat a dementor, no matter what it threw at him.

"I'll be fine," was all he said, as he scrambled to his feet. He couldn't stop himself from reaching out and touching Ginny's cheek for a moment, feeling her love for him wash over him. With that, he could face anything.

He walked back to the line and took a deep breath. Obviously, he would need a happier memory, and he knew just the one. This time, when the dementor began gliding towards him, he thought of how he'd felt in the cave, when Ginny had kissed his nose.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he bellowed, and watched in satisfaction as the silvery stag leapt from his wand and chased the dementor back into the briefcase. He heard Hermione squeak and clap her hands behind him, and when he turned around, she and Ron had huge smiles on their faces. He smiled back at them, and at Ginny, who also smiled, but only as she passed him. She had a determined look on her face, and he supposed that she had grown tired of waiting for her turn.

Harry just had time to take his place against the wall, before Ginny nodded to Julian. He wondered what her happy memory would be, and couldn't deny to himself that he hoped it would be very similar to his. He knew that what she'd be hearing from the dementor would be just as horrible as what he heard, and he could only hope that a memory of him would be enough to protect her.

As the dementor glided towards her, Ginny cocked her head, as though listening intently. Then, she nodded once, and raised her wand.

"*Expecto Patronum,*" she said, firmly, but not loudly. It didn't matter. A silver shape shot out of her wand, the strongest any of them had produced. It chased the dementor back into the briefcase, then turned and walked back to Ginny, who looked as though she couldn't have moved if her life depended on it. Then it bowed, first to Ginny, and then to Harry, who felt his

jaw drop in shock. It was like looking into a silvery mirror, though the Harry Patronus was grinning, and Harry certainly wasn't.

Suddenly, Ginny gasped. She whirled around, stared at Harry for a moment, then back at her Patronus. It saluted her with one hand, then disappeared. Ginny looked wildly around the room, then gave a sob, picked up her book-bag, and fled out the door.

Harry just stood there, staring at the door as though he could still see Ginny through it, until Hermione and Brenna walked over to stand in front of him. They stood in almost identical poses, hands on their hips, glaring at him.

"Well?" Brenna said. She looked like she was about to start tapping her foot at him, but he just watched her in confusion. Did girls really do this sort of thing? And why had Ginny run away?

"Well, what?" he finally asked, when it became obvious that she wasn't going to say anything else.

"Well, aren't you going to go after her?" she asked.

"Why? She...she didn't seem to want to see me."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, removing her hands from her hips and reaching out one to him. "Of course she did. She's hoping you'll run after her and comfort her."

"She is?" Harry asked. He looked around at Fred, George, Theo and Ron, who all nodded. He didn't want to look at Remus and Moody - it would be too embarrassing.

"That's what girls do, mate," Fred said. "Even normally rational ones like Ginny. And don't tell her I said that."

Harry would never understand girls, not if they did completely nonsensical things like running out of a room, but expecting a bloke to follow them. When he wanted to be alone, he wanted to be alone, with none of this mixed-messages stuff. But if Ginny expected him to follow her, follow her he would. He knew just where she'd gone, too, especially if she expected him to follow her.

"All right, I'll go find her," he said, gaining himself smiles from Brenna and Hermione. Without bothering to take his book-bag, he left the room, and made his way slowly through the corridors towards the front doors. He wanted some time to think, before he faced Ginny again. It made perfect sense, now that he thought about it, that her Patronus would be him. He'd been the one to rescue her from the worst experience of her life, after all. But he could also understand why she'd run out of the room when she'd seen it. It just felt so...so intimate. And so permanent. Her Patronus would always be him, no matter how she felt about him. He certainly didn't want to think of a time when they wouldn't be together, but they were only fifteen. He just hoped that this wouldn't change her feelings towards him right now. He didn't think that it would - he thought what they had together could survive much worse than this - but he couldn't be sure until he talked with her. He hastened his steps, until he reached the front doors, and pushed them open.

Sunlight poured over him, almost blinding him, until his eyes adjusted. He made his way towards the lake and Ginny's favorite bench, shading his eyes from the glare as he walked. He

expected to see her hair from far away, but even when he reached the bench, he didn't see her, because she wasn't there. Her book-bag was, though, and her school robes. Harry snatched them up, looking around wildly for any glimpses of coppery red. When he didn't see any, he looked back down at the bench, noticing for the first time that there were roses strewn all over it. He picked one up and stared at it for a moment, before feeling the familiar tug behind his navel. He had only time to think just how stupid he had been, before the Portkey pulled him away.

Chapter 33 On the Edge of the Light

Harry tried very hard not to stumble when he landed, with the Portkey still in his hand, but he didn't quite manage it, and that one off-balance moment was enough. He heard a voice cry out, "Potter!" and another right on top of the first, shout something else that he couldn't quite hear. He felt like he should know the first voice, though he couldn't place it, but he definitely knew the second. *Wormtail*.

Before Harry could do anything, ropes shot from Wormtail's wand, wrapping themselves around Harry and dragging him into a sitting position on the ground. He could feel someone else's back against his, and when a gust of wind blew a strand of coppery hair into his face, he realized it was Ginny. That let him breathe again. Wormtail wouldn't have tied her up if they'd killed her. They were both helpless, and Harry didn't know why they'd taken Ginny, but at least she was alive. He twisted his head around as far as he could, and found himself looking into her eyes. She looked absolutely terrified, which surprised him, but before he could try to reassure her, Wormtail spoke.

"Are you sure this is a diary?" he said to the other man. "It's completely blank."

"Of course I'm sure," the other man said, and Harry could hear the complete disdain he felt for Wormtail in his voice. "It's blank, because it's enchanted. You don't think a Weasley would use a Muggle diary, do you? Even this Weasley? All we need is the password."

Harry wished that he could see the man properly, but he was standing directly in front of Ginny, so all he could see was that he wore the robes, hood, and mask of a Death Eater. Wormtail, on the other hand, was dressed in normal-looking robes, and wore no hood or mask.

"*Why* do we need the password?" Wormtail whined. "Who cares what some teenage girl writes in her diary?"

"Are you completely stupid, Wormtail, or just feeling a little off today? This is *Ginny Weasley*. *Look* who's tied to her, and remember *why*. All the secrets of Hogwarts could be in this diary."

Even in this situation, that statement almost made Harry laugh. Whoever this man was, he obviously didn't know Dumbledore that well, if he truly thought the headmaster would tell all the secrets of Hogwarts to a fourth-year girl. Even if he knew them all, which Harry doubted. Wormtail must have been thinking the same thing.

"I just don't see how we'll learn anything more than we already know from it," he said. "Why don't we just take them both to Lord Voldemort? Then, if he wants to read the diary, he can do so."

Harry could almost hear the other man grinding his teeth. Suddenly, he grabbed Wormtail's arm, and pulled him away from Harry and Ginny. The two Death Eaters began an argument in hushed tones, but Harry couldn't quite hear their words, so he tried to block them out.

"Are you all right?" he asked Ginny, at the exact same time as she asked the exact same question. That made them both chuckle, and Harry watched her relax a little.

"Why are they so intent on your diary, and how did they get it?" Harry asked her, after they'd both said that they were as well as they could be, under the circumstances.

"I had it in my hand when I was transported here," Ginny said. "I'd been pulling it out as I ran, and after I'd reached the bench, I dropped my bag and pulled off my robes, and then picked the diary up again to start to write to Joanna. That's when I noticed the roses, and...I don't know what I was thinking, Harry. It was a truly stupid thing to do, picking one of them up."

"Then I'm truly stupid, too," he said, wishing he could see her face. Even turning his head as far around as he could, all he could really see was her ear and part of her cheek. "I knew you'd disappeared, and I still picked up one of those roses."

"What are we going to do?" Ginny said. She kept her voice low, but it still came out as a wail. "They're going to take us to Voldemort, and then...and then..."

"They haven't yet," Harry said quickly. He squinted at what he could see of the two Death Eaters. They were still arguing, but Wormtail seemed to be losing. Harry thought that was a good thing. "We need to stall them, keep them from taking us away from here. Someone will come to rescue us, you know that, we just need to stay in one place long enough for them to do it." *Stay in one place away from Voldemort*, he thought but didn't say out loud. "So, why is that man so intent on your diary?"

"I don't know," Ginny said. "He can't really think Dumbledore has told me anything of value, can he?"

"Who knows what he thinks," Harry said. "But we need to encourage him to think that, or anything else that keeps him interested enough so that he'll read it, and not move us. Ginny...I think you're going to have to give him the password."

"I know that, Harry, I'm not stupid," Ginny said, then sighed. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped. It's just...oh, Harry, there's things in there that I really don't want...but that's stupid, obviously our lives are more important than my pride."

"I know, but Ginny, it's worth it. Remember, Joanna always knows where she is! So, we just need to get one of them to write in her, and then close her again, so she can tell the other diaries, and Hermione's diary can tell her, and then they'll know where to find us."

"That's a lot of ifs, Harry," Ginny said. "I wouldn't count on that. If Hermione knows we're missing, why would she be writing in her diary?"

"Because that's what Hermione does," Harry said, but he wasn't really listening to what his mouth was saying, because it looked like the two Death Eaters were finishing their argument. "Listen, it's the best chance we have."

"All *right*, Harry," Ginny said. "I said I'll do it. Besides, so much of myself has been exposed today, what's the rest of it? You already know I love you, you're not going to hear anything different from Joanna."

"Ginny," Harry began, but before he got anything else out, the two Death Eaters came back. They both planted themselves in front of Ginny, so Harry couldn't see them.

"I'm going to collect the rest of the Portkeys," Wormtail said. "In the meantime, girl, you're going to tell my friend here the password to your diary and answer any questions he has."

"And if I don't?" Ginny asked, surprising Harry. She had agreed to give them the password, why was she balking now?

"If you don't, Weasley, you'll learn what it means to be beyond the safety of Hogwarts," the other man said. *Sod it*, Harry thought. *Why can't I place his voice?*

Wormtail laughed. "Perhaps we should tell you what the plan had been before Harry dropped so providently into our laps," he said.

"Stop stalling, Wormtail," the other man said. "You call yourself a Gryffindor, yet you're too afraid to return to Hogwarts? I suspect these two, true Gryffindors that they are, are ashamed to own up to you."

Wormtail glared at him, but didn't say anything else before raising his wand and Disapparating.

"Not that it's a bad idea," the other man said, "even though it came from an idiot." Harry heard movement, and then the man's voice came from much lower down, as though he had knelt on the ground in front of Ginny. "The plan was to bring you here," he said to her, "put you under the Imperious Curse, and then send you back to Hogwarts. I'm certain that even a Muggle-loving Gryffindor can imagine what you'd do there."

Harry felt Ginny trying to shrink back against him, and he couldn't blame her. He couldn't imagine a more cruel plan, especially for Ginny. *She must be reliving her first year*, Harry thought. *And where is the person who saved her then - the person who became her Patronus? Tied up, caught in the trap with her.*

"I'm tempted to do it still," the Death Eater said. "Even though we have Potter, there's still Dumbledore to be considered, and there would be other...benefits."

Ginny flinched, her head banging into Harry's, and he heard her almost panting with fear. He could only imagine what the man was doing to her, and didn't like what he was imagining. He tried to struggle against the ropes holding him, but of course they held, and he wasn't surprised that the man completely ignored him.

"In the meantime," the man said after a moment, "I'm simply fascinated by your diary. What secrets do you have in here?"

"I don't think you're going to like what you read," Ginny said, her voice shaking slightly. For a moment, Harry thought it was with anger, but he decided that he must be mistaken, of course it was with fear.

"Don't you?" the man said. "You might be surprised. Now," he added, and Harry could hear pages rustling, "what's the password?"

Ginny gave a little whimper, and Harry couldn't take it anymore.

"Just give it to him, Ginny!" he burst out. "Whatever is in there isn't worth you being hurt!" He thought he knew what she was doing - trying to make it seem like she didn't want to give up the password - but this man was a Death Eater. He obviously wouldn't hesitate to use the Cruciatus Curse on her, since he was thinking of using the Imperius, and Harry knew he couldn't sit there and listen to Ginny be hit by the Cruciatus. He just couldn't.

"Isn't that sweet? Potter doesn't want you hurt," the man said, and Harry suddenly realized that, whatever Wormtail might want, this man wanted only one thing. Ginny. He strained futilely against the ropes once more, and heard the Death Eater chuckle.

"I wouldn't bother, Potter; Wormtail's pretty useless at most things, but that charm, he's mastered. Must come from being the perpetual lackey, always in charge of tying people up. Weasley, the password."

Harry heard a rustling, and by straining his neck around as far as it could go, was able to see that the man had drawn his wand on Ginny. He willed Ginny to give in; she'd convinced him, she didn't need to suffer pain to do it.

"G-w-i-h-o-w," Ginny finally said, and Harry sagged in relief.

"Interesting," the man drawled, his quill scratching as he wrote. "What does that mean, might I inquire?"

"You'll find out, if you read," Ginny said, her voice quiet and dull.

The man laughed. "Then I'll find out," he said. He walked over to a tree that was off to the side of the clearing, sat down, and started to read. Harry thought that he was far enough away to risk whispering.

"Ginny, you really had me scared there," he said.

"I had to make it convincing, Harry," she whispered back. She leaned her head against his. "Besides, I really don't want him to read it; I wasn't completely acting."

"I know, and I think it's wonderful that you did it," Harry said. "By the way, what does 'g-w-i-h-o-w' stand for? Ginny Weasley something something, I assume?"

"Ginny Weasley, in her own words," she said with a sigh. "I wonder if I'll be able to change it, now that people know about it."

"Well, you don't have to worry about me," Harry said. "I give you my word that I won't read it."

"Oh, Harry," she said. "Thank you. It's...not exactly you I'm worried about."

"Well, you won't have to worry about that creep, either," Harry said, glaring over to where the Death Eater sat reading. "After this, he won't be in any condition to be reading diaries."

"Does that mean you have a plan?" Ginny asked. "Or are we just going to wait around to be rescued?"

"Much as it pains me to admit it, I think we'll have to wait around to be rescued," Harry said. He tried to keep his voice light, but inwardly he was screaming. Ginny should not be put in this position, all because of him. "Unless you have any ideas..."

"Well..." Ginny said, but she didn't finish her thought for some time. Harry didn't press her; he really had no idea what to do, and if she did, he didn't want to drive it out of her mind. He turned his head so he could see the Death Eater, where he sat against the tree. He was chuckling as he read, and Harry had to turn away again, because the sight of this man laughing over Ginny's private thoughts was just too painful. He could only imagine how it must feel for her, but when he twisted his head around as far as he could, he thought he saw that her eyes were closed. Instead, Harry tried to think of what they could do. He really wasn't good with planning; that was more Ron or Hermione's job. He did much better acting on the plans. But there was nothing he could do here. His wand was still in a pocket of his robes, but it was of no use - apparently the Death Eaters weren't worried about him reaching it, and rightly so, since the ropes that held them prevented all movement of his hands or arms. He supposed that he and Ginny, working together, could manage to stand up, since their legs were unbound, but he couldn't see how that would help them.

After a period of time that Harry felt was quite long, Wormtail reappeared. The other Death Eater didn't even look up.

"Well, *that* took awhile," he said, still reading the diary.

Wormtail almost snarled. "You know you can't Apparate onto Hogwarts' grounds," he said. "I had to run from the gate to the bench and back in my Animagus form, and, yes, that took awhile. Someone had been there," he added, and the other man finally raised his eyes from the diary.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"The girl's things were gone," Wormtail said. "So, unless they sprouted legs and walked away, I think we can assume that someone knows they're missing."

The other man stood in one fluid movement, slamming Ginny's diary shut at the same time. Harry felt Ginny twitch behind him, but it was all he could do to keep the grin off of his face. Now, Joanna could tell Hermione's diary where they were. Suddenly, he felt movement behind his head, and then he heard Ginny whispering in the ear that was away from where the Death Eaters were arguing again.

"I hope his handwriting isn't too like mine," she said. "Otherwise, Joanna won't know that it wasn't me writing."

Harry sagged against her. He hadn't thought of that. Then, he sat up straight again.

"She'll know," he said, trying to imbue his voice with a confidence he just wasn't feeling.

"She'll know what, Potter?" the Death Eater said. He came over to stand in front of Harry, still holding the diary. Harry didn't even give him the satisfaction of looking up at him, let alone answering him. The Death Eater apparently didn't like that - not that Harry had meant him to - because he kicked Harry's hip, hard, which did make Harry look up at him. *Hello*, he couldn't

help thinking, *you're a wizard. Why are you resorting to physical violence?* The man's eyes glittered down at him through the eye holes in his mask.

"Cat got your tongue, Potter?" he asked, and kicked Harry again. Harry grunted, but he still didn't answer him. The Death Eater lifted his foot for another kick, but then stopped.

"Here," he said, tossing Ginny's diary to Wormtail. "See if you can find anything interesting. That's assuming you can read." He gave the password, then turned back to Harry.

"What are you going to do?" Wormtail asked.

"I've remembered something else," the other man said, not taking his eyes off of Harry. He removed his wand from a pocket of his robes, and Harry heard Ginny whimper behind him. He braced himself for the Cruciatus Curse.

"*Accio* Potter's pocket-watch," he heard, instead, and suddenly, Harry knew who this Death Eater was. It really should have been obvious from the moment he saw the Portkeys made from Ginny's favorite roses, and he couldn't believe he'd been so daft. Even with the robes, mask, and hood, and his voice disguised, everything he'd said, everything he'd done, screamed Draco Malfoy. And the thought of Malfoy putting Ginny under the Imperius Curse made Harry almost vomit. He swallowed convulsively and stared up at Malfoy, who was examining the watch closely. He wondered if Ginny realized who their captor was, and then remembered her telling him that he wouldn't like what he read in her diary, and how angry she'd sounded. Yes, she definitely knew.

"Merlin's beard!" Wormtail said, jumping up from where he'd been sitting while reading the diary. He shut it with a snap, and rushed over to Malfoy. "This girl says that Snape's a spy!"

Once again, Harry felt Ginny's head knock against his.

"I forgot about that," she whispered, her voice rasping with unshed tears.

Malfoy, though, just waved a hand at Wormtail.

"Tell me something I don't know," he said, then turned his head to stare at him. "You mean you didn't? Wormtail, explain to me again just how you finished school?"

Wormtail didn't answer him; he just stood there, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Malfoy laughed, then began examining Harry's watch again, evidently dismissing Wormtail from his mind. Harry watched as Wormtail turned around once, looking completely lost, then walked back over to the tree, sat down, and opened up the diary again.

Harry's mind swam. So, Malfoy knew that Snape was a spy, but Wormtail hadn't. Did that mean that Voldemort did, or that he didn't? He could see several possibilities, and which was correct would make a great deal of difference to Snape. Malfoy could be bluffing, just saying that he'd known, when in reality he didn't. That would be in character, certainly. On the other hand, he could have heard it from his father, and if Lucius Malfoy knew, then Voldemort most likely did as well, unless the Malfoys were playing a deeper game than Harry really thought they were. And there was always the possibility that *Draco* knew, but hadn't told his father. Harry almost snorted, but stopped himself in time. *Yeah, that last one's a real possibility*, he thought.

"All right, Potter," Malfoy said, after a few more minutes of trying to figure out the pocket-watch. "Tell me how this works, or I'll Cruciatu your girlfriend there."

Harry gazed up at him, trying to read his eyes through the slits in the mask. He really didn't think Malfoy would cast the Cruciatus on Ginny. The Imperius, yes - he was just that twisted - but not the Cruciatus. And then there was the general principle of not giving anything up to Malfoy. On the other hand, he certainly didn't want to put that opinion to the test, didn't want to do anything to put Ginny at risk. Besides, what could the watch tell Malfoy that he didn't already know?

"I have to be holding it," he said. He tried very hard not to let Malfoy know that he knew who he was. Since he knew, he had some idea of how Malfoy would react to things, but if Malfoy knew he knew, he might deliberately change his plans.

"Oh, *do* you?" Malfoy said. "I should have known. Only a Gryffindor would have a personalized pocket-watch."

Harry frowned. That statement alone would have given Malfoy away, because having a personalized pocket-watch was much more of a Slytherin trait, much as it hurt him to think that way about his father's watch. Malfoy just didn't know when to quit.

"Does it have to be held in your hand, Potter, or can any part of you be touching it?"

"I don't know," Harry answered. "I haven't tried it any other way."

He could see Malfoy's eyes narrow through the slits in the mask, but he was telling the truth, and he didn't care if Malfoy believed him or not, anyway. Apparently, he did, because he reached out and touched the pocket-watch to Harry's head.

"Aine. Ginny. *Communico*," Malfoy said. "What does that mean, Potter? Gods, even your pocket-watch is worthless."

"I don't know," Harry repeated, but this time, he wasn't telling the truth, and he could barely keep his glee from his voice. "I don't understand what it means a lot of the time."

He must have sounded convincing to Malfoy, because the other boy just snarled and threw the watch down at Harry's feet, then stomped off to take Ginny's diary away from Wormtail.

Harry felt Ginny sag against his back, but he didn't say anything, because he was trying to figure out those words. They were obviously a message from Toby, and was Harry ever glad that he'd never let it be commonly known that his pocket-watch could receive messages. The only person named Aine that he knew of was Brenna's sister, and the only way he knew of her was because of the botched Communication Charm. *That must be what the 'Communico' means*, he thought. *That must be the charm*. But the last time Brenna had tried the charm, with him, he hadn't been able to receive anything intelligible. Hopefully, she'd made a breakthrough.

"Harry," Ginny whispered, and he could feel her twisting her head around to try to look at him, "*do* you know what those words mean?"

"It's Brenna's Communication Charm," he said, still staring in front of himself. There was still something he was missing; if Brenna had perfected the charm, why didn't she simply use it?

"Then why did it mention my name?" Ginny asked.

"Of course!" Harry said. "Ginny, the last time Brenna tried the charm, I practically passed out on the floor, bowled over by her memories. Maybe she needs to speak to you, instead."

"Then why doesn't she?" Ginny asked. "I haven't heard a thing - oh!"

"What?"

"Maybe she needs me to use the charm, too - maybe both people have to be using it at the same time. And that's why she sent the charm itself, so I'd know how to cast it."

Harry knew she was right, and it was brilliant. There was just one problem.

"You can't get to your wand, Ginny," he said, dropping his chin almost onto his chest. "This thinking is all well and good, but we can't actually cast the charm..."

"Maybe we can," Ginny said, her voice dropping even lower. "Harry, Theo has been teaching me wandless magic."

Harry's head came up at that, and he twisted it around, able to meet one of her eyes, at least, since her head was similarly turned. Even under the circumstances, he felt like he could drown in her gaze, though he could see that she was still terrified. That impressed him - he certainly wouldn't have been able to tell from her voice.

"That's wonderful, Ginny," he said, "but if you can do wandless magic, why haven't you done any to get us out of here?"

Even out of the corner of his eye, he could see her blush.

"I haven't gotten very far," she said. "I haven't even mastered *Accio* yet. Theo said it's taken him years to be as good as he is, and that I'm progressing really well, but I'm still not very good. I didn't want to try something, and have it blow up in my face, until we're really desperate, and there's no other hope."

Harry could see her point. All the same...

"I think now is a good time to risk it," he said. He looked over at the two Death Eaters. Malfoy was still reading Ginny's diary - he didn't look especially happy with what he was reading right then - and Wormtail was actually sulking. Harry had to be glad; if he and Ginny had had to be kidnapped by Death Eaters, he supposed it was good that they were completely incompetent. "We really need a way to communicate with Dumbledore."

"I know," Ginny said. "Give me a moment."

Harry did, though he felt himself fidgeting, and tried to stop it. He didn't want to give Wormtail, whose eyes were fixed on them, any hints that they were actually trying something. After a few more moments, he felt Ginny go very still, and then heard her whisper, "*Communico*." It took real force of will not to turn his head and look at her. He realized he was counting seconds, and made himself stop before he went insane. He deliberately let out

his breath, which he'd been holding, and if the exhale had actually been more of a huff, well, that was understandable.

Finally, Ginny touched the back of her head to his.

"I have Brenna," she whispered.

Harry almost let out a whoop of delight before stifling it.

"Where are they? When are they coming?" he whispered back, trying to gaze off into midair, as though nothing was happening. Wormtail was still watching them.

"They're in our classroom, and they're coming as fast as they can. Oh, Harry, Joanna did know it wasn't me - she told them where we are. It was worth it. So, all we have to do is wait."

"I hate waiting."

"I know, Harry," Ginny said. Harry thought he could hear smile in her voice, but since she was whispering, it was hard to tell.

"Do they have a plan?" Harry asked, but Ginny didn't answer. After a few moments of silence, he decided that he didn't care what Wormtail thought, and twisted his head around to look at her. She was staring straight ahead of herself and moving her lips slightly. Harry realized that she was talking to Brenna, and he just had to wait until she was done. He turned his head back around and slumped against her back.

A few minutes after he began to be seriously annoyed, Ginny finally spoke.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "What did you say?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but then he realized that he'd been stewing for so long that he didn't even remember.

"What are they doing?" he asked, instead.

"They're getting their brooms," Ginny said. "They're going to fly here, because the students can't Apparate, of course."

"Of course," Harry said. He repressed his sudden need to look up. "So, where are we, anyway?"

Ginny snorted softly.

"We're on the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest, on the opposite side from Hogwarts," she said. After a silent moment, during which Harry reflected on that irony, she added, "Remus is bringing you your Firebolt."

That made Harry smile. Remus wasn't as flamboyant about it as Sirius was, but Harry knew he cared about him just as much. He could just as easily have brought one of the school brooms, but that wouldn't have been Remus. Before he could say anything, though, Malfoy

slammed Ginny's diary shut, making both of them jump. Harry turned his head in time to see Malfoy surge to his feet and stalk over to stand in front of him.

"You bastard," he hissed, his eyes glittering through the mask. "You utter, undeserving, lucky bastard."

Harry just stared up at him, thoroughly confused. He had no idea what Malfoy meant. It must have been something Ginny wrote in her diary, but the only thing the two of them had done so far was kiss, and Malfoy knew they were together - what did he *think* they were doing? He wished he could ask Ginny what she thought, but not with Malfoy standing right there.

"Well?" Malfoy said. "Not going to explain, Potter? Cat got your tongue?"

"Explain what?" Harry asked, his need to understand outweighing his dislike of asking Malfoy *anything*.

"As if you don't know," Malfoy said. "Always get everything, don't you, Potter?"

Harry still had absolutely no idea what Malfoy meant, and his befuddled expression must have pushed the other boy past his breaking point. He let out a strangled yell, pulled out his wand, and cast the Furious Curse at Harry.

Back when they'd studied the Furious in class, Harry had finally managed to shake it off, but that was before he'd learned just how much his magic was tied to his anger. And before he'd been kidnapped by Draco Malfoy, of all people. Now, when he tried to force his mind into the pattern necessary to shake the curse, he just couldn't. Instead, he felt his anger rising and rising, and the look on Malfoy's face didn't help. He stood there, smirking down at Harry, as Harry desperately tried to break the ropes binding him. He heard Ginny whimper behind him, and the part of his mind not affected by the curse realized that his thrashings were probably hurting her, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. All he could think about was his fingers around Malfoy's throat.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Wormtail stand up and start over towards them, but his attention remained focused on Malfoy's laughing face. He could feel the ropes biting into his wrists, and suddenly, he could feel something else - an ocean of power that he could almost taste. He reached out, felt the ropes snap, heard Ginny shriek, "Harry!", and somehow found himself on top of Malfoy, trying to pummel him into the ground.

He was only able to enjoy that for a few short seconds, before he heard Wormtail yell, "Stupefy!" Right on top of that, he heard Ginny yell, "Expelliarmus!", which explained why he could still move, because the spell hadn't actually hit him. Unfortunately, all of that had distracted him, allowing Malfoy to fight back. The other boy surged up, rolling Harry over onto his back, but Harry's anger, along with Theo's help, fought back, and the two boys thrashed about on the ground, getting in punches whenever they could. Harry felt like he was getting the better of Malfoy, but before he could tell for sure, he heard a different voice shout, "Stupefy!", and his next punch *hurt*, because Malfoy was frozen in place. He looked around to see who had interfered, and practically threw himself at Remus, who stood at the edge of the clearing. Before Harry could reach Remus' face with his fists, Remus caught his wrists and held them easily.

"It's the Furious Curse," Remus said over his shoulder, then turned back to Harry. "Come on, Harry, you can fight this," he said in a calm, low voice. "I know you can. You've done it before. Let go of your anger. Let go of Theo. Break through the curse." He kept speaking, saying basically the same things, and Harry slowly began to come out of the curse.

The first thing he realized was that Hermione stood behind and to the side of Remus, her wand pointed at them. She didn't look happy about having her wand trained on Harry, but she did it, and Harry knew that she'd have stupefied him in a moment, if she thought he might hurt Remus. Toby stood beside her, looking even more determined. The next thing he realized was that everyone else was here, too - Ron, Sirius, Fred, George, Theo, Brenna, and Professor Moody. But the rest of them weren't looking at him and Remus. Instead, they were watching Ginny and Wormtail, who stood in the middle of the clearing, their wands pointed at each other. Ginny looked furious, and Harry didn't think she'd been hit with the curse; she was probably just angry that she hadn't managed to get Wormtail's wand away from him.

Ron, Fred, and George also had their wands out and pointed at Wormtail, but as Harry turned towards them, Professor Moody signaled the three of them not to do anything. He started to walk towards Wormtail slowly. He had his wand out, but looked like he was trying to seem non-threatening. It was hard to tell, because it was Mad-Eye Moody, after all.

"All right, Pettigrew," he said as he walked, his voice as calming as it ever got, "you're surrounded. We're all here, we all know you're alive, you might as well give yourself up. You know you can't go back to Voldemort with yet another failure. You had *Harry Potter*, you fool, and you let him get away."

Harry watched him, fascinated. Was this how he caught all those Death Eaters - talked them into giving themselves up? Or was it something he was doing just for Wormtail? It seemed to be working; Wormtail's eyes flicked back and forth between Ginny and Moody, and his wand wavered, dipping slightly. Ginny seemed to relax a bit, though she kept her wand pointed at him.

Moody was only five steps or so from him, when he suddenly lifted his wand, and several things happened at once. Ginny yelled, "Expelliarmus!" again, as did George, while Ron, Fred, and Theo yelled, "Stupefy!" None of them were in time, as Wormtail had already transformed before any of the spells hit him, and he scampered off into the forest.

"Black!" Moody said over his shoulder, but Sirius, as Padfoot, had already given chase.

Ginny sank to the ground, dropping her wand, and Ron, Fred, George, and Harry all ran to her. It was Harry she turned to, clutching his shoulders almost roughly.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I tried, I tried to get him," she said, burying her head in his shoulder so her voice was a bit muffled. "If he gets away, it's all my fault."

"It is *not*," Harry said, gripping her shoulders himself, and pulling her face away from his shoulder so he could look into her eyes. "You kept him from stupefying me, you held him until Moody got here. Don't *do* this, Ginny."

"Listen to him, Miss Weasley," Moody said. He was standing near them, but his eyes were fixed on the spot where Wormtail and Padfoot had disappeared into the forest. Harry wondered how far his magical eye could see into the trees. Suddenly, Moody removed his

gaze from the forest to pin Harry and Ginny where they knelt on the floor of the clearing.
"You both did well."

This was such a compliment, coming from Moody, that both of them just gaped up at him. He nodded once, gave them one of his rare, rather unnerving smiles, and then stalked over to where Remus, Toby, and Hermione held their wands on Malfoy. Hermione had a shocked look on her face, which made Harry suspect she knew who she was holding with her wand, but Malfoy had somehow managed to keep his hood and mask on while Harry had been pummeling him. Harry couldn't tell from their expressions if Moody, Remus, or Toby had seen Malfoy's face, but the Weasleys evidently hadn't.

"Who is that, Harry?" Ron asked, and both Fred and George looked at Harry for his answer.

"It's -" Harry began, but Ginny interrupted him.

"Does it matter?" she asked, pulling herself away from Harry and standing up.

Harry stood up, too, and stared at her.

"Of course it matters, Ginny," he said, but before he could say anything else, he felt Ron stiffen beside him. He looked across the clearing to see Malfoy still sprawled on the ground, but someone had removed his hood and mask, and his white-blond hair shone in the sun. Someone must have woken him up, too, because Harry could see his sneer, even from here.

"Malfoy," Fred said.

"Malfoy," Ron echoed, then growled, "*Malfoy* was going to put the Imperious on Ginny?"

He started across the clearing, but Fred and George grabbed his arms.

"Let Moody handle him," George said, but Ron kept trying to shake them off until Ginny said, "Please, Ron."

All four of them turned to look at her, but she just shook her head, her eyes fixed on the scene across the clearing. Ron and Harry exchanged looks, then they both shrugged, and listened to what was happening.

"You can't prove it," Malfoy was saying. It was amazing how poised he looked while sprawled on the ground with four wands pointed at him.

"You're wearing the hood and mask, Malfoy," Hermione said.

Malfoy didn't even look at her; he kept his eyes fixed on Moody.

"But not the Mark," he said.

Hermione let out a shriek of frustration, but Moody waved at her to calm down.

"We may not be able to prove you're a Death Eater," he said, "but we can certainly prove that you helped to kidnap two students -"

"I was just wandering through the forest, and here they were," Malfoy interrupted, but Moody continued as though he hadn't even heard.

"- with the intention of delivering them to Voldemort," he finished.

"Now, that you can't prove, because I never intended to do it," Malfoy said.

"What?" Harry said, practically running across the clearing.

"Which word did you not understand, Potter?"

"You said that the plan was to put the Imperious Curse on Ginny to get to me. How can you deny that?" Harry stopped quite close to Malfoy and pointed his wand at him, which felt quite good, after the day he'd had.

"That was Wormtail's plan, not mine," Malfoy said.

"Then what was *your* plan, Malfoy?" Moody asked as Harry spluttered. Malfoy had said...he'd said...well, Harry couldn't remember *exactly* what he'd said, but he was sure it had been horrible.

"I didn't really have a plan," Malfoy said, smiling cheekily up at Moody.

"Then what did you want?" Harry asked through gritted teeth.

"Ginny," Malfoy said, and Harry heard four Weasleys' gasps behind him.

"You went through all of this to get Ginny?" he said, staring down at the other boy. "What were you going to do with her once you had her?"

"Do I really need to explain it, Potter?" Malfoy said, hardly even bothering to sneer. "Have you really been wasting all this time?"

Harry felt himself turning red, but that was nothing to how Ginny reacted.

"I would never do *anything* with you, Malfoy," she said, stalking across the clearing, her wand pointed at him. "How many times do I have to say no?"

"Too many, apparently," Fred said. He and George appeared on either side of Ginny, and Ron's head and shoulders could easily be seen above Ginny's head.

Malfoy didn't seem at all fazed by this display of Weasley solidarity.

"You wouldn't have had the choice, Weasley," he said, and there wasn't any doubt as to which Weasley he was speaking.

Ginny opened her mouth to retort, but Moody stopped her.

"Enough," he said. "We'll take him back to Dumbledore; he's the one to decide what to do with him." As he drew his wand, the expression on his face said quite clearly what he would do if it were his decision, but all he said was, "Stupefy!"

Malfoy's head slumped to the ground, and Harry hoped that he would have a big lump on it the next day.

"Now that's out of the way," Moody said, "where's that sluggard Black?"

No one really paid attention to him. Hermione practically dropped her wand in her hurry to throw herself at Harry, and Harry was busy catching her. She sobbed into his shoulder, and he could tell that she was saying something, but the only words he could make out were 'worried', 'roses', and 'Malfoy.' Ron came over behind her and put one hand on her back and the other on Harry's shoulder. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Harry closed his eyes and slowly let the tension and adrenaline drain out of him. He was safe; he wasn't going to have to face Voldemort today.

He opened his eyes to find Ron looking at him, a question written on his face. Harry nodded and smiled at him, then looked around for Ginny. Toby had her arms around her, though Ginny stood stiffly in them. She wasn't crying; she still looked furious. Fred and George did, too; Fred had sidled up to the inert form of Malfoy, and had even raised his foot to give it a kick, but Moody barked at him, and he put it back down. Brenna stood near Ginny, talking to her; Harry couldn't hear what she was saying over Hermione's sobs, but she was obviously trying to calm her down. He certainly couldn't blame Ginny for being so furious, but he suspected that at least part of her anger was to cover up how frightened she'd been. He couldn't blame her for that, either.

After a moment of wondering what to say to her, he realized that he knew of the perfect way to cheer her up. He patted Hermione on the back, and then detached her arms from around his neck and passed her off to Ron, who immediately drew her into an embrace. Then, he walked towards Ginny, and as he drew near, he heard what Brenna was saying. Her voice was quiet, but determined.

"Ginny, this is not your fault. You did not lead him on. You did everything you could to discourage him, in fact. If he wasn't deterred by the Pepper Spray Charm, nothing would have stopped him. He's obviously insane, Ginny."

Ginny had been trying to interrupt her, but Toby had put her hand over her mouth and forced her to listen. Harry watched some of the stiffness drain from her shoulders as Brenna talked, but he suspected that had as much to do with Toby as with what Brenna was saying.

"I agree with all of that, except for one thing," he said, coming to stand in front of Ginny. "Malfoy's not insane - if I couldn't have you, I'd be tempted to do something desperate, too."

He saw Toby, over Ginny's shoulder, wrinkle up her nose as though she wanted to laugh, but Brenna sighed.

"Oh, Harry," she said. "That is *not fair*."

At that, Toby did laugh, and she and Brenna moved away from Ginny, leaving the two of them relatively alone. Ginny smiled at him, and he knew he couldn't tell her that he'd gotten that line from one of Aunt Petunia's soap operas. Besides, he'd meant every word.

"Listen, Ginny," he said, before he could lose himself in her eyes, "is there anything this reminds you of?"

She looked around, frowning slightly.

"This? This what?"

Harry waved a hand around the clearing.

"All of this," he said. "A clearing in a forest. Sirius and Remus. Wormtail." He took a deep breath and steeled himself to do this right there in front of everybody. "There's only one thing missing," he said, and put his arms around her.

Ginny sighed, and reached up to clasp her hands behind his neck. Her eyes glistened as she looked up at him.

"Now I remember," she said. Then, she smiled. "I also remember Ron telling me that I shouldn't ever *think* of dancing with you in a forest."

"That's funny," Harry said, hardly able to contain his grin, "he said much the same thing to me."

"He doesn't look too upset right now," Ginny said, and Harry turned his head to see Ron holding Hermione, his eyes closed. He turned back to Ginny and grinned. She smiled back.

"Who would have thought, back when I had that vision, that it would happen like this," she said. She fixed her eyes on Harry's chest and muttered, "I'm so lucky, Harry."

Harry tightened his arms around her and lowered his head a little.

"I'm the lucky one," he said into her hair. Then, to stop his eyes from burning, he added, "You know, there is one more thing that has to happen to make your vision come true."

"That's right," Ginny said, lifting her head from his shoulder and turning towards the place where Wormtail and Padfoot had disappeared. "Shouldn't they be back by now?"

Before Harry could say anything, Padfoot dashed out of the forest, Wormtail clutched in his mouth. Moody practically threw himself at them, grabbing the rat with one hand and pointing his wand at him with the other. Harry just had time to realize that Moody had his hand directly around Wormtail's throat, before Moody was suddenly holding Peter Pettigrew, still by the throat. Sirius transformed, too, and he and Remus stood shoulder to shoulder, wands held on Pettigrew. Toby stood off to one side, her wand out, her face hard and frozen. Pettigrew still held his own wand, but he didn't look like he was even thinking about using it. He wouldn't meet anyone's eyes.

Moody barked, "Black!" again, but this time Sirius just raised his eyebrows at him. Moody growled and rolled his magical eye to point at Theo. Theo grinned and raised his hand, and a moment later, Wormtail's wand flew into it. Wormtail sagged in Moody's grasp.

"Now," Moody said to him, "is there anything you'd like to say?"

Wormtail raised his eyes, first to Harry, then to Toby, and lastly to Remus and Sirius. What he saw in all of them must have been awful - Harry knew that what he must have seen in his own eyes was - because he just shook his head and studied the ground in front of him. Talking had

worked two years ago, but Harry was older now, and, though he didn't like to think of it, a little harder. If Sirius and Remus wanted to kill Wormtail right now, Harry wouldn't stop them. It wouldn't be murder; it would be justice. Wormtail had been one of the Death Eaters who had tortured Dean's parents; he'd attempted to murder the Grangers; he *had* murdered the Creeveys. Not to mention making it possible for Voldemort to regain his body. Whatever small part had been left of the Wormtail who had helped to create the Marauder's Map, the Wormtail who had shared a dormitory with Harry's dad, Sirius, and Remus, the Wormtail who had been one of his dad's groomsmen...well, that part was gone, as far as Harry was concerned. This man standing before him now was someone completely different. Someone who deserved to die for the crimes he'd committed.

After several moments of studying Wormtail studying the ground, Moody turned to the rest of them.

"What about you?" he asked, his magical eye seeking each of theirs in turn. "Anything you'd like to say?"

Harry just stared at the two of them - the old Auror and the defeated Death Eater - and shook his head in amazement. There was absolutely nothing he wanted to say to Wormtail. The man knew his crimes, knew the depth of his treason. Nothing Harry could say could change or add to any of that. It would just be for his own satisfaction, berating the man who had committed the ultimate betrayal, and what good would it do, really? He reached out and took Ginny's hand, feeling her give him an encouraging squeeze immediately. He squeezed back, then met Moody's eye, shaking his head again and receiving another one of Moody's unnerving smiles in return.

Moody then turned back to Sirius and Remus, who both had stunned looks on their faces. Harry supposed they were both realizing what it all meant - since Wormtail had been captured, Sirius was a free man, and could take his rightful place in society. Moody's smile widened as he looked at him, then disappeared when he turned to Toby. Harry followed his gaze to see Toby open her mouth, her eyes blazing.

"Stuart!" Moody barked, before she could say anything. She met his eyes, then followed them as they flicked to Sirius, Remus, and Harry himself. Harry could almost see his mind working. *Do you really want to dig everything up?* he seemed to be saying to her. *They're satisfied, why can't you let it lie?* And Toby drooped, letting her wand dip slightly. She shared a long gaze with Remus, and then she, too, shook her head at Moody.

He gave a grunt of satisfaction, then without another word stupefied Wormtail. Everybody sagged a bit, and Harry heard several ragged breaths being taken.

Everybody except Hermione, that is. She gave a small shriek, and then tore loose from Ron and dashed over to Ginny. She grabbed Ginny's shoulders and turned her so that she had to meet her eyes. Ginny looked back and forth between her and Harry, but all Harry could do was shake his head at her.

"Ginny, you have to do it now," Hermione said, her words tumbling out on top of each other. "What if this happens again? What if it's someone intelligent next time? How will you be able to live with yourself?"

"Hermione, what are you talking about?" Ginny asked. She let go of Harry's hand so she could reach up and try to pry Hermione's hands from her shoulders. It didn't work.

"Your Protection Charm, you ninny," Hermione said, gripping her even more tightly. "If you'd cast it before, we wouldn't have had to worry nearly as much."

"Hermione," Ginny said, but Hermione wouldn't let her get anything out.

"It will work, Ginny, I know it will. And you owe it to all of us to try. I truly believe that. Besides," she added, and Harry got the feeling that she very deliberately didn't look at him, "what would it hurt if it didn't work. He doesn't *know*, Ginny."

"Hermione!" Ginny said. She looked so distressed that Harry had to look away. He thought he could tell who understand what Hermione was talking about by the looks on their faces. Brenna, Toby, Theo, Moody, and Remus definitely knew. Ron, Fred, and George definitely didn't. He wasn't certain about Sirius, because he was still focused on Wormtail, now laid out on the ground by Moody's feet.

"Hermione," he said, turning back to the two girls, "if she doesn't want to do it, whatever it is, why should she?"

"Because, Harry," Hermione said with the type of calm that really meant she was about the explode, "it's a Protection Charm for *you*. And Ginny's just being...being missish!"

Everyone stared at her for a moment, and then Ginny giggled and Ron guffawed.

"Missish!" he crowed, practically doubled over from laughing so hard.

"I think you've been reading too much Jane Austen, Hermione," Brenna said, and Toby had her hand over her stomach as though it hurt to laugh so hard.

Hermione stamped her foot.

"Fine, laugh," she said, "but you know I'm right, Ginny, and -"

"Fine!" Ginny said. "Fine." She shook off Hermione's hands and turned to Harry. No one seemed to pay attention, because they were still laughing at Hermione, so only Harry and Hermione watched as Ginny raised her wand and whispered a charm so quietly that Harry couldn't hear her words. Then, she gazed at Harry with such blazing intensity that he thought he would have caught on fire if he hadn't been distracted by what was happening to him.

Little sparks shot out of Ginny's wand to float in the air around him; at least, he thought they did. He could see them out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned to look directly at them, they seemed to disappear. Then, the ones that he could see suddenly started rushing towards him to settle on his skin and in his hair. They should have burnt, and they did, but somehow the burning felt good - it felt as though his skin had been designed to receive these sparks, and it just kept feeling better and better. After a minute or so, Harry looked down at his hands to see them glowing, and he realized that light was pouring from his body - a warm, coppery-red light. He could feel everyone's eyes on him, but when he looked up at Ginny, his gaze was caught and held by hers; he didn't think he could break it if he tried. Her wand was

still pointed at him, but he could tell that she had finished casting her charm; her mouth gaped open slightly, and he didn't think her eyes could possibly widen any more.

Slowly, the glow faded from Harry's skin. Everyone just stood and watched as it did, and the silence began to press in on him. He didn't really know what had just happened. When his skin returned to normal, he blinked for what felt like the first time in hours.

"Ginny, I think it worked," he said, because no one else seemed likely to comment.

"It...did," Ginny said. She still hadn't stopped staring at Harry, and he wasn't sure she'd breathed. "It did. It worked. It *worked*."

Hermione shrieked and threw her arms around Ginny, spinning her around so that bushy brown and bright red hair spread out behind them as she twirled. Harry watched them for a moment, then turned to Ron, but Ron only shook his head and shrugged.

"All right, that's enough," Moody said, his voice gruff, but his expression as soft as it ever got. "We need to head back to Hogwarts."

"Right," Ginny said, stopping suddenly and then clutching at Hermione to stay upright. "Back to Hogwarts, where *you* will soon have O.W.L.s." She grinned at Hermione as she spoke, and her grin only widened when Hermione gasped. "So, where's my broom?" She looked around the clearing, then spun quickly in a circle and hugged herself.

"Right here," Remus said, his quiet tone belying the mischief sparkling in his eyes. He held up Harry's Firebolt.

"But...but that's Harry's," Ginny said.

"That's all right, Ginny," Harry said, throwing a grin over his shoulder at Remus, "I don't mind taking you with me."

"I should hope not," Hermione said. Everyone else had already summoned their brooms from where they'd stashed them, but Hermione was eyeing hers as though she thought it would bite her.

Harry laughed. He couldn't help it. Hermione was worried about things like the O.W.L.s and having to ride a broom - things had returned to normal.

"You ready, Ginny?" he asked. He took the Firebolt from Remus and mounted it, then held out his hand to her. He still wanted to ask her about that Protection Charm, and he figured that while they were on the same broomstick would be an ideal time. Ginny hesitated and eyed him for a moment, but then she tossed her head and practically skipped over to him, climbing onto the Firebolt in front of him. Harry put one arm around her waist, well aware of the looks he was getting from her brothers, but not caring a bit. They'd just been kidnapped and very fortunately rescued, and he wasn't going to let an opportunity like this pass.

Once he and Ginny were ready, the whole party rose in the air and headed back to Hogwarts, trailing after them the unconscious forms of Draco Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew. Harry couldn't help but think back two years, to the last time he'd thought he would be able to live with

Sirius. This time, it would happen. This time, they'd done it right. As the setting sun turned the Forbidden Forest Weasley red, Harry felt his heart sing.

Chapter 34 - Meanwhile, Back at Hogwarts...

After Harry left the room, silence reigned for a few moments, and then almost everyone started talking at once, discussing Ginny's Patronus. For once, I didn't join in a discussion, being too preoccupied with how this newest incident would affect her and Harry's relationship.

I'd been so happy when the two of them became a couple. Harry so desperately needed to be loved, wholly, unconditionally loved. And Ginny gave that to him, almost as though she couldn't help it. Sometimes I wondered if she wished she could help it, could choose not to love him, especially since she became a Seer, and had to deal with the consequences of balancing her talent and her relationships. But I knew that, if I asked her, Ginny would answer no. I don't think she would know who she was without her love for Harry. In some ways, that sickened me - they were only fifteen, after all - but in other ways, I thought it was romantic. I'm only fifteen myself.

So, on the face of it, having Harry as her Patronus shouldn't bother Ginny too much. And even though she'd run out of the room, I knew that she wanted Harry to follow her, which was a good sign. At least she wanted to talk about it. Harry's not terribly good at talking about things, though, so that had me a little worried. On the other hand, a Patronus is just so permanent. I knew something about how that feels myself, but I didn't want to think about that right then.

Ron hadn't joined in the discussion of his sister's Patronus, either. He'd just been sitting there, staring at his hands, which he'd folded on the desk. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with my own thoughts, I would have realized that something was odd - Ron never sat still like that, except over a chessboard. Suddenly, he stood up.

"I'm going after them," he said, then darted out of the room.

Ron's learned a lot this year, and not just classwork. He knew we'd all try to stop him going after Harry and Ginny, so he tried to escape before we could. And he's got such long legs that none of us could catch up, even as we all - Theo, Brenna, Fred, George, and me - pelted down the halls of Hogwarts after him. Of course, that didn't keep us quiet, and the group of first-year Hufflepuffs we passed flattened themselves against the wall, their eyes practically popping out of their faces. I hope they don't often see a group of fifth through seventh years, several of them prefects, tearing down the hall, especially yelling at the tops of their lungs.

Ron didn't stop, of course. It took me awhile to realize that's one of the things I love about him - he's one of the few people who's just as stubborn as I am. Harry's only stubborn about certain things, and up until this year, I didn't think Ginny had a stubborn bone in her body. Now I know she can dig in her heels about things she thinks are vitally important. Ron, though, is just like me - we can both get just as worked up about what exactly we'd eaten at breakfast a week ago as about matters of life and death. Actually, what took me the longest was admitting that I was just as stubborn as Ron; it just didn't fit in with my view of myself. Now that I've admitted it, I find it much easier to give in on unimportant things.

Not on this, though. Ron was just plain wrong - Harry and Ginny needed to work this out for themselves. It certainly wasn't surprising that Ginny's Patronus was Harry - if Harry had saved my life when I was eleven the way he'd saved Ginny's, he'd probably be my Patronus, too. Though, come to think of it, I suppose he *had*, by foiling Voldemort's plan to get the

Philosopher's Stone. It just wasn't as direct as is saving Ginny down in the Chamber of Secrets. And, after all, we'd all saved each other's lives, that night, and so many nights since. I suppose that dilutes the effect somewhat.

No matter what we shouted, though (and Fred and George thought up some interesting, though improbable things), Ron didn't stop until he'd reached the big double doors leading outside. When I caught up with him, he had his eyes closed against the sunlight pouring over us.

"Bright light," he said, as soon as I reached him. "Can't see."

"Oh, Ron," I said, marveling at how even the silliest thing coming out of his mouth sounded wonderful to me. Besides, he'd known it was me standing there, even with his eyes closed - he says that to me whenever we go into bright sunlight, because I have brown eyes, and his are more sensitive to light - and that made me feel tingly all over.

Before either of us could say anything else, Fred and George skidded to a halt behind us, and each one of them grabbed one of Ron's arms. That made him open his eyes; he turned around to glare at them for a moment, then shook them off pretty easily. He is a good eight inches taller than they are, after all, and Quidditch has given him lots of practice using leverage. For a moment, I just stood there, marveling at the sheer athletic grace of him, but as soon as he started off again, I shook myself out of it and followed him.

"You don't even know where you're going," I yelled after him, as his longer legs took him farther and farther away from me.

"Yes, I do," he yelled back over his shoulder as he ran, and I had no choice but to follow him. At least, if I was there when he found Harry and Ginny, I could stop him from doing anything too crazy and embarrassing for all three of them. Maybe.

I was trying to think of ways to do this, when Ron stopped suddenly. He stood next to Ginny's favorite bench by the lake, and as soon as I saw it, I realized that I should have thought of it, too; it was the obvious place for Ginny to run, especially when she hoped that Harry would run after her. Neither one of them was there, though, and at first I thought that was why Ron had stopped so suddenly.

"Where are you going to look next?" I gasped as I ran up to him. "See, doesn't this just prove that -"

I caught myself up on a gasp, as I realized what Ron had already. Ginny *had* been here, because her bookbag and school robes still sat on the bench. But there was no sign of her or Harry, who almost certainly had been here, too. Ginny had told me just how much this bench meant to both of them. Strangely, there were roses scattered all over it, some of them crushed beneath Ginny's bookbag, giving off an almost sickly sweet smell.

"How odd," I said, bending over to look more closely at one of them. "Oh," I added after a moment of recognition, "they're Ginny's Welsh roses," and reached out to pick one up.

"No!" Ron said, grabbing my hand just before I could touch it.

"Whyever not, Ron?" I asked, staring up at him. "Harry probably transfigured these to apologize to Ginny - I'm pretty impressed, actually, that's a tricky bit of transfiguration, I suppose he used blades of grass, but it's awfully sweet of him, don't you think? I don't know where they went after that, but -"

"There wasn't *time*, Hermione," Ron said, still holding my hand tightly, but his eyes scanned all around us. "The only way they could have gotten away so quickly, especially if Harry had been transfiguring roses, is by Portkey. And those roses are the most likely candidate."

"But why would Harry make a Portkey - oh."

So that was stupid of me. Really, why would I think Harry would transfigure grass into roses? It was a bit too advanced for him, actually. And sweet though he could be sometimes - Ginny had told me all about their picnic in the cave (after it had happened, of course) - this didn't really seem his style.

"All right," Ron said, and something in his voice made it very difficult for me to breathe. "Harry and Ginny have been kidnapped. We need to get them back."

I looked up into his eyes, and saw them bright and hard, his gaze fixed on the horizon. He still held my hand in his, and slowly his grip tightened.

"Ron!" I said, just before it became too painful to bear. He let go and muttered an apology, but his eyes didn't soften. "We'll get them back," I said, just to say something.

"I know," he said. Finally, he looked down at me, and I almost burst into tears at the look in his eyes. "Fetch Sirius - he should be at Remus' hut. I'll go to Dumbledore."

He took off running before I could say anything, and after a moment of catching my breath, I did as well, heading in the opposite direction. When I reached Remus' hut, I almost opened the door without knocking, but reconsidered - I really didn't want to see Sirius if he wasn't prepared for visitors. I settled for banging on the door.

Sirius appeared quickly, luckily fully clothed, a fact which was explained when I saw Toby peering out over his shoulder, and Professor Snape seated at the kitchen table.

"Hermione!" Sirius and Toby said.

"What's wrong?" Toby added, pushing Sirius out of the way and reaching out to put an arm around my shoulders. That was too much for me - I gave in to everything that had happened, and burst into tears.

"Harry and Ginny have been kidnapped," I tried to say, though not much of it was intelligible. Enough of it must have been, though, because Sirius yelled, "What?" and bent down to look me in the eye.

"When? Where? How did it happen?" he asked, and when I didn't respond right away, he let go of my arms and stalked over to where Snape still sat. He put both hands flat on the table and bent over, glaring at Snape.

"Don't look at me, Black," Snape said, his black eyes meeting Sirius', sneer firmly in place. "You know quite well that I haven't kidnapped Potter or Miss Weasley in the past hour or so."

For a long moment, Sirius just stared at him, then he gave a sudden crack of laughter. He rubbed his hands through his hair, making him look so wild that I actually stopped crying to stare at him. Beside me, Toby made a funny sound, between a laugh and a sob, but Snape continued to sit there and sneer up at Sirius until he calmed down.

"You know that wasn't what I meant," Sirius finally said. He sounded as though he was choosing each word with extreme care, yet at the same time as though he would explode at any moment.

"What precisely did you mean?" Snape said, and he quirked an eyebrow at Sirius.

And suddenly, everything shifted for me. They still hated each other, these two men - I could tell - but they *enjoyed* hating each other now, and that made me feel, for the first time, like we could do this. We could rescue Harry and Ginny. If Sirius Black and Severus Snape could work together - and they obviously could - everything would be all right. I just knew it.

"It just happened," I said, still sniffing, which annoyed me, but at least I was able to talk. "We were in class with Remus and Professor Moody -" I broke off, remembering the class. Ginny's Patronus, and then the two of them being kidnapped, had driven it out of my mind, naturally, but now, standing next to Toby, I remembered. It had been so *embarrassing*, so much worse than finding out that every Gryffindor in third year and up knew how I felt about Ron. That was just, well, just *natural*, but this...I thought that I'd handled it well, but just how do you handle finding out that your Patronus is one of your professors? Basically, anyway. I do hope that Fred and George, especially, don't read too much into me having a wolf for a Patronus.

"Ah," Toby said, breaking into my thoughts.

I felt myself turning red - I must have just been standing there, stock-still, with my mouth wide open.

"This was the Patronus lesson, wasn't it?" Sirius asked, and I looked quickly at him, but I could tell that he wasn't really thinking about it.

"What was your Patronus, Hermione?" Toby asked, but to my profound relief, before I could answer, Professor Snape interrupted.

"Perhaps we should discuss matters of importance," he said. "How were Potter and Miss Weasley abducted from a classroom containing Alastor Moody and Remus Lupin, Miss Granger?"

"They weren't!" I said, outraged at his implication. "Ginny ran out of the room, and Harry ran after her. They went to Ginny's bench by the lake, and there were Portkeys there, and, well..."

"Surely Potter knows better than to touch anything that might be a Portkey by now," Snape said.

Sirius began to sputter indignantly, but I beat him to it.

"If he lived like that, he'd never touch anything," I said.

Snape just waved a hand at me, which I took to mean that he conceded my point, though I knew he would never actually say that. I was right.

"Continue, Miss Granger," was all he said.

I explained as quickly as I could about the Portkeys made of Ginny's favorite roses, and how Ron and I had deduced what had happened. I didn't mention that I'd almost touched one of the roses myself, because they really didn't need to know that.

"What do you think, Snape?" Sirius asked, almost on top of my last words. "Is it...is it..."

"I do not believe so," Snape said. He stared at his hands as he spoke, and if an utterly blank face could look worried, his certainly did. "However," he continued, after a moment of silence broken only by Sirius' harsh breathing, "as you are quite aware, Voldemort does not always take me as much into his confidence as we would wish."

A statement which, according to Ron, was taking Snape's capacity for understatement rather far.

"Spit it out, Snape," Sirius said. He looked like he wanted to run out of the door and go after Harry himself, which I'm sure he did, and I was glad to see that he'd tamed his impulses enough to know that Snape was the best chance he had of finding out exactly where his godson was. Snape's thoughtful deliberation was provoking him greatly, which I'm quite sure was on purpose.

"Most likely, this is a rogue operation," Snape said, finally raising his eyes to look at Sirius, "probably run by someone who is currently out of favor with Voldemort. Someone whose previous assignments failed utterly. Someone who would do anything to get back on Voldemort's good side."

I figured it out a moment before Sirius did, and watched his eyes widen.

"Wormtail," he spat.

Snape nodded, then stood, his every movement still deliberate.

"I will attempt to ascertain exactly what is happening," he said, reaching into a pocket and pulling out his wand.

I gasped when I realized where he was going to go.

"Won't that be dangerous?" I asked, then bit my lip immediately.

Snape didn't even look at me. "Miss Granger, kindly use the formidable intellect we all know you possess," he said, then stalked past me and out the door.

Toby, Sirius, and I watched him walk away for a moment, then Sirius said, "Toby, take Hermione to Remus. I'm going to look at those Portkeys."

"Oh, no, you're not," Toby said, grabbing his arm before he could go for his wand. "I don't trust you for one moment with those Portkeys. You won't be able to resist going after Harry yourself. *You* go with Hermione to Remus, and *I'll* examine the Portkeys."

"Fine," Sirius said, shaking off her hand. He looked mortally offended, but I agreed with her. He simply wasn't to be trusted anywhere near those Portkeys. Come to think of it, if it hadn't already happened, I'm not sure I would have trusted *Ron* near them. Thinking back, he had probably held my wrist so hard at least partly to make sure *he* wouldn't touch one, as much as me. It really said a lot about how much he's matured, that he didn't go charging after Harry and Ginny, regardless of the consequences.

Toby didn't say anything else, just started off for the bench at a run. Sirius, still looking hurt, transformed with a pop, then loped off by himself, without looking back to see if I followed him. I did, of course, but he quickly outstripped me. I'm just not used to this much physical activity. Once Padfoot reached the front doors of the castle, he stood and barked loudly in my direction, clearly impatient with how long it was taking me. Just before I reached him, the doors opened to reveal Professor McGonagall. She fixed Padfoot with a severe glare, then raised her eyes to look at me, as I stood there, panting.

"Kindly control your dog, Miss Granger," she said, making me stare at her, because she knew who Padfoot was as well as I do. But then, she continued, "Perhaps you should take him to Professor Lupin. He's in the usual classroom." She took out her wand and a piece of yarn from her pocket, and transfigured it into a collar and a leash, which she handed to me. I looked down at him, expecting him to be growling, but instead, he looked resigned, as odd as that looked on a dog. So, I buckled on the collar and grabbed the end of the leash, just before he started through the doors, pulling me along. When we entered the hall, I realized why Professor McGonagall was so adamant; the hall was crowded with students, milling around the bulletin board. I didn't care what the announcement was - probably another Hogsmeade weekend - and that was a good thing, since Padfoot practically raced through, while I tried to shout apologies to everyone jumping out of his way. Padfoot didn't stop running until we'd reached the door to our Auror classroom, where he had to, because it was shut and locked. I knocked, but he couldn't wait, jumping up and scratching at the door with his front paws. Remus opened the door after a moment, and didn't look at all surprised when Padfoot's claws scratched down the front of his robes. He didn't say anything to either of us, just held the door open, and then locked it after us. Sirius transformed, starting to speak in the middle of his transformation.

"What's the plan?" he asked, his head turning between Professor Moody and Ron.

I looked at Ron, too, not surprised to see him drawn and focused. I wanted to go over to him, put my arms around him, but I didn't want to distract him. Besides, I suspected that I might break down if I did, and that was the last thing I wanted to do.

Moody began speaking to Sirius, but I didn't hear what he said, because Brenna suddenly appeared beside me, gripping my arm tightly.

"Hermione, I want to try my Communication Charm out on you," she said, making me stare at her in surprise.

"But it hasn't worked with anyone yet, has it?" I asked.

"No," Brenna said, dropping her eyes to where her hand held my arm, "but I just realized that I've never tried it with another girl. And I thought..."

"Do you really think that might make a difference?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, looking up again, "but I want to try. Please?"

"Of course," I said, because I had immediately seen the possibilities - if Brenna could use the charm with another girl, she could let Ginny know we knew they were gone, and what we were planning to do.

Brenna tightened her grip on my arm, and drew me away from the door towards one of the windows, where Fred and George waited. Theo stood near Ron, listening intently to his conversation with Moody, Remus, and Sirius. Brenna didn't say anything else, and George just smiled at me as she took out her wand and murmured her charm.

Hermione...

Of course, it would be an owl...

...can you...

"Is that an owl, Brenna? Mum's going to kill you..."

...hear...

Brenna, I know you must be all right, because you couldn't leave this world without ever having eaten a Canary Cream...

...me?

"Stop," I said, forcing my eyes open and trying to close my mind to what Brenna was sending me. I knew I shouldn't be hearing any of that. I'm an intensely private person myself, and I could only imagine how horrible it must be for her, to have her memories exposed like that. That she'd be willing showed just how desperate the situation was.

Brenna, Fred, and George were all watching me, Brenna's eyes burning with intensity.

"Did you hear me?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes, but I also heard some of your memories," I said, trying to keep my voice cool and impersonal to minimize her embarrassment. "Maybe we're too close to each other right now," I added.

"Maybe," George said. He turned to Brenna, who was now studying her shoes. "This was the best yet," he said. "Hermione's not lying on the floor or looking at me any differently, at least."

Fred snorted, and I glared at both of them. I know the twins try to make jokes out of everything - I know it's their defense mechanism - but that was not the time.

"Do you want to try it with me in another room?" I asked Brenna. She nodded, so after another glare at Fred and George, I walked over to Remus and told him what we were planning. I still felt a little embarrassed talking to him, but he didn't seem to be thinking of my Patronus at all, which, come to think of it, was completely understandable. We did have bigger issues to deal with right then.

"Interesting," was all he said, when I'd finished explaining. "Do you think it will work?"

I just shrugged, not completely trusting my voice. It had to work. *Something* had to work. Remus studied my face for a moment, then nodded.

"Take somebody with you," he said. "It's ridiculous to think that you would be in any danger in Hogwarts, but then, it was ridiculous to think that anyone could be kidnapped from Hogwarts' grounds. We don't want to take any unnecessary chances."

"I'll go," Theo said. He'd been listening to us ever since I approached Remus; I think he wanted to distract himself from what Professor Moody, Sirius, and Ron were discussing. I know I did. I couldn't help but overhear some of it. I heard Sirius say something about "minimizing the risk of the kidnapper committing an act of desperation," and while I understood why he didn't do it, I wished he would just come out and say that they didn't want to burst in wherever Harry and Ginny were being held, just to have their kidnapper kill them. I followed Remus over to the door just as eagerly as Theo did - at least we were going to be doing something concrete.

I turned back as Remus was performing the unlocking charms and told Brenna to give us ten minutes. She nodded without removing her head from George's shoulder, and Fred gave me a cheeky salute. As Theo and I left the room to the sounds of Remus locking the door again behind us, I had to stop myself from muttering as I walked. Why is it that when I'm upset or worried, Ron's attempts to cheer me up always work, but Fred and George's just make me annoyed on top of everything else? And it's not because I'm in love with Ron, because he had this capacity way back in first year. I fully realize what Fred and George are trying to do, and yet it irritates me, every time.

"Are you all right?" Theo asked, after a few moments of silent walking. "I mean, besides the fact that two of your best friends have been kidnapped?"

"Besides that?" I said. "Isn't that enough?"

"Of course it is," he said, "but there's something else wrong."

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye.

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"I can hear your teeth grinding," he said, watching me in the same exaggerated, sideways style I was using.

I laughed - I couldn't help it - and immediately felt better.

"It's not important," I said, but at least now I could smile at him. "Where do you think we should go?"

Theo still looked at me for a moment, but then he accepted the change of subject.

"There's always Professor Vector's classroom," he said.

"Oh, yes," I said. "It's several stories up, so that will be a good test, but it's not as obvious as the Owlery or the Astronomy Tower. I don't know exactly how Brenna focuses her mind to use the charm, but she won't know where Harry and Ginny are when she tries to reach them, so if she doesn't know where I am and she can reach me, that will be a positive."

"Exactly," Theo said. His voice held amusement, but I didn't mind. It wasn't malicious amusement.

When we reached the classroom, Professor Vector wasn't there, which made me relieved. I like and respect my Arithmancy professor, but I didn't really feel up to explaining this right then. I sat down at my usual seat and pulled out my diary. I asked Theo if he'd mind if I wrote instead of talking, and he said that of course he didn't. Then, he closed his eyes, and slowly, Professor Vector's big teacher's desk rose off the floor. She and Harry had both told me, separately, about Theo's tendency to do this, but it was the first time I'd actually seen it, and it was impressive. I watched for a few moments, then took out a quill and opened my diary.

I'd barely written the password, when words started spilling across the page.

"Joanna's really worried about Ginny - she's taken her diary far away from Hogwarts, and someone else is writing in it - do you know why, Hermione?"

"Ginny's been kidnapped, along with Harry," I wrote back. "How do you know where she is?"

"Joanna always knows where she is when her diary's open; it's a special charm that she built into it. Hermione, how were Harry and Ginny kidnapped?"

"It was a Portkey - where are they? We're trying to rescue them, but we don't know where they are."

"Joanna's diary is in the Forbidden Forest, at the edge, near Haddington, but Hermione, there's no guarantee that's where Harry and Ginny are."

"I know, but it's the best chance we've got. I've got to go - I'll let you know what happens."

"You'd better, young lady."

I shut the diary, slightly harder than I meant to, and looked up to see Theo watching me intently. Professor Vector's desk was back on the floor.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I know where Harry and Ginny are," I said, jumping up. They had to be where Joanna was; they just had to.

"Where?" Theo asked, standing up himself.

Before I could answer him, though, I heard another voice.

Hermione, can you...

...one of the Weasley twins...

...hear me? Hermione...

"Well done, Miss O'Keefe."

...this is imp-

...there's still too much subconscious filtering...

-ortant. Hermione...

"Yes, I can hear you, Brenna," I said, even though I knew she couldn't hear *me*. It was a little better than before - I hadn't felt I had to close my eyes, and I could still think my own thoughts - but it still wasn't right. But at least Brenna had been able to send something without knowing where I was, and Ginny would be even farther away. Maybe she would only hear what Brenna meant to send.

"It's working?" Theo said, looking thrilled. *He* didn't have Brenna O'Keefe in his head, so well he might.

"I wish I could tell her to stop working," I said, putting my diary and quill back into my pocket and heading for the door.

"Why don't you?" Theo asked.

"Because it only works - wait a minute." I stared at him. "Why *don't* I?" I took out my wand, focused my thoughts on Brenna, and murmured the charm I'd heard her say.

Brenna, I can hear you, I sent.

Her voice in my head stopped abruptly, and there was blessed silence for a few moments. I used the time to head out the door and begin the trek back to our Auror-training classroom, Theo trailing after me.

Hermione?

I grinned as I walked, easily able to picture Brenna's wide-open eyes.

Yes, I thought at her, I used the charm myself, and now it works both ways. This is a wonderful charm you've created, Brenna.

Why didn't I ever think of that? she said in my head, and I realized something.

Brenna, are you hearing complete sentences, or are you also receiving some of my memories?

Complete sentences - oh, Hermione!

That's the answer, I thought at her. We had reached the door of the classroom by this time, and Theo knocked. *The charm is designed to work when both parties use it.*

Remus opened the door and beckoned us in.

But I didn't design it that way, Brenna thought at me, as I walked in the door. I reached out my hands to her and smiled as she took them. I know how wonderful it feels when something you've worked on for so long finally comes together.

"You did, you just didn't realize it," I told her out loud.

"Of course you did," George said, reaching out and picking her up, making me drop her hands when he spun around with her in his arms, leaving me free to turn to Ron and Professor Moody.

"I know where Harry and Ginny are - well, generally where," I said.

Ron, who had been staring at something on the desk, looked up, his eyes bright. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Sirius was at my side in two steps, grabbing my arm almost too tightly.

"Where, Hermione?" he asked.

"In the Forbidden Forest, of all places, near Haddington."

"How do you know?" Remus asked. He reached out and detached Sirius' fingers from my arm.

"Whoever has them wrote in Ginny's diary, and she told mine," I said. I heard Ron snort when I mentioned my diary - he always does, he thinks it's out of character for me to have one.

"All right, then," Professor Moody said. "We know where they are. We know how they were taken." He nodded at Toby, who I'd just noticed was in the room. "Now, I'd rather we knew who had them, but I'm ready to go without that."

"If only Ginny knew Brenna's charm," I said. "Then we could talk to her, and she could tell us who it is."

There was silence for a moment, as we all thought about how helpful that would be. Toby finally broke it.

"Does anyone know if Harry has his pocket-watch on him?" she asked.

"He always does," Ron said. "Why - oh! You could send him the message to have Ginny use the charm."

"Yes, but how do we know Harry's in a position to get to his watch, Ron?" I asked. "Or that Ginny still has her wand? In fact, I think it's highly unlikely that she does."

"Ginny can do wandless magic," Theo said, making all of us turn and stare at him. "She hasn't done anything near as powerful as that charm probably is, though."

"It can't hurt to try," Ron said, after a moment when he just stood there and shook his head in shock.

"You're right, it can't," Professor Moody said. He turned to Toby. "Make sure your message is something only Potter will understand," he said.

Toby looked at him blankly for a moment, then nodded and pulled Brenna into a corner of the room.

"All the same, we'll proceed as though we can't make contact with Ginny, and don't know what we're going into," Moody went on. "Dumbledore will probably disagree with me, but he's not here, so I'm taking all of you. You students can't Apparate there, of course, so we'll have to fly."

I suddenly felt faint, and when Ron reached out and took my hand, I clutched at it thankfully. I *hate* flying. I know it's mostly in my head, but that doesn't help - I just can't feel comfortable on a broom. But if rescuing Harry and Ginny meant flying the Channel, I'd do it. I just didn't have to like it.

While I was giving myself my mental pep talk, Professor Moody had been describing the plan. I hadn't heard a word, and I could tell Ron knew it. I'd just have to ask him what I was to do, and endure his teasing. Besides, just the fact that he felt optimistic enough to tease me, which I could tell from the looks he was giving me, brought my spirits up. If Ron thought we had a chance, we had a chance. He leaned over to whisper something in my ear, but before he said more than my name, Toby and Brenna came rushing back.

"We've made contact!" Toby said. She practically bounced, she was so excited. "They're being held in a clearing in a forest, by Wormtail and another Death Eater. They're tied up, and they can't get to their wands."

"She did it!" Theo whooped, and Ron swept me up into a hug to celebrate Ginny's accomplishment. Fred and George began dancing a sailor's hornpipe - at least, that's what I assume it was.

Professor Moody's gravelly voice easily cut through the pandemonium.

"Does Ginny know why they're being held there, and not taken to Voldemort?" he asked, his eyes fixed on Brenna.

That made all of us quiet down immediately.

"They hadn't expected to get Harry so easily," Brenna said, after a moment, her eyes widening as she relayed Ginny's thoughts. "The Portkeys were meant to trap Ginny, and then they were planning to put her under the Imperious Curse to get Harry and Professor Dumbledore." She shut her eyes, and even her usually faint color drained from her cheeks. "Dear Lord. They're still thinking about it, to get to Professor Dumbledore."

"How does she know?" Ron asked. His voice was tight and hard again, and he hadn't let go of me, which was a good thing, because I wasn't sure I could have stayed standing if he had.

"He told her," Brenna said, her eyes still closed. "The other Death Eater, not Wormtail. He said...never mind."

"What?" Ron, Fred, and George asked in unison.

"Never mind," Brenna said again, and when George murmured her name, she opened her eyes and let them blaze at him. I've never seen Brenna look so fierce, before or since. "I said never mind, George. I'm relaying what Ginny wants me to."

"Is that really a good idea?" Ron said. "We all know what Ginny's like."

Brenna opened her mouth to respond, but Professor Moody interrupted her.

"We're wasting time," he said. "Does Ginny think they're going to be taken to Voldemort soon?"

"No," Brenna said after a moment. "Wormtail seems completely under the thumb of...the other Death Eater, and *he* seems more interested in Ginny's diary than anything else. So she says."

"Good," Moody said. "But we can't count on it staying like that. At least we know there are only two of them right now. Brenna, stay in constant contact with Ginny. If there's any change at all, let me know right away. Let's move, people."

Remus immediately started to unlock the door, and we all filed out of the room. I was about to swallow my pride and ask Ron exactly what the plan was, when I heard Sirius ask Brenna how Harry was dealing with everything. Ron and I both turned to hear her answer.

"Ginny says he's frustrated, but trying to hide it from her," Brenna said, smiling faintly for the first time since she'd first made contact with Ginny.

"Frustrated, huh?" Ron said. "He's tied up with my sister, and he's frustrated?"

I elbowed him in the stomach, quite hard. I know he's a sixteen-year-old boy, but this was neither the time nor the place. Sirius actually laughed, then tried to sober when Remus looked back over his shoulder at him.

Brenna had evidently relayed Ron's comment to Ginny, because she said, "They're tied up back-to-back."

I elbowed Ron again, just for good measure, just as we reached the doors and went outside. He mock-wincing, then stepped outside, shooting me one of his patented evil grins. I had no difficulty interpreting that, since we headed in a pack towards the building that houses the Quidditch supplies and school brooms, and Ron knows just how much I hate flying. The adults waited outside, while the rest of us went in, and Fred, George, Ron, and Theo went straight to their respective teams' rooms to fetch their own brooms. Brenna walked over to one of the racks in the main room, and picked up a broom.

"What do you want, Hermione?" she asked over her shoulder. "A Cleansweep Five? Or a Comet Two-Sixty?"

"Neither," I said, but I didn't say it loud enough for her to hear me. Instead, I walked up behind her and asked her which she thought was better.

"Well, there really isn't much to choose from," she said. "The Cleansweep's more responsive, though that's not saying much, but the - wait a minute. You're best friends with Harry and Ron, not to mention Ginny, and you don't know your brooms?"

I was saved from answering by Sirius, who stuck his head in the door and growled, "What's taking so bloody long?"

The boys came hurrying in, each clutching a broom, and I grabbed one myself off the rack. I didn't look to see what kind it was until we'd gotten outside again, because it didn't matter, really. I knew that whichever broom I'd be flying, I'd hate it by the end of the day.

When we reached the adults again, Remus had Harry's Firebolt in his hand, as well as his own broom, which I thought was a very good idea. Someday, I want to have as much knowledge as Remus, so I can think on my feet as well as he does.

Professor Moody just nodded at us before mounting his own broom.

"You know what to do," he said, and kicked off.

Except that I didn't. I actually hadn't been on a broom since the Christmas holidays, when Ron had talked me into being a Quidditch referee, and even though the Cleansweep gave me no real problems, I still felt awkward. Besides, I still didn't know what the plan was. I started lagging behind the others - the dratted broom simply wouldn't go any faster - and Ron flew back to me after a few minutes.

"Come on, Hermione, it's not that bad," he said. "You're doing great."

"No, I'm not," I said, annoyed at how easily he was maneuvering. "But I'd be doing better if you told me what the plan was."

"Pretty simple, really," he said. "The best plans often are. We're just going to surround the clearing, then come at them from all sides. Sirius is going to transform, of course."

"Of course," I said, though I wasn't quite sure why, since Wormtail obviously knew Sirius' Animagus form. I looked at Ron out of the corner of my eye; I didn't want to turn my head too far to either side, in case the broom followed it. That's what my father always says happens with autos. "What will we do if the Death Eaters panic and try to...try to hurt Harry and Ginny?"

"We won't let that happen," Ron said. His eyes were fixed firmly ahead of himself, too, and I knew it wasn't because he was afraid of his broom. He and Harry don't talk about it, of course, but I know that they couldn't be any closer if they were of one blood. Having both Harry and his only sister kidnapped must be eating Ron up inside, and the fact that he was hardly showing it, when he usually just let all of his emotions out, both impressed me and worried me. We were going to rescue Harry and Ginny, of course - we had to - and I was very glad I wouldn't have to see Ron's reaction if we didn't. With added resolve, I urged my broom to go faster, and actually caught up to everyone else. We flew on, the whole pack of us ready to do whatever it took to rescue Harry and Ginny.

Epilogue Life, Everywhere

Harry sat in front of his trunk, wondering how he always seemed to have so much more stuff when he left Hogwarts each year than when he'd arrived. Not that it was that hard to figure out; the Dursleys didn't exactly load him down with gifts, after all. At least Hermione had taught him the charm to make the trunk larger on the inside than the outside; if she hadn't, he never would have been able to make everything fit.

Still, he did need to organize everything. If he didn't, Dobby would, and he didn't want him to have to do that. Harry hadn't believed it possible, but Dobby was even happier than Harry was that he wasn't going back to the Dursleys'. Harry hadn't thought about what would happen in the summer when he'd agreed to take on Dobby, but he should have. The Dursleys would never have let a house-elf live at Privet Drive, and Harry doubted that Dobby would have been able to keep quiet and out of sight if he'd snuck him into his room. Luckily, he wouldn't have to worry about that, since he was actually going to be picked up at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters by Sirius. As soon as Sirius had been officially pardoned, which had been as soon as Professor Moody had been able to spend some one-on-one time with Cornelius Fudge, he'd rushed out and found a house, so he could finally take Harry to live with him. Remus had told Harry that he had Toby to thank for Sirius not spending far more than the house was worth, since he'd been so eager just to get a home for Harry that he'd have spent anything. Harry still caught himself giving his arms pinches, because he just couldn't believe his good luck. Of course, not everything was perfect - living with Sirius had come with the price tag of having to live with Aunt Petunia and Dudley as well, not to mention Mad-Eye Moody. Dumbledore insisted on Harry having the strongest protection possible, and that meant blood relations and the best Auror available. Still, even that couldn't ruin Harry's summer.

Of the five boys in the dormitory, only Neville and Dean had already packed their trunks. The two of them were outside, enjoying their last day with Hannah and Padma, respectively. Ron and Seamus were also out enjoying the sunshine, along with Hermione and Lavender, but their trunks were still open and messy. Ron's section of the room looked almost as bad as Harry's had back in second year, when Ginny had trashed it, looking for the diary.

Ginny was the reason why Harry wasn't out in the sunshine, celebrating his release from the O.W.L.s, Malfoy, and (at least for the summer) Snape. She'd told him that she couldn't possibly enjoy herself out in the sun until she knew her trunk was packed, and since she wasn't going to be out there, Harry figured he might as well pack, too. Ron and Hermione certainly didn't need him hanging around them just then, and everyone else seemed to have paired off as well. So, he'd come inside, but he was finding it difficult to sort through his things.

For instance, all his notes and practice tests from the O.W.L.s - he didn't need them anymore, truly, and yet his mind wandered back to the revision sessions in the library...in the common room...outside on the lawn after the kidnapping attempt... He carefully packed up the notes and put them in his trunk, and as he did so, his fingers hit something hard and unexpected. He drew it out, and read the title in bemusement. *Animagi: A Guide to Finding Your Inner Animal*. He'd completely forgotten about it. When Hermione had sent it to him for his birthday, he'd been so excited to try it out, but so much had happened during the year that it had just sat in his trunk, unread. Well, he'd have plenty of time over the summer, not to mention a godfather who could answer any questions he might have. Harry pinched his arm for the hundredth time, and then set to his packing, determined to finish.

Some time later, he slammed his trunk shut and dusted off his hands. He suspected that Dobby would still repack the whole thing to make it neater, but there was nothing he could do about that. For now, everything that should be in that trunk, except for clothes for tomorrow, was in there, and Harry could head outside with a clear conscience. He practically skipped down the stairs, then stopped as soon as he entered the common room, surprised to see Fred and George sitting at a table. They were talking very earnestly to Katie, who sat between them, looking like she was trying not to laugh.

"Now, when he refers to eckeltricity, don't laugh," George was saying to her. "Both Harry and Hermione have tried to get him to say it right, and it just hasn't worked."

"Right sad, that is," Fred said, shaking his head and frowning. "Makes you wonder if there might not be a tail feather loose in his wand, if you know what I mean."

"Fred!" Katie said, elbowing him in the stomach. She looked up, saw Harry, and waved him over. "Harry, please tell me these two are exaggerating," she said.

Harry had to laugh. "If they're talking about Mr. Weasley, they're actually not, for once." Her eyes went wide, and she looked back and forth between Fred and George, who both crossed their hearts and looked solemnly back at her.

"Are you going to be visiting at the Burrow, Katie?" Harry asked. It suddenly struck him, yet again, that the three of them, and all the rest of the seventh-years, wouldn't be back at Hogwarts next year. This fact had been hitting him in waves, every time he did something for the last time with them. The match against Hufflepuff had been horrible, even though they'd won, because every time Lee Jordan called out Fred, George, Katie, Angelina, or Alicia's names, Harry thought about next year. Next year, not only would none of them be playing Quidditch for Gryffindor, but Lee wouldn't be the one announcing the games, either. The party the night before had almost been worse, because Harry wasn't the only one feeling it then - Gryffindor parties had achieved legendary status because of these six seventh-years, and the whole tower would miss them.

Now, Katie shook her head, but before she could answer Harry, Fred did it for her.

"She's going to be working with Dad, in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department," he said.

"Taking over for Dad, more like," George said. He looked proud, but his voice was fierce. "Which isn't a sinecure anymore, y'know." He turned to Katie and added, "At least you're training with Moody, so you can defend yourself."

Katie jumped up and turned to face him, her hands on her hips.

"Are you saying I couldn't defend myself before, George Weasley?" she said, glaring at him. "Because I remember -"

"No, no," George said, holding his hands up in front of him in horror, "I would never say that. But, Katie, Death Eaters aren't exactly going to be trying to tickle you."

Katie opened her mouth, and then shut it again. Harry could see that she had tears in her eyes.

"So, you're going to be training with Professor Moody," he said, just to say something to break the mood.

"The way she always should have," George said.

Katie shook her head, but she still didn't seem able to say anything, so it was a good thing that the Fat Lady opened just then. Ron and Hermione climbed in, and came over to the four of them.

"All packed, Harry?" Hermione asked. When he nodded, she added, "I brought this one in to do the same. He'd leave it 'til midnight if I let him."

Ron smiled down at her, while making an obscene gesture at his brothers, who were snickering. Hermione pretended not to notice as she walked over to the girls' dormitory stairs. Ron glared at Fred and George, and at Harry as he started to laugh as well, and then stomped over to the boys' stairs. Harry could hear his stamping footsteps all the way up the stairs and into their dormitory.

"Shut it, you three," Katie said. "I think they're cute, and you boys certainly can't talk. Speaking of which," she added to Fred and George, "what *are* you doing inside, and not with Angelina and Brenna?"

Fred and George sprang to their feet and gave her two smart salutes.

"Brenna's packing, and told me to meet her at four o'clock, ma'am!"

"Angelina is saying good-bye to the Quidditch changing rooms, ma'am, and I wanted to leave the two of them alone!"

Katie giggled. "Well, I suppose you're excused," she said, then turned to Harry. "Ginny said to tell you that she'll meet you at the usual place." She cocked her head at him. "Just out of curiosity, where is the usual place? You don't have to tell me," she added.

Harry shook his head. "I don't mind. It's that bench out by the lake."
"The one where...she still goes *there*?"

"Of *course* she does," Harry, Fred, and George said in unison, and then laughed at themselves.

Katie shrugged and shook her head. "All right," she said. "You want to head down, Harry? I'm meeting Theo."

Fred and George snickered, but she ignored them, and Harry followed her out of the portrait hole and downstairs to the main doors.

When he reached them, though, he realized that there was somebody else he needed to see first. He waved at Katie and headed over to Remus' hut. Halfway there, he stopped short. Remus' hut. For four and a half years, it had been Hagrid's hut, and now, after just six months, it had become Remus' so completely that the thought had just slipped out. Harry wondered what that said about him. There wasn't a day that he didn't miss Hagrid, but he didn't like to think about it. There were so many people he missed; if he thought about them all the time,

he'd never do anything else. He started walking again, determined to enjoy the day, and not to let his thoughts drag him down.

The door of the hut stood open, so Harry could hear Remus' and Sirius' voices as he approached.

"I do hope you're not planning on doing this often during the summer," Remus was saying. "What an example to set for Harry!" He'd managed to keep his voice somber for the first sentence, but Harry heard amusement in the second.

Harry stopped immediately, one foot raised to climb onto the first step leading up to the door. He put it back down onto the ground; he wanted to hear this.

"Shut up, Moony," Sirius said. His voice sounded muffled, as though his head was buried in his hands.

"So, where did you go?" Remus asked, definitely amused now. "Rosmerta always closes at midnight."

"Erm..."

"Or should I say, with whom did you go? I don't know if I'm impressed or appalled - you just bought your new wand last week."

"Impressed, Moony. You know you're impressed."

Harry grinned at the smugness in Sirius' voice. He wished he could see the two of them, but he knew that if he put a foot on the wooden steps, they'd hear, and they'd stop talking. This was the happiest he'd ever heard the two of them, and he didn't want it to stop.

"What was her name?" was all the answer Remus gave Sirius.

"Erm," Sirius said again. "It was...Jay? Wren? Didn't matter, she didn't like it. Wanted to be called - never mind."

Remus chuckled. "Wait 'til I tell Toby. She's been wracking her brain, trying to think of one of her friends that would suit you."

"Wracking her brain? Is it that hard to think of someone who might be interested in me?" There was a pause. "Oh, all right. Shut up, Moony."

"And here I was going to ask you what she's like," Remus said, at his most bland.

"Oh, dark brown hair down to here, bright blue eyes, the cutest little bump on her nose...and fun. Lots of fun."

"I'm glad," Remus said.

"Yeah, me, too," Sirius said.

Harry swallowed. He knew he shouldn't be hearing this, but he, too, was glad. He turned around and sat down on the bottom step, knowing that Remus, at least, would be able to hear him, but not caring. He blinked a few times and stared out over the lake.

"Get some sleep," he heard Remus say. "I'm certain you need it."

"Shut up, Moony," Sirius growled, yet again, and Remus laughed.

After a moment, Remus walked out of the door, shutting it behind him, and came to sit next to Harry on the steps. Harry grinned at him, and Remus smiled back.

"I'm glad, too," Harry said.

"Be as glad as you want, but don't get any ideas," Remus said, but he didn't seem able to wipe the smile from his face. "Oh, well," he added, glancing back over his shoulder, "it was his first night out as a free man; he's certainly earned the right to celebrate."

Harry nodded. He turned back to look out over the lake. As happy as he was for Sirius, that wasn't why he'd wanted to talk to Remus. He wondered how to bring up that reason.

"You want to talk about Draco, don't you?" Remus said, once again showing his uncanny perception.

Harry didn't turn his head, keeping his eyes fixed on the lake while he nodded. He could see Ginny's bench from where he sat, and the sun glinting off her hair, even from there. She would want to hear this, too, but Harry needed to have Remus tell him by himself. He wasn't sure how he'd react, and he didn't want to show Ginny any more ugly outbursts.

Dumbledore had expelled Malfoy as soon as he'd heard what he'd done. It was the first time Harry had ever seen the Headmaster act so decisively without listening to the other side of the story (Malfoy had still been Stunned). He had said that nothing could excuse Malfoy's actions, and he had repeated that when Lucius Malfoy and Cornelius Fudge had descended on him in protest. Lucius had, of course, demanded a hearing, and Fudge had forced Dumbledore to accede to it, and to allow Draco to sit his O.W.L.s as well.

The real problem was that Fudge had decreed that neither Harry nor Ginny's evidence was allowable at the hearing. He'd considered Harry dangerous and unstable for over a year now, thanks to Rita Skeeter, and he was well aware that Ginny had been the person who had opened the Chamber of Secrets. No matter what Dumbledore said to him about who had been the real culprit, Fudge wouldn't change his mind. In fact, none of the people who accused Draco with kidnapping held much weight with the Minister of Magic. Remus was a werewolf, Toby a reclusive Seer, Brenna the daughter of Squibs, and Moody was, well, Mad-Eye Moody. The Weasleys were all suspect, of course, and Theo was the cousin of a formerly imprisoned accused Death Eater. Fudge had had to pardon Sirius, when confronted with an alive, kicking, and confessing Peter Pettigrew, but he hadn't had to like it.

The hearing had been this morning. Since Harry couldn't be there, he'd tried to put it out of his mind and enjoy the day. Remus hadn't been there, either, but Harry knew he'd have found out what had happened as soon as it was over, and he felt more comfortable asking Remus about it than Dumbledore.

"The governors upheld the expulsion," Remus said, now, and Harry had to restrain himself from punching the air and yelling with joy. Remus wasn't completely happy, he could tell, and he wanted to find out why.

"I'm worried about them," Remus said, staring off over the lake. "And their families. Lucius Malfoy is not going to forget this."

That withered Harry's joy. Remus was right, and Malfoy certainly had both the power and the inclination to punish whomever displeased him. The governors had done a very brave thing, since they had to have known that, too. Harry didn't even know all of their names, but he would find out.

"I suppose he'll go to Durmstrang," he said, remembering how Ron had dreamt of Malfoy at Durmstrang, getting pushed off an iceberg.

"Probably," Remus said, and sighed.

Harry raised his eyebrows at him.

"The boy will have no chance at Durmstrang," Remus said. "Here, at least, there was the possibility that he might see the error of his ways and come around, like Severus. There's no hope of that now."

There was precious little hope of that before, Harry thought, but he didn't say anything. Remus hadn't spent five years in school with Malfoy, he couldn't know what an evil, sick, twisted - Harry stopped his thoughts before he became too angry.

"Severus is beside himself, of course," Remus murmured. He gazed out over the lake, and Harry suspected he'd forgotten he wasn't alone. "He'd thought he was getting through to the boy."

Harry jumped to his feet. He didn't think he could stand hearing Remus call Malfoy 'the boy' in that tone of voice one more time...as though he were Theo, or...or Ron. He wasn't, and no amount of wishing by Remus or Snape could make him so. Harry started off towards Ginny's bench, waving at Remus as he left. Remus waved back, but he didn't seem to really notice that Harry had left.

As he walked, he thought about Professor Snape. Hermione had told him what Snape had done, when he and Ginny had been kidnapped, but even so, he'd been surprised at how worried she, Remus, Toby, and especially Sirius, had been until Snape had returned to Hogwarts. Ginny hadn't been able to sit down until he did; she'd felt guilty that she'd told Joanna Snape was a spy, and no amount of logical reasoning from Hermione calmed her down. Hermione had pointed out that since both Wormtail and Malfoy had been captured, if Voldemort knew Snape was a spy, it wasn't because Ginny had told him. It hadn't done any good. When Snape finally returned Ginny had practically thrown herself at him, and had received in thanks a tongue-lashing she wouldn't forget for awhile. Neither would Harry; there was just something about the words, "kindly refrain from emotional outbursts that do everyone around you, including yourself, more harm than good," that sticks in your mind, especially when they were uttered in a sneering, bone-tired voice.

The knowledge that Draco Malfoy had at least said that he'd known Snape was a spy hadn't made any impact on the Potions professor. He'd merely said that it changed nothing, and continued his report to Dumbledore. The kidnapping, as they'd suspected, *had* been a rogue operation; apparently, Malfoy hadn't even told his father his plans. Which, of course, only added to Lucius' wrath when he'd been informed of his son's expulsion from Hogwarts.

When Harry neared Ginny's bench, he realized that she wasn't actually sitting on it. Instead, she sat on the ground beside it, her head propped up on her hand, gazing out over the lake. Harry dropped down beside her, laying both of his arms out over the bench.

"The governors have upheld the expulsion," he blurted out.

"That's great, Harry!" Ginny said. She turned a bit and took one of his hands in both of hers, her eyes sparkling. "I'm glad for our world to know that Professor Dumbledore still has more influence than Lucius Malfoy."

"Me, too," Harry said, "but, Ginny, because they did, they're going to be in danger. Their families are going to be in danger. I just remembered that Geraden Gard's father is one of the governors. I don't think that his being a Slytherin is going to stop Lucius -"

Ginny put her fingers to his lips to stop the torrent of words.

"I know, Harry," she said. "I know what can happen to the families of people who anger the Malfoys. But there's nothing you can do to help them. They've made their choice, and we should honor them for it."

Harry nodded, but he barely heard her words. His entire world had just come down to her fingers on his lips. He didn't want to move, hardly even wanted to breathe, because he didn't want her to take them away. When she did, he felt his skin still tingling.

"Ginny," he said, because the tingle had reminded him, "you promised that you would explain the Protection Charm to me today." She had. They'd been on his Firebolt, flying over the Forbidden Forest, and she'd asked him to wait for an explanation until the day of the Leaving Feast. He hadn't wanted to, hadn't understood why she would want to wait, but she'd said, "Please, Harry," and he could never resist that.

"That's right, I did," she said now, turning her head to look out across the lake. She still held his hand, and she rubbed her thumb over his knuckles, forcing him to hold himself very still so as not to twitch in response.

"Remember how I told you that the charm required something?" she asked, and Harry tried to tear his thoughts away from her thumb and back to the conversation.

"Yes," he said finally. "You said that both of the people had to do whatever it was. I assume you meant the caster and the person she's casting it on?"

Ginny nodded. "But it's not something you have to do, it's something you have to feel." She took a deep breath. "It's love," she said.

Harry just looked at her. "So, why couldn't you tell me this before? Of all the people in the world, I certainly know how strongly love can affect magic."

Ginny jumped up, took a few steps away from the bench, and stood there, not looking at Harry.

"Both people have to feel love, Harry," she said. "Both of them. Not affection, not tenderness, not sympathy for a little girl with a crush, love. And I didn't know...how you felt."

She barely murmured the last words, but Harry heard them. Or maybe, he just knew that she was going to say them.

"Now you do," he said, gazing up at her.

"Yes," she said, "now I do, and, oh Harry -"

She turned back around, and he barely had time to register her bright eyes, her swirling hair, before she flung herself at him, pushing him over onto his back on the ground. Harry's head hit rather painfully, but he didn't care, because Ginny was covering his face with kisses, and he would have endured a concussion for that.

Quite a long time later, they sat up again and returned to lounging against the bench. Harry knew they should head inside - the Leaving Feast would begin soon - but he didn't want this time with Ginny to end.

"You'll come visit, this summer, won't you?" he said suddenly.

Ginny looked at him sideways, through her eyelashes.

"If you invite me," she said, and her lips quirked into a half smile.

Harry quirked back. "Consider yourself invited," he said. "'Course, it's going to be a madhouse. Putting Sirius, Aunt Petunia, Dudley, and Mad-Eye Moody together in one house was not one of Dumbledore's better ideas."

Ginny turned to him and put a hand on his arm. Her gaze burned into him; he'd never seen her look quite so serious.

"It's necessary, Harry," she said. "You need the protection of your blood relations, you know that."

Harry gave her a comical grimace, hoping to diffuse her intensity somewhat. He didn't want to be this solemn, on the last day of the term.

"I know," he said. "And hopefully, your mum has softened Aunt Petunia up enough that she'll be almost human."

Ginny chuckled. "She probably has," she said, "but what about Dudley?"

Harry leaned over to whisper in her ear, for no other reason, obviously, than that he wanted to do it.

"Sirius," he said, "is going to take care of Dudley."

Ginny burst out laughing, and Harry watched her, a huge smile on his face. She really was

amazing. Seeing her like this, you wouldn't have thought that she'd been kidnapped and threatened with the Imperious Curse (and maybe worse), just a short time ago. Of course, compared to her first year at Hogwarts, this latest experience was probably relatively easy to assimilate. And he wasn't doing too badly, either.

"Ginny," he said suddenly, because now seemed like a good time to ask a question he'd wanted to ask for awhile, "remember when Malfoy went berserk?"

Ginny looked at him as though she thought he had sunstroke.

"Right," he said, "of course you do. But right before he cast the Furious Curse at me, he called me...well, you remember." He didn't know why he didn't want to say 'bastard' in front of Ginny - she'd obviously heard much worse from Ron, at the very least - but he didn't. "Do you know why he was so angry? I mean, it was obviously something you wrote in your diary, and..."

He trailed off, because Ginny had buried her head in her arms. Before she did it, though, Harry had seen her face quite clearly; she was *blushing*.

"Well, it couldn't have been anything you said about anything we were doing," he went on, knowing he was floundering, but plowing ahead anyway, "because we weren't really doing anything." Ginny gave an indignant, though muffled, squeak, and Harry hurried to reassure her. "I mean, what we were doing was wonderful - is wonderful - but it wasn't anything to make him have *that* reaction, and...dammit, Ginny, if you know why, tell me!"

Ginny giggled, and finally raised her head. She was still blushing, but she was smiling, too.

"I had a vision that...that...oh, this is embarrassing," she said. "Why do I have more visions about mundane things than important ones? A vision of the kidnapping attempt would have been extremely useful, but all I saw was the aftermath. What good is that? And one of my brothers' wedding? Why did I see that?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I'll tell you this, though. That vision you had of Sirius, the one where he was laughing and carefree, was pretty important to me." He saw sudden tears spring up in her eyes, and went on, "And don't think you can distract me that easily. What was this vision that you described in your diary that caused Malfoy to lose it?"

Ginny buried her head in her arms again, but this time she spoke into them, too.

"I saw...something that...that indicated that we...have a future together," she said.

"Oh," Harry said. He stared out across the lake and thought about that. A future together. What exactly did she mean by that? Had she seen them holding hands at his seventh-year Leaving Feast? Living in a flat together? Their wedding in the Weasley garden? He looked back down at the bright hair spilling out over the bench, and knew that he couldn't ask her. Not for the first time, he realized that Trelawney was right about one thing: the gift of True Sight was a curse. If Ginny knew that they would stay together, maybe even get married someday, she must be feeling like all of her choices had been taken away.

"Ginny," he said, reaching out and putting a hand on her head. Even in the midst of all this, he couldn't help but marvel at the silky fire of it, and at the fact that he was allowed to touch it.

"Ginny, I don't want you to feel trapped."

"Oh, I don't," she said, raising her head and reaching for his hand. "I probably should, but I don't."

Harry held her gaze for a long time before he nodded. He believed her, but he knew that he *wanted* to, and that probably influenced him. But he also knew Ginny, and knew that if she did feel trapped, she wouldn't hesitate to break free.

"All right," he said finally, and she smiled and leaned in to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. He reached out to hold her there, but she jumped up with a laugh.

"C'mon, the Leaving Feast is about to start, and I'm starving," she said, pulling him to his feet.

Harry looked instinctively towards the castle when she said that, and saw Ron and Hermione waving at them from near the doors. He grabbed a tighter hold on Ginny's hand and started to run towards them, pulling her along with him. He knew that nothing was really over, that Voldemort was still out there, and that someday he would have to face him. But that day was not *this* day, and Harry decided to enjoy this day, and as many days to come as he had, to the utmost. He owed it to his mother and father, and to Cedric, Hagrid, and the Creeveys, and to all his friends, who wanted him to so much. And he owed it to himself. He and Ginny almost plowed into Ron and Hermione, and it was as one laughing, connected mass that they headed into the Great Hall and the summer to come.

The End